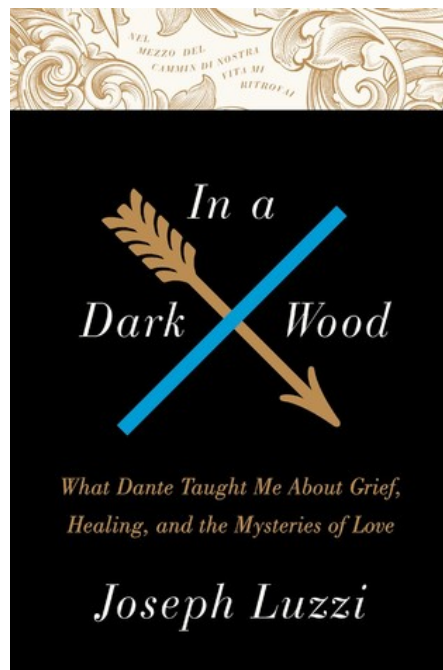




In a Dark Wood: What Dante Taught Me About Grief, Healing, and the Mysteries of Love

Joseph Luzzi

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In the aftermath of a heartbreaking tragedy, a scholar and writer uses Dante's *Divine Comedy* to shepherd him through the dark wood of grief and mourning—a rich and emotionally resonant memoir of suffering, hope, love, and the power of literature to inspire and heal the most devastating loss.

Where do we turn when we lose everything? Joseph Luzzi found the answer in the opening of *The Divine Comedy*: “In the middle of our life’s journey, I found myself in a dark wood.”

When Luzzi’s pregnant wife was in a car accident—and died forty-five minutes after giving birth to their daughter, Isabel—he finds himself a widower and first-time father at the same moment. While he grieves and cares for his infant daughter, miraculously delivered by caesarean before his wife passed, he turns to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* for solace.

In a Dark Wood tells the story of how Dante helps the author rebuild his life. He follows the structure of *The Divine Comedy*, recounting the Inferno of his grief, the Purgatory of healing and raising Isabel on his own, and then Paradise of the rediscovery of love.

A Dante scholar, Luzzi has devoted his life to teaching and writing about the poet. But until he turned to the epic poem to learn how to resurrect his life, he didn’t realize how much the poet has given back to him. A meditation on the influence of great art and its power to give us strength in our darkest moments, *In a Dark Wood* opens the door into the mysteries of Dante’s epic poem. Beautifully written and flawlessly balanced, Luzzi’s book is a hybrid of heart-rending memoir and critical insight into one of the greatest pieces of literature in all of history. *In a Dark Wood* draws us into man’s descent into hell and back: it is Dante’s journey, Joseph Luzzi’s, and our very own.

In a Dark Wood: What Dante Taught Me About Grief, Healing, and the Mysteries of Love Details

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Carin says

I have struggled with what to think of this book since I read it. I am still not sure what my final verdict is. Maybe writing this review will help me solidify things.

Joseph Luzzi's wife, Katherine, was killed in a car accident, but she was kept alive just long enough to deliver their daughter, Isabel. Joseph was devastated by this loss. I mean, completely unable to function in most ways. He is a professor at Bard College in New York, and he and Katherine had been living in a small town just north of the city. He moves back to his hometown in Rhode Island, to give over the care of Isabel to his mother and four older sisters.

He throws himself into work, commuting from two states away, writing an academic book. His family and friends are baffled by his ability to function so well on campus, but his utter inability to be a parent. And I was baffled too. I just wanted to shake him. He was so self-indulgent. He kept saying that he just couldn't function as a parent. But I disagree. If he hadn't had this safety net to fall back on, I think he'd have managed. As much as he praises his mother for her selflessness and her love for and care for his daughter, I think she was in some ways an enabler. Not to mention this meant that Isabel was being raised by a woman still steeped in the old ways of Calabria, a woman who had been merely fourteen when she had been married, and a woman still very much enmeshed in the machismo social structures of Italy. In addition, she fed Isabel garbage food and although Joseph said he wanted Isabel to eat organic food from Whole Foods, I'm not sure if he ever even told his mother this, and if so, he certainly didn't do anything when she refused. I was unimpressed with his excuses for Isabel's neglect. I totally get that Katherine's death was horrible, devastating, and threw him for a loop, but how long does he get to use that as an excuse? You can be depressed and in mourning and still feed your child decent food. If he could pull himself together enough to write an academic book, I say it's not that he didn't have the energy or wherewithal to parent properly, but he was misdirecting it. And what was more important, his career or his daughter? His choices were damning.

