



Grief

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Reeling from the recent death of his invalid mother, an exhausted, lonely professor comes to Washington, D.C. to escape his previous life. What he finds there — in his handsome, solitary landlord; in the city's somber mood and sepulchral architecture; and in the strange and impassioned journals of Mary Todd Lincoln — shows him unexpected truths about America and loss.

Andrew Holleran is the author of three other novels, *Dancer from the Dance*, *Nights in Aruba*, and *The Beauty of Men*. He has also written a book of essays, *Ground Zero*, and a book of short stories, *In September the Light Changes*. Holleran lives in Washington, D.C.

Grief Details

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Alicia says

This is a book that, not surprisingly, explores the different ways people deal with grief. The main character comes to Washington D.C. to recover from the death of his invalid mother. While in D.C. he connects with a number of his gay friends and they talk about the AIDS epidemic that took so many of their friends. The main character realizes that his guilt at surviving the epidemic and the fact that he never came out to his mother are keeping him locked in the grieving cycle even as others move on into new lives. Paralleling this is his reading of a book of letters of Mary Lincoln, who let grief at the loss of her husband destroy her.

This was an interesting, spare book that provides an unusual portrait of the world of gay men in Washington D.C. however the grief of the protagonist never became real for me. Maybe this is because grief is such a personal experience or because no one can ever see another's grief in its fullness but this book did not have the emotional weight that the title suggested that it would have.

Jeffrey Richards says

I love this book, one of my favorites that I've read in the past couple of years and I've read it twice now. Some of the reviews have stated that this book is "barren" and "stilted" and that the narrator is wallowing in his grief. Well, welcome to grief. It's not all wails and tantrums and insights. A good portion of the time we become stunned by grief, which may be viewed as barren or stilted or even wallowing when we can't get out of it quick enough. What's so wonderfully beautiful about this book is that Holleran doesn't go for the theatrics, he keeps the story calm and methodic and it's in this presentation that I found myself completely enshrined in this man's tale of grief, as well as Mary Todd Lincoln's, and all the other tales of grief that pass through the book (each character is grieving in their own way). I just love the glow of this book.

Sian Lile-Pastore says

I thought this was beautiful and lovely and also pretty sad and bleak (yep, the clue was in the title). It's a novel about a man who moves to Washington after the death of his mother and rents a room in a house from a gay man in his 50s.

I assumed that that grief part would be about the narrator getting over the death of his mother, but it also seemed to be a general kind of grief (the grief 'lay beneath all things'), with his friend and landlord trying to get on with their lives in a post AIDS world after losing hundreds of friends. The narrator's landlord is described as

'one of thousands of gay men who survived AIDS only to realize they are completely alone and have nothing to live for.'

which is incredibly sad... another bit that got to me was when the narrator was teaching a class in Literature and AIDS and said:

'was sitting in a room once a week at a long table talking about something that for these students was simply a historical event being studied in a seminar made me recall, as I led the discussion, all the people who were no longer alive.'

Anyway, along with all of this, there are also lots of lovely bits about walking around Washington and museums and the letters of Mary Todd Lincoln.

DoctorM says

Andrew Holleran produced "Dancer From the Dance" in the mid-1970s, in the post-Stonewall, pre-HIV disco era. "Dancer" was a swoony romance, the gay "Gatsby". But it was also suffused with a kind of gentle melancholy that Holleran expanded on all through the plague years of the 1980s. "Grief" is Holleran's meditation on loss and living on after grief--- a fine and sympathetic novel, one that draws not only on the survivors' guilt of Holleran's generation but also on the passage of time, on the lives of men now in their fifties.

Holleran's unnamed narrator has moved into rented rooms in a DC townhouse after the death of his elderly mother. His landlord is a 50-something gay man whose life has closed off after the plague years. The narrator, his landlord, and their friends move like ghosts through a winter and early spring in DC, men all too aware of their losses and how time and love have passed them by.

The voice here is pitch-perfect--- Holleran's narrator finds a volume of Mary Todd Lincoln's letters and projects Mary Lincoln's post-1865 life as a permanently grieving widow onto his own losses and past loves. The narration takes up DC in winter as a perfect stage for grief--- a city based on history and the past.

"Grief" is a brief novel, but a deeply affecting one. Very much worth reading.

Rebecca McNutt says

While I'm not a big romance fan, I loved the way the author was able to capture so much emotion (depression, grief, love, joy, etc) in such vibrant detail.

