The Boston Globe

Lifestyle

‘The Widow’s Handbook’ describes loss through poetry

By Bella English | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 07, 2014

Carl Steinbaum was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer in December 1995 and died 10 months later. He was 58 and left behind his wife, Ellen, and their three daughters. College sweethearts, the couple married when she was 20 and he 24.

GWENDA KACZOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Though Ellen knew what the likely outcome of his illness would be, his death stunned her. “Death wasn’t something I thought about,” says Steinbaum, who lives in Cambridge. “I realized how innocently I had lived my life.” She had lost beloved grandparents, aunts, and her father, but no one “out of generational sequence.”

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

Steinbaum and a group of other bereaved women have just published a moving anthology of poems dealing with the deaths of their husbands or significant others. The works deal with grieving, coping, and beginning anew.

Related

- ‘Birthday’ by Ellen Steinbaum

“The Widows’ Handbook: Poetic Reflections on Grief and Survival” is a collection of poems from 87 American women of all ages, “legally married or not, straight and gay, whose partners or spouses have died,” according to the editors, Jacqueline Lapidus of Brighton and Lise Menn of Colorado.

Some, such as Maxine Kumin, Tess Gallagher, and Mary Oliver, are well-known poets. Others have never been published. They range from a 23-year-old who was nine months pregnant when her husband died to an elderly widow married for decades.

About a dozen are from Greater Boston, including Susan Mahan of Weymouth, Barbara Greenberg of Boston, and Ruth Rothstein of Lincoln. Several others are from the other New England states.

In the foreword, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, whose husband of 56 years died in 2010, writes of the “loss like no other” and says that the book gives voice to those who can’t find the words to express their own grief.

“The poems speak first of the long days and nights consumed by mourning, then of the need to tackle the necessities of living without the support that once sustained them, and ultimately of the capacity still to seek the joys of being alive,” writes Ginsburg.

The theme of contemporary widowhood is hardly new, from Joan Didion’s best-selling memoir, “The Year of Magical Thinking” to Joyce Carol Oates’s “A Widow’s Story.” But this is the first book of poetry by myriad widows, according to the editors.

GWENDA KACZOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“Memoirs by famous writers and single-author volumes of poetry are totally different from this anthology,” says Lapidus. “The problem with memoirs is that they are so specific to one individual’s circumstances and usually deal with only the first year or two of widowhood.”

In the anthology, the women write frankly of their journey out of the land of couples. Their poems speak of the death itself, broken hearts, sold homes, thoughtless remarks, old memories and new chores, of navigating Home Depot for the first time, of loving, and lusting, again. There's grief, anger, and even humor.

The book includes a spectrum of couples, from long-time Provincetown resident Mary Oliver's 40-year partnership with another woman to Lapidus's decades-long relationship with a married man. They'd fallen in love as young, single colleagues working in New York. Lapidus went to Europe intending to stay six months but ended up staying 21 years. Meanwhile, he met and married someone else.

But the feelings, and the relationship, continued. "We were connected just over 40 years," says Lapidus, a writer, editor, and translator. Edward — she does not want his last name used — was to spend Thanksgiving 2004 with her. But he didn't show, or call.

"That was not normal," says Lapidus, 72. He had been on Nantucket, closing his summer house for the winter, and was stopping in Boston to see her before heading home to New York. In the book, Lapidus writes:

"The fridge was full of food for Thanksgiving/ her pie was cooling on the rack any minute his key/ would be turning in the lock/ I called the caretaker and told him to look/ everywhere, even up in the attic/ He was in the kitchen, he'd had a stroke."

SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Ellen Steinbaum with husband James Dalsimer. Her first husband died of cancer at 58 and she has contributed a poem about it to "The Widows' Handbook."

Lapidus and her co-editor were classmates at Swarthmore College. Menn went on to become a linguist and professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her husband, linguist William Bright, died of cancer in 2006.

Though never legally married to Edward, Lapidus considers herself a widow. "What defines widows is not so much the legal status, but the irrevocable change in our lives, the fact of having had this relationship and being bereaved, that there's no more 'we' and never will be," she says.

