



Torch (Vintage Contemporaries)

Cheryl Strayed

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"Work hard. Do good. Be incredible!" That's the advice Teresa Rae Wood gives the listeners of her popular local radio show, Modern Pioneers, and she has taken it to heart in her own life. She fled a bad marriage, escaping to Midden, Minnesota (pop. 408), where she fell in love with a carpenter who became a loving stepfather to her children, Claire and Joshua. Now Claire is away at college, Joshua is laboring through his senior year of high school, and Teresa and Bruce are working to make ends meet. Despite their struggles, their love for each other binds them as a family. Then they receive the devastating news that Teresa has cancer and at thirty-eight may have less than one year to live. Those she will leave behind face something previously unimaginable -- a future without her.

In Torch, the award-winning writer Cheryl Strayed creates from one family's shattering experience a novel infused with tenderness, compassion, and beauty.

Torch (Vintage Contemporaries) Details

Date : Published September 12th 2012 by Vintage (first published February 1st 2006)

ISBN :

Author : Cheryl Strayed

Format : Kindle Edition 432 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Contemporary, Audiobook

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From Reader Review Torch (Vintage Contemporaries) for online ebook

Laura Lemay says

I am another newcomer to Cheryl Strayed via the Dear Sugar column. This was my first "real" CS book, and I knew going in that it was her first novel, and very autobiographical.

On the one hand, this is a really dark, harrowing, moving, emotional book. It's about a mother who dies of cancer at 38 and how her family falls apart and does horrible things to each other in the aftermath, and how they start to rebuild their lives and relationships afterwards. A funny fast-paced romp, great for the beach, this book is most assuredly not.

On the other hand: the writing is tremendous. From the pacing, to the structure (multiple 3rd person points of view), to the very real and very complicated characters, to individual sentences, this book is just beautifully crafted. As a writer, I want to sit down with this book and a pencil and deconstruct how it was put together. It was the glorious writing in this book that kept me reading, even as I put it aside every night saddened and unsure if I wanted to continue reading.

I can recommend it to writers. I'm not sure I can recommend it in general, because it is just so emotionally raw.

Susan says

Sometimes a book becomes more than a book...for me, usually it is a book of poetry, or a poem in particular, something to hang on to when things are not going well. You know those days/weeks/God help you if it's months, when things just falling badly like dominos, one falling brick after another, until you are wondering if there is an ancient gypsy curse on your family or what. This has been my March. A friend had recommended awhile ago that I read an essay in *The Sun* by Cheryl Strayed which led to me getting her book, this book. From the opening line "She ached." I was drawn in to the lives of these characters, vibrating with so much life that at the book's close, I feel I know them, that I will refer to them in my memory as people I have cared for. I am a very speedy reader when I want to be, but I delayed this book, held its pages at bay, to help me walk through some difficult days. It was nice knowing that at the day's end, I could rest my head on my pillow and open the book up, and be in Midden with these people I had come to care so deeply about.

A terrific book from a gifted writer. Can't wait for the next one.

Cynthia Sinsap says

I purchased the book simply because it was by the author of the memoir "Wild." When I started reading the novel, I had to check the cover a couple times to see if I had put down Torch and accidentally picked up Wild instead. The thought that went through my head at several points in the beginning sections of the book was, "If you copy from yourself, is it still plagiarism?" At one point and entire long paragraph was an exact copy of a paragraph in Wild. Perhaps it wouldn't have irritated me so much were it not that the paragraph had a rather trite metaphor-- one hard enough to put up with once let alone come across again in a different book! Now I understood why the author had felt the need to add a preface to this later printing of the novel-- a disclaimer that the novel was not autobiographical. (sure started that way though!).

Actually, as the book went on it got better. The story did eventually veer far enough away from biography to be unique rather than another version of Wild. I did enjoy the book in the end.

Rivka says

I always think of Anne Carson's preface to Euripides when I think about grief: "Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief." This kept coming up for me throughout Torch.

I found myself watching the writing and reading the book as though a close friend had written it (the writing felt very familiar, as though I read it weekly, as though I stamped some particular turns of phrase into my memory) and it reminded me that if I start writing again I have to become each one of my characters in order for them to be human. I think the best kind of reader and the best kind of writing allow for a two way mirror. More than anything, this reminded me of that.