Katherine says

This book is a meditation on grief - the main character doesn't evolve or change during the course of the book, he mainly explores his own grief and that of others. I've stayed away from Joan Didion's *A Year of Magical Thinking* - what reviewers called this book's non-fiction counterpart - because I've had plenty of my own experiences with death in the last few years, and I wasn't sure I wanted to read about how hard it could be. But this being fiction, I wanted to give it a shot. Some of the writing is really very beautifully done - it's careful and spare and conveys a great deal. But I didn't think it was particularly powerful, nor did it ring particularly true, and the characters and story were almost intentionally unengaging. At the end of the day, I think this is really a reflection on particular kinds of grief - the lives of gay men as the U.S. AIDS crisis began to ebb, the life of an adult child who has cared for an ailing parent. Perhaps it says something about grief that not much translates. I think is a worthwhile, and short read, if you come across it, but I wouldn't

rush out to get it or put it on the top of the pile.

Will says

I didn't think I'd bother reviewing this, but the reviews of the book are just so fucking stupid. What type of illiterate moron thinks a novel called *Grief* (and let me repeat: the novel is called *Grief*, not *Over the Fucking Moon Happy*) is bad because—wait for it—it's *too sad*? Or how about this one?: it has too much AIDS. And?: it's gay. This is like whining that *Beloved* has too many black people in it. "Yeah, that whole slavery thing—*too sad!*"

And yet, I don't actually feel like contributing anything substantial to counter them. Mostly because *Grief* is, bar none, the best short novel I've read this year, and it's a work of understated genius that rivals *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. Like, what the fuck am I supposed to say about *that*? For the time being, I'd much rather do the easy work of pointing fingers to single out blockheads and prejudicial nitwits.

Lewis says

Unlike other writers, Holleran knows he doesn't have to hit the reader over the head to get his ideas across: it's much more effective to crawl under our skin. *Grief* is a deceptively simple book—short, thematically focused, with only a minimal plotline—but the cumulative effect is powerful and devastating. As the nameless narrator wanders the streets of Washington, DC (with nary a reference to politics, as if we are in a mythic landscape, where the resident of the White House doesn't matter), observes the antics of his quirky landlord, and becomes enthralled by the tragic story of Mary Todd Lincoln, his own feelings are kept at arm's length. He occasionally delves into his immediate grief—the loss of his mother—but under the surface lie the deaths of dozens of others, friends and lovers lost to AIDS. This is the story of an unwitting survivor who, at some level, questions both how he survived and why. The grief is unending, because he believes that's the way to keep the dead forever with him. In so doing, of course, he freezes his own life. Holleran's prose reads like poetry, his characters emerging like modern archetypes, and as a result, the feeling of grief is palpable. It takes only a few hours to read the book, but the emotions it conjures up are lasting. I believe this is Holleran's finest work since the classic *Dancer from the Dance*. A must-read for anyone who's ever lost—which is all of us.

Rowe says

Not bad! This is a short novel, only 150 pages, that is so detailed, you take a long time to read it. I think it's fun to read; it's a tour of Washington D.C. and a history lesson. Politics are addressed, and I would describe the ideas as edgy, politically incorrect, brave, and they serve to create real intimacy between the main characters. I'm surprised SJWs haven't held a pitchfork party and burned all copies of this book. Likely, not enough people have read it. Natalie Goldberg mentions it in *LET THE WHOLE THUNDERING WORLD COME HOME*, her newest memoir. All the cool people are reading it.

Bookmarks Magazine says

In his fifth work of fiction, Andrew Holleran, author of the widely praised *Dancer from the Dance* (1978), explores the complex issues surrounding grief while offering multifaceted impressions of Washington, D.C. Critics praised Holleran's lyrical writing, his subtle and flavorful characterizations, and the beauty of his observations—especially in his evocations of the city. Several admired Holleran's refusal to deal with grief in simplistic terms. John Freeman carped that the novel was a "talky piece of fiction" in which "dialogue nudges the narrative along." But even he admitted that "the languorous beauty of Holleran's observations gives the book bottom and weight." Most critics agree with Michael Upchurch that "this brief, quiet novel may be [Holleran's] best yet."

This is an excerpt from a review published in Bookmarks magazine.