In fact, he only ever seems to pull out of his funk and start to operate like an adult again, when he meets the woman who is now his current wife. He claims that he started to function again and started to take over Isabel's rearing on his own, but from what I saw it seemed like it was only when he met Helena that he

started to parent again. (His dating, by the way, also got a lot of his time and attention when Isabel was still being neglected at home. That also gives me serious pause regarding his "I was so depressed and couldn't function!" argument.) I got the feeling that he was a Mama's boy who really can't get along well without a woman in his life to take care of the details.

I will give him props for his brutal honesty. He certainly gives readers all the information so we can judge him harshly if we see fit. He may give excuses, but he doesn't obscure the facts.

I know I'm supposed to be impressed with his deep reading and the way he found solace in his critical appreciation of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, but I thought it was too much and he took it too far. It started to feel a little like class. I did read the books back in college, but he gives you so much of them, that it's unnecessary: you will feel like you read them after this. The interpretation was completely accessible and not academic, and I liked it up to a point.

I guess what it boils down to for me is that this was a tragic story, very well told, but in the end, I just don't like Joseph as a person. And in a memoir that's hard to get over. It's one thing if he were ruining his own life (I've enjoyed those types of memoirs! I adore *schadenfreude*.) but to be screwing over his innocent infant daughter at the same time is hard to overlook. If wrenching honesty and beautiful writing are what you like in a memoir, this book is for you. (But not for me.)

Crystal ☆ Lost in Storyland says

In a Dark Wood is a compelling memoir about Luzzi's journey through grief and the healing process following his wife Katherine's untimely death. A professor of Italian and a Dante scholar, Luzzi draws parallels between *The Divine Comedy* and his own experiences in the dark wood of grief.

Having studied English during my time as an undergraduate student, I appreciate how Luzzi relates Dante's great work to his personal experiences and finds meaning in one through the other (and vice versa). It's actually what drew me to this book in the first place, and I love how Luzzi intertwines his story with that of Dante's work. I do wish that I had read *The Divine Comedy* before picking up this book. It has been years since I've looked at Dante's work. While Luzzi does a good job explaining the connections that he makes between Dante's work and his own experiences, a refresher would have helped me to better understand the significance behind Luzzi's references from a more critical perspective (the casual reader shouldn't have too many problems).

That said, *In a Dark Wood* has a complicated narration. Luzzi not only intertwines his story following Katherine's death with that of *The Divine Comedy*, he also includes anecdotes from his college days and from his parents' lives. While I like all the connections that Luzzi makes, he jumps around a lot from scene to scene, from one point in time to another. Furthermore, though his book follows a general timeline, he does not entirely narrate events in chronological order, so it can be difficult to piece events together in their proper order, especially if you don't finish the book in one sitting. I would have preferred if Luzzi cut back on some points and focused more on the immediate storyline. I do appreciate how he ties in his Italian heritage and how he shows the importance of family and friends in his life. Luzzi shows the ups and downs and how his family supported him in his time of grief. The inclusion of his family members' stories also serves to show where he comes from and how it influences his relationships with different women.

In reflecting on his family, his personal experiences, and on Dante's work, Luzzi gives a profound commentary on love, life, and loss. As he tells his daughter Isabel at the end of his book, "it's not what lands you in the dark wood that defines you, but what you do to make it out—just as you can't understand the first

words of a story until you've read the last ones" (quoted from ARC). In a Dark Wood is a heavy read in that Luzzi is weighted by his grief throughout much of the book. In his grief, he makes many poor decisions, including his neglect of his fatherly duties to Isabel, and he continuously finds himself unable to move forward with his life. The excruciatingly slow progress out of the dark wood can get frustrating to readers who haven't gone through similar experiences. Nevertheless, Luzzi's narration stays true to reality in showing readers the challenges of working through grief. Through it all, Luzzi is there reflecting on his thoughts and actions during his time in the dark wood, and he makes ample use of The Divine Comedy to comment on love and loss.