In the end, what I will keep with me is the relationship between Joshua and Claire. When I closed the book, I got that deep "me too" feeling and knew that my brother and I do the best we can with each other.

Ashley says

I'm really unsure why this book has gotten so many good reviews. There was nothing endearing or redeeming about it. I understand flawed characters, but there was nothing remotely likable about any of them, including their relationships with each other. If it is a story about a mother's love and her legacy to her children, then it was a poor example. If it is a book about coping, and stages of grief, then it is also a poor example. Each character deals in the exact same way- with sex. And there is no true emotion or motivation connecting me with any of their plights. I had to force myself to finish this book and see if the end justified the means, but it continued to disappoint and disgust all the way to the end. Save your money and read Slammed instead. It depicts a similar family scenario in a truly emotional and moving way.

Tracie says

After everyone freaked out about Wild (which is not available for normal people to read/buy yet) I had to find out who this Cheryl Strayed person is, so I got her first book.

I have a hard time with this star system. Three is too low, but that's what my gut is telling me now that's it's been a week since I've finished it. There were times, a lot of times, where I LOVED this book. It's incredibly well written and Strayed has a way of phrasing super complex emotional/feeling things in ways that make them perfectly understandable, and for that I should probably give it four stars. It's a gift. But this was not a book I ever wanted to pick up again after I put it down. It's sad and heart wrenching and the sad and the heart wrenching NEVER CEASE. If I'd read it straight through in one day, which wouldn't have been hard if I'd had the time, I'd probably have given it 4 or 5 stars. The first part or two really are mind blowingly good. Like, I kept saying out loud to myself or to Chris, "Holy shit this is good." But by the end I was more like, "Yeah, okay, it's still good, but I'm a little tired of it? I'm ready to move on?" Which is easy for me to say, and yes I realize it makes me a giant dick to so flippantly say, "Sorry your mom died, but can we change the subject a bit?" So, yeah, I'm a dick. But I will say that you should read this. It's worth reading.

(The other thing is that I read a long essay by Strayed about the situation with the whole mom dying thing, and the essay, maybe because it's not fictionalized at all, was so incredible, that parts of the book seemed unnecessary and dull compared to it. Sort of wish I'd read them in reverse order.)

I can pretty much guarantee that sometime in the future I will go and up this to four stars.

Monika says

It's not often that I don't finish a book. I fell in love with Cheryl Strayed after reading Wild and Dear Sugar, so I was looking forward to consuming everything I could get my hands on. It's clear, though, that Torch isn't what made her for a reason. There is nothing wrong with the book, it just isn't very compelling. After reading the other books and being familiar with Strayed's story, I can't help but think of this as more of a therapeutic writing project for her to explore her feelings about her mother's death than a story that we are all to share. Maybe if I had never read the other books, maybe if I didn't know it was the same author, maybe then I would like it. But for now, I'm admitting defeat and putting this one down.

Jane says

A friend whose significant other died recently of lymphoma lent me this book, and as I read it I wondered how she could bear to read it herself. The painfulness of the topic aside, it's a realistic look at first, the process of dying from cancer, and second, the effect of the death of a young mom on her two kids and their step-dad. Claire, the daughter, is at the U of Minnesota, and her brother is still in high school in a small Minnesota town. Each family member deals with the death differently, and at times the reader wants to get into the story and give each one a shake! By the end I appreciated all of the characters and the author for sharing what is in part her own life story and helping me appreciate that life, often messy, never leaves us stuck in one place unless we choose to remain there.

Rebekah says

A really beautiful, honest portrait of grief, relationships, and change. I read this in just a couple of days, drinking it all up. I think I like this book better than Strayed's more popular book "Wild".

Erica Verrillo says

I confess that when I first picked up this book, I had no intention of bringing it home with me. Who wants to read about death and its terrible aftermath--loss, grief, anger? As it turns out--I did.

From the very first sentence, I was hooked. I read the second sentence, and third and fourth, until I realized that I would rather be reading it at home than standing in an aisle. As soon as I got home I opened the book and read it non-stop for two days. I devoured every single word.