Tom says

This is a sequel to "The Beauty of Men," in which Holleran depicted a closeted son dutifully, but often resentfully, giving his mother weekly outings from a Florida nursing home. In this work, the middle-aged single man, writing in the first person, has moved to Washington D.C. temporarily after his invalid mother has passed away. He is teaching a literature class while working through mixed feelings of guilt, grief and regret that life has passed him by. There is not much "action" in this piece, no hot sex encounters, and no happy ending. Instead it's more of a solitary meditation, as the man hovers between starting a new life for himself or sinking back into the old, sans Mom. He debates this issue with himself on nocturnal strolls around Dupont Circle. A shadowy landlord tries to offer guidance, urging the man to settle in D.C. permanently and get on with a new life and make new friends. But the hero finds himself drawn, instead, by the peculiar letters of Mary Todd Lincoln, who chose obsessive mourning and isolation as the way to live out her life. The book may not be meaningful for 20- and 30-somethings but it may speak powerfully to older gay men who survived the AIDS epidemic and feel haunted by memories of friends and lovers who didn't.

Christian Paula says

I wanted to like this book more. Holleran is great with words and the way he talks about being gay having lived through AIDS, as well as grieving the death of his mother were beautiful and illuminating. But what got to me were the descriptions of life in DC. He touches on the cycle of gentrification and the spacelessness the city has as not a city in Maryland, but the country's city. But I was bored to tears with bland descriptions of the city's attractions and how much he can't connect to any of it if it isn't tied with his current state. If he stuck to the grieving, it would have struck the chord in me, but DC came off as the elder person you have to respect but have no interest in getting to know.

Chana says

A lonely middle-aged gay man has cared for his aging mother for years. Now she has died and the man is alone and bereaved. A friend suggests he take a temporary job in D.C. and rent a room from a friend of the friend. The man he will rent from is also a middle aged gay man. So this plan goes forward and nothing else happens except discussions of grief, loneliness, responsibility to the living and the dead. Our main character is in a Washington D.C. that seems empty and he walks around a great deal, going to museums. He lives in a world of near silence. It seems like he is reaching for a closer relationship with the man he is renting from but nothing develops. Middle aged men don't seem to be attracted to each other, they want younger men. The renter snoops in his landlord's private rooms and makes friends with the landlord's dog, letting it out when the landlord is not around.

Eventually our main character goes back home, the end.

What I did like about this book is the concurrent reading, by the main character, of "Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters by Justin and Linda Levitt Turner. That was fascinating and I would like to read that book. There were also some good insights into grief such as, "...grief is what you have after someone you love dies. It's the only thing left of that person. Your love for, your missing, them. As long as you have that, you're not alone - you have them."

That is very true; how I resented anyone who tried to help me "get over" my grief. I felt like they were trying to take my son away from me again.

Eduardo says

4.5 is my rating.

This is the second time I've read this remarkable short novel (150 pages). And I have liked it as much this time as the first time, maybe more. Holleran uses a very penetrating eye in revealing the splendors and miseries of gay life in Washington, the capital of the nation, a paradoxical and sad mirror / pattern of the whole country.

The narrator is told on page 122 by an 80-year old lady that guilt is caused by the awareness of human imperfections, and, being so, it is a form of snobbery. Brilliant.

Laurie says

Not everyone will 'like' this book, but I believe it speaks intensively and extensively to those who have reason to grieve. As I put it to a friend, the characters in this book are in one way or another 'bereft'. I purposely don't use the term 'berieved'; its connotations are somehow too conventional.

The characters in the novel are all dealing, to one degree or another, with absence. In the novel's particular context, it is about gay men grieving for the friends and lovers they have lost through AIDS, but also about family (parents in particular). In a more general way, the novel is about connectedness or the keenly felt lack of it with those who are gone or are about to go. Even to Frank's ancient cat who, as Frank says, has shared 16 years of his life and therefore hasn't long to live, has a place in Frank's life that will soon be left empty and with which Frank must deal.

Although there is a great deal in this short novel about gay men and gay life in Washington DC, I feel the gay scene is peripheral to or simply an interesting vehicle for the author's long conversation with grief and the state of being bereft. I lost my second husband to sudden death 22 years ago, but still remember how it felt (and feels) to be bereft, which is perhaps why I view this book as a conversation with grief in all its many

forms rather than as a 'gay' novel: grief ranges from 'moving on' through 'marking time' to letting grief rule one's life utterly in the sense that grief can sometimes be a form of death before actual death. I also see echoes in it of my adopted son's bereft-ness: he lost his mother to death when he was only two, and his father to abandonment, and though eleven years have passed for him and he scarcely remembers his mother (as he says, more from photographs than anything else) I can also see that he carries on an emotional conversation - that changes over time but doesn't disappear -- with grief.

Not everyone will enjoy this book. Some will get hung up by its 'gay' aspect, while some will be bored or repelled by its central theme of grief. But if you have to face the imminent death of someone close to you or have already done so, I think this book will speak not so much to you, as about the questions you have half-formulated about how to live a life that has to accommodate grief somewhere.