She wanted to do a book of poetry on widowhood: "Lise and I knew at least six other women in our class whose husbands had died. And behind us are the baby boomers. That's a big cohort, and then there are the families, friends, clergy, social workers, hospice and health care professionals. All of them need to know how we feel in order not to put their foot in it."

Put their foot in it?

“We heard a lot of inappropriate stuff after the deaths,” she says. “No one knows what to do in a culture that does not handle death up front. People expect you to come back to work in three days and then ‘get over it’ within a year.”

In her poem, “With friends like these,” Lapidus writes of some comments after her lover died: “I don’t know what to say. Did he leave you anything? Now he’s at rest, he’s with God. . . . He wouldn’t want you to feel miserable, why are you wearing black? You’re lucky he didn’t linger. Can we talk about something else? But he gave you so much grief! But you weren’t even married!”

To elicit poems from other women, Lapidus put the word out throughwriting networks. Hundreds of submissions came in, and she and Menn culled what they considered the best sampling. But there were 15 rejections beforeThe Kent State University Press accepted the manuscript.

They don’t expect to make money from the book — “We’ll be lucky if we make back our expenses,” Lapidus says. But they paid their contributors, except for those who waived a fee. Though they never heard back from the reclusive Oliver, her agent sent two poems. “We dropped a third poem because we couldn’t afford it.”

The anthology is timely because widowhood is a growing demographic. In 2010, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services, there were 8.7 million widows — more than four times the 2.1 widowers.

There are already 1 million baby boomer widows in the nation. That number certainly will rise because there are about 25 million married boomer women, and 70 percent of them are expected to survive their husbands, according to the Journal of Financial Planning. In addition, about 500,000 women under the age of 45 have lost partners to accidents, illness, combat, and suicide.

Many people asked Lapidus and Menn about widowers. Were they going to include men in the book, too?

They didn’t, and not only because the numbers favor widows. It’s because, they say, society favors widowers. “Grief is grief,” says Lapidus, “but women whose partners die suffer a particular kind of social demotion in a world that privileges couples.”

Widowers tend to be fussed over: “The neighbor women line up at their door with casseroles, invite them to dinner, try to fix them up with the nearest widow, and continue to include them in social events even if they don’t remarry,” Lapidus says. “Widows are ignored, invisible.”

SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

“People expect you to come back to work in three days and then ‘get over it’ within a year,” says Jacqueline Lapidus, a co-editor of “The Widows’ Handbook.”

It’s true that women form closer friendships, she says, but “widowhood still lowers our social opportunities. Nobody bothers to include [especially older] single women in activities in which couples get together, especially evenings, weekends, vacations.”

And, she says, “dating is not fun.”

Some of the poems detail such dating. In “Where Is Walter?” Cary Fellman, tells of her search to find “Walter,” recalling that when her husband became ill he suggested that after he was gone she should find somebody else, maybe someone named Walter. She wrote, in part: *“I thought I’d met my Walter on a plane/ to Miami but his wife was waiting there,/ The next Walter was a boring man,/ obsessed with health. He wore garlic./ Then I met Walter who played tuba/ in the community band. He was/ short and fat and chewed Tums.”*

Steinbaum knows that her story of remarrying is not the norm. She had been widowed for 11 years and had not dated in five years when a friend fixed her up with a widower.

“I had pretty much put out of my head the idea of finding someone new to share my life with,” says Steinbaum, 71. In 2007, she met James Dalsimer, a psychiatrist. They married in 2009.

Their first spouses, she says, are a respected part of their marriage, and her poem, “Last night his late wife” speaks to the issue. “Our late spouses are a constant part of who we are as individuals and as a couple,” Steinbaum says.

The book's epilogue is “Widow and Dog” by Kumin. An editor’s note explains that in the poem, a woman who is not widowed imagines what it would be like to live alone after the death of her husband. It begins: *“After he died she started letting the dog/*

sleep on his side of the bed they had shared/for fifty-one years . . . / his smooth tawny bulk close to her but not/ touching eased her through the next night and the next."

Kumin died last month at her home in Warner, N.H. She is survived by Victor Kumin, her husband of 67 years.

There will be a reading by Boston-area poets from "The Widows' Handbook" at 7 p.m. on April 3 at Newtonville Books.

Bella English can be reached at english@globe.com.