What is amazing about this book is the way you are drawn into the lives of the characters. They were entirely convincing, to the point where I could not imagine they were not real. Their conversations, thoughts, actions were so natural I felt I knew them. Maybe I do know them, because all of the characters in this novel are us--in all of our emotional complexity. Whatever they feel, we feel, and have felt.

There is something positively magical about Cheryl Strayed's writing. It is beautiful, lyrical, and poetic in all the right places. But most of all, it is truthful in a way that is rare in life, let alone literature. She faces the most terrifying change of all, the loss of the most important person in one's life, with a kind of fierce honesty that is entirely free of the manipulative sentimentality that haunts personal stories. And this story is indeed personal. Strayed's own mother died suddenly when she was in her twenties. It is undoubtedly her own intimacy with grief which lends this book its force.

If I could give Torch more than five stars, I would. Strayed truly knows what it means to be human.

Laura says

V sad, v beautiful.

jo says

i'm kind of moved to see so many people review this now that cheryl strayed has finally told us she is sugar of the rumpus (she "came out" on valentine's day, 2012). sugar is so much loved, so much *justly* loved, that her readers are flocking to her books and her articles to read more by her.

if you have followed sugar's advice columns (and they are NOT ordinary advice columns: they are masterpieces of wisdom, wit, beauty, and life) this book won't entirely surprise you. it belongs with the same philosophy of hard knocks sugar embraces (though she's also much more!). in her columns sugar is much

warmer and more positive than she is here, but this was written some time ago, and this is her life, and she is entitled to as much bitterness as she wants to put on the page.

there is this 2002 article in The Sun Magazine that covers the same emotional and historical territory cheryl strayed covers here. i suggest you read it after reading the book, not only because it gives the book away, but because it's more powerful and more beautiful than the book (it's truly astounding) and it'll ruin the book for you.

so here's my fantasy, my pure uneducated speculation about cheryl strayed: when she was young her mom died really really fast, and the pain that hit her when her mom died was a pain she didn't even know could exist. it was a pain so ferocious, so corrosive, so annihilating, she felt she couldn't survive and probably her feeling was accurate. but she did survive it, somehow. she didn't survive it very well or very tidily, but she lived. on many occasions (my fantasy goes) she cursed the fact that she was alive. on many occasions she railed against the fact that she couldn't die. because she really, really, REALLY wanted to die. she wanted to die more badly than she wanted anything. yet she couldn't. she was stuck in this here life and that sucked so majorly, she tried to make a mess of this life that was entrapping her as rigorously as she could.

but her mom had made a terrific job of raising her and she was too good and too sane to fuck it all up.

so, at some point, reluctantly, painfully, heroically, she resumed living. and then, because the pain, though it had lessened its bite *somewhat*, was still not going away, she decided to exorcise it by putting it all into writing. this was, after all, who she was. she was a writer. so cheryl decided to write her way out of her massive, horrible, icy cold, hell-hot pain.

in the novel, the characters are a bit of a composite of various aspects of cheryl's pain as described in the Sun article. here are three aspects of this book i want to focus on:

1. cheryl strayed is a fantastic writer. she sees things very deeply and puts them on the page in such a way that you see them deeply too. she finds words for the most difficult, the most impossible, the most intangible things. also, she uses adjectives quite spectacularly. if i thought this denomination made any sense, i'd say she's a writer's writer. but here's something that does make sense: if you want to write, read cheryl strayed and learn how to compose sentences and paragraphs and narrative structures. study her. she has it down pat.

2. this book does not let up. it doesn't let up from page one. you'd figure CS would portray the mother who is soon to die as someone special and lovable. but: no. the kids are annoyed at her. the kids are embarrassed by her. the kids are kids who have outlived their enchantment with their mother and are totally ready to live a life of their own to which anger at their mom is at this time (they are respectively 17 and... 20?) essential. in the normal course of events they would eventually stop being mad at their mom and would bond with her. but mom dies and they are stuck in rageland.