Content (contains potential spoilers)

(view spoiler)

Margaret says

I should be nicer about a guy's book that's about grieving for his wife.

But really, the connection to Dante is tenuous at times (anyone from the Dante+Decameron group on Goodreads knows most of what he discusses about The Divine Comedy) and his actions towards his girlfriends (especially the woman that would become his new wife) verged on a little creepy. It's an inconsistent book that doesn't necessarily contain the nuances of other books on grieving like The Year of Magical Thinking.

Rebecca says

In November 2007 Joseph Luzzi's wife Katherine was in a fatal car accident; she had been eight and a half months' pregnant, so within one day he entered "the wild uncharted terrain of being a single father and widower." He was from a tight-knit family of Calabrian immigrants, and his mother and four sisters huddled in to raise Isabel at the family home in Rhode Island. However, this meant that for several years Luzzi was able to disengage from fatherhood, throwing himself into his work – teaching Italian at Bard College, editing the proofs for a forthcoming book – while others did the hard work of childrearing.

To his credit, Luzzi calls his own bluff and talks openly about the mistakes he made in the early years of fatherhood. He tried dating and played a lot of tennis, but mostly he delved deeper into Dante, his academic specialty. Like Dante, Luzzi obsessively asks himself how he can go on loving someone who no longer has a body. "Every grief story is indeed a love story," but his memories of Katherine took on a more bittersweet tinge when the other driver involved in the car accident filed a lawsuit and Luzzi responded with a countersuit.

As Virgil was to Dante, Dante is to Luzzi: a guide through the hell of loss and into a *vita nuova* as he starts a new life with Isabel and, five years later, his second wife. "You may visit the Underworld, but you cannot live there," Luzzi concludes. The biographical information about Dante can seem a little intrusive and some specialist interest in Italian literature and/or tennis would help you enjoy this memoir more, but I think

anyone will appreciate the vivid picture of grief.

Related reading – a few recommended grief memoirs about the loss of a spouse:

- *The Light of the World* by Elizabeth Alexander
 - *To Travel Hopefully* by Christopher Rush
 - *Unremarried Widow* by Artis Henderson
-

Frank says

This story is about a man's dealing with the loss of his wife. It has very little to do with Dante. Yes, he did get through his grief with the help of his knowledge of the Divine Comedy, but it's as though he used snippets from the Comedy, and not entire themes, to help him overcome his grief, to identify with Dante's life. And I often had to struggle to see the connection between what he wrote about his suffering and the snippets from the Comedy to which that aspect of suffering was related.

Gloria says

Repetitive. Inconsistent. Underwhelming.

Stephanie Ward says

4.5 Stars

'In a Dark Wood' is the enchanting memoir of a man's journey through a very dark part in his life - the death of his beloved wife - and how Dante's epic poem, The Divine Comedy, was able to lead him through his grief and pain. I don't normally read a lot of memoirs, but this one grabbed my attention at the mention of Dante's classic poem. Being an English major in both college and graduate school, I have read this timeless piece several times. I'll admit that it still confounds me at times and there's such an incredible depth to it that it feels like I'll never have enough time or the skill to peel back all of its layers. I was curious as to how a memoir that identified with Dante's poem would be like - it was surely going to be a hit or miss type of situation. When I read the book, I was happily surprised that the author was actually able to meld together his own personal story with his studious journey through The Divine Comedy, without being boring or dry at all. For me, it was actually the opposite. The author's life story was both heartbreaking and full of hope, and I was really intrigued by how he associated so intimately with the poem. Aside from those aspects, the author also gives the reader a bit of commentary and explanation of the poem itself - which, for my nerdy self, was ridiculously fascinating. Even though one would expect this type of book to be boring or only appeal to a slim portion of readers - the author surprised me again on this front. The writing was done in a conversational tone, so it felt as if he were speaking to the reader directly instead of lecturing in front of a class. Even the parts of the book where he explains passages of the poem and what they mean are compelling.

By writing his memoir in this way - reconciling the hardest journey of his life with Dante's masterpiece and giving the reader insight into both - the author has truly changed my opinion and experience of reading memoirs. It's true that not all readers will enjoy this book as much as I did - I attribute much of my fascination and interest to the fact that it was centered around The Divine Comedy, which as an English

student (for life), instantly grabbed my attention. Even if you aren't an English scholar or fan of the classics - this memoir will still captivate you from the moment you begin reading right up until the final words. The author's story is so full of raw emotion and a roller coaster ride of feelings that it will feel as if you experience all of it yourself. Although it's written in a conversational tone, the author uses fantastic descriptions and attention to detail along with lots of vivid imagery to really bring the reader inside of the book. I very highly recommend this memoir to readers who enjoy memoirs and autobiographies, as well as those interested in classic literature, especially the focus of the book - Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. I honestly think that this book will appeal to fans of all genres and is something that everyone should at least give a try. I think it will really surprise you - in the best of ways.

Disclosure: I received a copy of the book in exchange for an honest review.

Raven Haired Girl says

“Only after losing this love did I grasp his awful wisdom. One of you will have to face the world alone someday and inhabit the Underworld—the hell at the start of Dante’s descent into a dark wood.”

Luzzi finds himself in utter chaos. He reveals himself in such an intimate manner. He’s honest in sharing his feelings towards the man who hit his wife and sues him. His feelings towards his family and how they differ from his Ivy League ways and lifestyle. His dating experiences, his yearning for another woman.

“Rilke once wrote that to love another person is our ultimate task, that for which all else is preparation.”

Plagued by guilt and mixed emotions as he leaves his infant daughter with family so he can do research and write in the attempt to stave off grief. *The Divine Comedy* helps him maneuver his way through the labyrinth of grief. He asks questions, seeks answers and bouts with existentialism. A man scratching and clawing with an unexpected and tragic sudden loss.

“I also asked him that day if he believed in the eternal life of the soul. I was now anguishing over this question to which I had never given a second thought before.”

“But if you believe in one deep, true love, common sense would also suggest that it would be difficult if not impossible to find another love of comparable intensity once your beloved is gone.”

An affecting story, those suffering a loss, experienced the powerful grip and depths of grief will relate to Joseph Luzzi’s powerful memoir.

“But I hope you’ll discover, as I have, that it’s not what lands you in the dark wood that defines you, but what you do to make it out—just as you can’t understand the first words of a story until you’ve read the last ones.”

For this and other reviews visit <http://ravenhairedgirl.com>

Amy Brown says

Joseph Luzzi unterrichtet am Bard-College in New York. Er ist ein Italo-Amerikaner, seinen Ursprung hat er in Kalabrien. Er beschäftigt sich seit Jahrzehnten mit der Literatur und Kultur Italiens, zu deren frühen Dichtern eben auch Dante gehört.

Sein Roman "In einem dunklen Walde unterscheidet sich jedoch literarisch von seinen poetischen Vorbildern, er schreibt in seiner Geschichte eher Prosa, also in einer ungebundenen Sprache, wie wir sie von aktuellen Romanen kennen.

Die Kernaussage von Joseph Luzzi besagt, dass Geschichten heilen können, wenn sie zur rechten Zeit an den richtigen Menschen geraten. Das kann ich nur bestätigen, auch ich habe mich oft in Bücher geflüchtet, die mir Mut gemacht oder mich getröstet haben.