3. now, you would expect the kids to feel guilty. i know i would. i would feel AWFUL for every single time i failed to show her love and kindness. i would worry over those moments like an obsessed and possessed person. not these kids. maybe because they are minnesotan kids and they are raised to keep their feelings as locked up as they possibly can, they spend the whole book failing to connect: to themselves, to each other. (view spoiler) grief leaves these people decimated and while they could help each other restore each other to wholeness, they don't. there are about two million moments in which someone is about to say something that you feel could change things, start a dialogue. invariably, he or she bites it back. this is the book of missed connections. connecting moments present themselves and are allowed to pass over and over and over. it can drive you mad.

these three characters, father, son, and daughter, so damn alone with their devastating pain. and since you never see them truly appreciate the woman they have lost (well, the father does; he loved her, though you don't see exactly what they had), you don't even quite know why they are suffering so much. you want to scream: did you even *like* this woman???? THEN TELL US WHY!

maybe if they were able to name, to themselves and to each other, why mom is so fucking missable; if they were capable of tracing the contours of the hole she left behind, they could find some solace. but they seem to be able to do just about zero emotional work. you follow them through the book at their most bereft and lost and directionless.

i liked this book very much. i was sorry it ended. i could have read twice as much of it. the writing is magnificent and in literature this is 90% of the joy. what i want to say is that there is an intrinsic redemptive value in beauty and art, and, while the characters of this novel stumble through life in a fog, *you* don't. you can name all they cannot name. you process the pain through the beauty of the writing. you are given clear and deep vision.

Melanie says

Cheryl's story is painfully close to home, but she manages to make the telling a healing journey. She is, quite simply, my literary hero.

Katie Kenig says

I picked up Torch from the library because I loved loved loved "Wild," Cheryl Strayed's memoir of her trek along the Pacific Coast Trail. I identified with her. I liked her style, I liked her writing, and I loved her story. When I found out that she'd published a work of fiction some seven years ago, I couldn't resist!

I might should have resisted.

It's not so much that this is a bad book, but this is a very thinly veiled memoir of what actually happened to Strayed, much of which you will already know if you've read "Wild" previously. So, I knew the story, but not all the details. I decided to persevere with the book anyway, because I had faith in Strayed's storytelling ability. I knew the book would be sad. I knew it would make me cry. I didn't know it would also make me angry. I actually threw the book across the room at one point and decided to stop reading it.

But I still persevered.

There was a moment at the end where I thought I was going to have to relive what, for me, was one of the saddest moments in "Wild," having to do with her mother's horse, Lady. When reading "Wild," this particular section affected me so much that my husband stopped what he was doing (in the middle of playing an MMORPG, and that, ladies and gentlemen, means he thought it was an emergency) to come to the bedroom and investigate why his wife was bawling like the world was ending.

But I still persevered.

And I kind of wish I hadn't. I really liked *Strayed* after *Wild*, and now I'm kind of ambivalent. I don't know how true these details were to her story, but it was pretty clear that much of it was ripped directly from her life. It made me alternately angry at people in her life and at her. It was heartbreaking in places, and in other places I just boggled at the choices people made. It seemed hyper-real, in the way that sometimes, when I tell people about the "year of hell" in our lives they can't believe that that would actually happen to a person. Sometimes, when too much happens, it seems like it has to be fiction. It has to be fake. And I'm well aware by my own experience that it's not always the case, but it still stretches that part of our brain that is desperately trying to suspend disbelief.

I think that *Strayed's* writing style of writing has certainly evolved since writing "*Torch*". She is much more eloquent in "*Wild*" and has learned the art of the narrative through trial and error, partly through writing "*Torch*" it seems.

This was an okay book. It isn't brilliant enough to make it one I'd recommend, because it also is a very provoking book, but it was definitely... okay.

Wilhelmina Jenkins says

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold". Yeats said it, it has been used a million times, and it is the primary thought that kept recurring to me as I read this heartbreaking book. Teresa, the mother and wife and the core of the family, dies of cancer, and the family grieves and crumbles. *Strayed* examines the aftermath of this death from the viewpoint of each of those she left behind as they struggle to redefine themselves and their direction without her. Anyone who has lost someone who is central to their life will find something of their own experience here. Beautifully done.