Der Schreibstil ist zwar ohne Form, aber trotzdem sehr poetisch und tief sinnig, das ist keine Erzählung, die man mal eben so weg liest, für die Geschichte muss man sich Zeit nehmen, denn oft gerät man ins Grübeln und muss Joseph Luzzi recht geben. Ich kann mich noch gut daran erinnern, dass mir bei seiner Trauer und den Vergleich mit Dantes Werken oft das Herz weh getan hat weil die Texte so eindringlich geschrieben sind, dass man unweigerlich mitleidet.

Seine Erzählungen über seine Frau Katherin wechseln sich ab mit Vergleichen zu Dantes Werken. Insbesondere Dantes Vorstellungen der Liebe werden oft thematisiert. Sein Werk ist eine Mischung aus Selbstüberprüfung und Interpretation von Dante. Joseph Luzzi thematisiert den Verlust seiner Frau sehr häufig, was mir sehr gut gefallen hat, weil das Thema in unserer Gesellschaft viel zu wenig Anklang findet.

Sally Smith says

"In the middle of our life's journey, I found myself in a dark wood." These words from Dante's Divine Comedy are the theme of this book by Joseph Luzzi, who lost his young wife in a car accident. Luzzi is able to express the anguish and complexities of grief that others in a dark wood also feel but perhaps can't quite explain or verbalize. Luzzi is a professor whose specialty is Dante and therefore understands the intricacies of Dante's text. I had a much harder time with that, but could certainly relate to Luzzi's tale of sorrow and emergence from deep grief.

Jason says

You know the memoir you're reading has fallen short when -- despite its unthinkable tragic subject -- it leaves you feeling cold. I should've felt extraordinary, complicated sympathy for Joseph Luzzi, who became "a widower and a father" on the very same day, but instead I found myself judging him -- and not at all unfairly, I don't think. I understand that people navigate grief and mourning in vastly different ways (including, at times, failing to navigate altogether). My problem with Luzzi is not that he ran from his responsibilities as a father, but that, even in retrospect, he never really acknowledges having done so. He leaves his almost-80-year-old mother to essentially raise his daughter while he throws himself into polishing his CV, playing tennis and amorous flings -- and he endlessly frames his selfish behavior as the rebuilding of his life. I'm sorry, but it never comes across as that to me: his life is rebuilt, yes, but incidentally -- his actions never seem like "rebuilding" (on the page, anyway), like a new construction of one's foundations. He is terrified of facing the haunted realities with which he's confronted. But he never frames it that way, never calls a spade a spade -- instead, it's this incessant habit of framing his running away as necessary for his healing (if I had a dollar for every time the tennis courts were referred to as a "refuge"), as though he means to convince himself that his cowardice (understandable cowardice, true, but cowardice all the same) were something other or more dignified than what it is. And the fact that he's always writing about others with scorn makes him seem less a man suffering a loss than, frankly, an asshole. When he writes that Match users "consider the daughter of a single parent 'baggage'," you're left wanting to answer him: "painting with an awfully wide brush, aren't we?" And I find his attitude toward his mother contemptible. Sometimes this attitude of exception manifests itself in very subtle ways ("Now a vibrant and hyperarticulate four, Isabel bore little resemblance to the little girl who clung to Nonnie's skirts like a lemur"). I see, so now that your daughter is under your refined auspices, she's "vibrant and hyperarticulate," whereas when she was being raised by your mother, she was an animal. And again, perhaps Luzzi doesn't intend a passage like this to be read as critical or contemptuous of his mother, but *that is how it reads*. Or how about when his mother, at his second wedding, tells him, after the speeches have been made: "I too wanted to talk." And then after musing on what his mother have said, he concludes: "My mother said none of these things because she was not one to sing her own praises." No, Mr. Luzzi, your mother said none of those things because you didn't ask her if she'd like to speak at your wedding. And you didn't ask her to speak at your wedding because you're embarrassed by her. Or how about when he gives in to his daughter's upset, and Helena, the violinist who will become his second wife, tells him: "You're such a Luzzi," using his mother's unaffected, working-class pronunciation of the Z -- the name of his mother, then, becoming an acceptable, teasing insult.

I found the book infuriating. For every brilliant insight Luzzi has into the particulars and shocks of grief (and there are many such insights, especially in the book's second chapter), there are a half-dozen moments when I felt like strangling him for his short-sightedness or his elitist contempt. Consider this passage: "I wanted to have my domestic cake, with Katherine as stay-at-home mom, and eat it too, with her also going out and earning some money in a job that wouldn't overly tax or distract her. *Please, God, just let her earn \$50,000 a year*, I prayed, sometimes loud enough for Katherine to hear. I never imagined a life of financial hardship for us, not after all those years of study and sacrifice." Are you shitting me? I realize the cost of living in your neck of the woods is likely quite high, but you're a tenured university professor. Are you that out-of-touch with most of America, that you think the only people who'll be reading your book are from the Ivory Tower you inhabit? that you think writing about a combined household income of at least \$150,000 a year can, in any universe, be described as "financial hardship"?

I should have loved this book. I, like Luzzi, come from a blue-collar family and was the first person in my family (including parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) to earn a Bachelor's degree -- and am still the only person in my family to have earned a Master's degree. I have an obsessive love of tennis. I've experienced unmooring grief and trauma in my own marriage. And I have a keen understanding of how literature can correct our wayward, storm-tossed courses.

But I just found Luzzi so unlikable as to make identification with him almost impossible.

I disclose that I received this book from the publisher.

Sharon Chance says

I absolutely fell in awe of this memoir. Joseph Luzzi's style of writing pulls the reader into his dramatic and tragic story but leave you feeling uplifted and inspired at the conclusion.

I can't imagine the pain of losing a spouse - but Luzzi's comparison to the classic "The Divine Comedy" by Dante is the perfect way to describe the agony of loss and the gradual recovery process that brings you back to life, battered but still fighting the good fight!

If you've experienced loss, intense grief, and the battle of returning to a new normal, you will commiserate with this brilliantly written story. "In A Dark Wood" is, by far, one of the most intense and interesting books I've had the pleasure of reading this year. I highly recommend it.

Aaron Crofut says

I feel bad giving this book a single star. Not because I am overly sympathetic with Luzzi, which I truly am not, but because this book was a gift from a talented student who picked it specifically because of a project on Dante I had her complete.

To ease my conscience, let me say that the high school student was far more perceptive in her understanding of Dante than the author was in this book.

Where to begin? I suppose we must begin somewhere, and so I shall start at the end. My end, that is, with this book. That's when a ten page ramble about tennis and McEnroe began. His account of the Red Sox miraculous 2004 run was almost enough to suck out the excitement of that event; I knew I wasn't doing ten full pages of tennis.

Wait, you say, this book is about Dante and grief, right? So why the Red Sox and Borg and McEnroe? Because the author likes them. Nothing to do with plumbing the depths of the human soul, but the man is so self-centered that he believes there is wisdom in these meanderings.

Do I feel bad that such a tragedy befell him? Yes. But there is an expectation that we soldier through without completely collapsing. Luzzi knows this, and goes so far as to say he put on the macho outer shell and that the real world couldn't see how wrecked he was.

Yes, they could.

Were there glimmers of hope? Sure, on the odd occasion he returned to Dante or Homer and discussed their understanding of tragedy, of virtue. But after one hundred pages of "I was a mess", I reached the point that I didn't care anymore.

At this point, I was ready to offer this my standard "three stars for the gift book out of charity" rating but then made the frightful mistake of seeing how the book ends. It ends with Luzzi, a professor who focuses on Dante, claiming FREAKING DANTE IN HIS FREAKING DIVINE COMEDY ends not with God but with love.

Oh, sorry. Capital Love. As in God. The Love that sets all into motion, Aristotle's Prime Mover.

The Comedy without God is a blood transfusion without blood. I haven't read it since my conversion, but even as a dedicated agnostic I recognized that Dante placed God at the center of literally everything in his tale.

So one star it is for that horrific misreading. On to Viktor Frankl, from whom I expect much more.

Annette says

Three and one half stars. Memoir about loss and grief. Luzzi lost his wife and became a widower with a newborn baby. His journey through grief is a study of Dante's own writings about death and grief.
