

MOURNING  
DIARY

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Roland Barthes

Translated and with an afterword by Richard Howard

## Mourning Diary

*Roland Barthes, Richard Howard (Translator)*

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# Mourning Diary

*Roland Barthes , Richard Howard (Translator)*

**Mourning Diary** Roland Barthes , Richard Howard (Translator)

**A major discovery: The lost diary of a great mind—and an intimate, deeply moving study of grief**

The day after his mother's death in October 1977, the influential philosopher Roland Barthes began a diary of mourning. Taking notes on index cards as was his habit, he reflected on a new solitude, on the ebb and flow of sadness, and on modern society's dismissal of grief. These 330 cards, published here for the first time, prove a skeleton key to the themes he tackled throughout his work. Behind the unflagging mind, "the most consistently intelligent, important, and useful literary critic to have emerged anywhere" (Susan Sontag), lay a deeply sensitive man who cherished his mother with a devotion unknown even to his closest friends.

## Mourning Diary Details

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## From Reader Review Mourning Diary for online ebook

## Roxane says

For writers grief is either a blessing or a curse because they are able to articulate with exacting detail, the nature of their sorrow. This is a lovely book.

**Farnaz says**

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**Sinem A. says**

Barthes'in annesinin ölümü ardından tuttuğu 3 parça günlükten oluşan kitap bir düşünürün saf ve en yalın halini görmek açısından çok etkileyici idi.

Aslında kitabı daha çok yazarın gün gün yazdığını küçük notlardan oluşturuyor. Kansa ama üzerine düşünecek cümlelerden. Bu küçük notlar daha sonra birleştirip "Vita Nova" dediğinde annesinin ölümüne dair bir roman yazma tasarısını var ancak hiçbir zaman gerçekleştirmiyor.

Aslında insan? bu kadar ele geciren bir duygusal?nda yazmak kurgu yapmak oldukça zor bence.

O nedenle bu kadar *cal??kan* bir *dü??ün*ürün *Vita Nova* y? hic var edememesini *yad??rgamak* mümkün de?il.

*"Bir annenin zekasından hiç söz edilmez, sanki bu onun duygululuğunu azaltmak, onu uzak göstermek gibi olur. Ama zeka bir insan ile özgürce ya? amam? za olanak veren her? evdir.."*

## **Michael Palkowski says**

The existence of this book is interesting ethically at least because it is invasive reproduction of a writer's own private scribblings on index cards sutured together for the sake of commercial ends. Ethics aside, the content is really staggeringly aphoristic, infinitely quotable and full of concise instantiated grievance. The observations however require a specific frame of mind to read and the fragmentary nature of the notes does mean that a linear reading is almost fruitless, except if reading purely for chronology. What is clear is that his mother's death leads Barthe to contemplate and deliriously inspect his own mortality. The whole world is sucked into this state, the rain becomes a 'momentary palpitation' and life becomes "mourning in layers", which is a "cruel country".

What we get is an author who treats his own suffering much like a mathematician does with numbers. He is self aware of the therapeutic nature of his notes as he always relates to his mourning in third person, it's always exterior to him and he doesn't accept it. It's suffering, not mourning. He uses a classification schema, a taxonomy of sorts to help him deal with the implication of "forever [being] my own mother". A staggeringly well put observation is when he remarks that he feels as though he has lost his daughter, since he in effect was mothering his own mother for such a long time before she died. The lack of consistency, the lack of form and the lack of meaning truly scares and terrifies Barthe as he feels it in the most simple of things (like hunger pains) to more complicated understandings. The essence of Barthe's conundrum is Kierkegaard's point (which he refers to)

"Once I speak, I express generality and if I refrain from speaking, no one can understand me"

This impossibility to elaborate and fully articulate the suffering he faces leaves him emotionally abandoned (See Note from Jan. 16 1978). What enters is melancholic musings and sad reflections. These points offer a character study more of Barthe, than anything specific about the relationship he had with his mother. Most mourning seems to take on this specific narcissism in which one must face their own death and the inability to grieve for others. To become the subject of dying shows a definitive end to the neutral that Barthe talks about in his lecture series. A problem of course with the book is that the reader is forced to psychoanalyze the disposition and points being made without clarification or elaboration from the author himself, it's therefore a series of calculations and attempts at clarifying what Barthe himself states endlessly that he cannot. The richness of the material therefore depends wholly on the reader's ability at putting the pieces together as one of the more poignant and brilliant aphorisms in the book puts it: we all have our own rhythm of suffering. This is something that time doesn't cure for Barthe as time only "makes the emotivity of mourning pass".

The book itself is also wasteful, with single lined notes sometimes taking whole pages, giving the illusion of content when the manuscript is very small. Indeed a lot of the observations he makes could be coupled or pasted together with other documents or ideas he had at the time including in the neutral where he gives lectures dealing with these issues and reflecting on his mother's death. It does present another side to the stern and verbose literary critic though as he is not filtered through a certain style or presentation here, it's more raw and real. It shows a humanism, a gentleness and someone who deeply cared for his mother.

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### **Diane says**

This is a book that was very meaningful to me, but it is not something I would widely recommend. It was such a personal read that I even had trouble discussing it with friends.

When Roland Barthes' mother died on October 25, 1977, he started writing notes about his grief. This mourning diary covers nearly two years, and some passages were so moving and powerful that they felt poetic. This book was published after Barthes' death (tragically, he died just a few years after his mother, due to complications from an auto accident) and his notes are unfinished, scattered and chaotic. But there is beauty in these journal entries — the truth of his suffering is laid bare. I could not critique this book; I could only relate to it.

I reached for this text because I am also mourning my mother, and in Barthes' writings I found some solace. There is comfort in meeting a fellow traveler in grief, even if his journey happened nearly 40 years ago. (Similarly, Barthes found comfort in Proust's writings on grief.)

I so appreciated this book that I lingered over it for a week, taking my time, slowly reading and marking passages. I was grateful for the companionship. After a death, people tell you to *move on, focus on living, it gets easier, you'll be fine*. Don't tell me I'm fine. Things aren't fine. Things will never be fine. People want you to act fine so that they can feel better about themselves, and I was grateful that Barthes figuratively called bullshit on this social custom.

This was my first Roland Barthes book, and while it was an unusual place to begin, I liked it so much that I will look up his other, more complete works. Recommended to those who appreciate grief memoirs.

### **Meaningful Passages**

People tell you to keep your "courage" up. But the time for courage is when she was sick, when I took care of her and saw her suffering, her sadness, and when I had to conceal my tears. Constantly one had to make a decision, put on a mask, and that was courage.

[Status confusion] For months, I have been her mother. It is as if I had lost my daughter.

Moments when I'm "distracted" (speaking, even having to joke) — and somehow going dry — followed by sudden cruel passages of feeling, to the point of tears.

Always that painful wrench between my ease in talking, in taking an interest, in observing, in living as before, and the impulses of despair.

To whom could I put this question (with any hope of an answer)? Does being able to live without someone you loved mean you loved her less than you thought?

Don't say *mourning*. It's too psychoanalytic. I'm not *mourning*. I'm suffering.

Now, from time to time, there unexpectedly rises within me, like a bursting bubble: the realization that *she no longer exists, she no longer exists*, totally and forever. This is a flat condition, utterly unadjectival — dizzying because *meaningless* (without any possible interpretation). A new pain.

Everyone is "extremely nice" — and yet I feel entirely alone.

Everything pains me. The merest trifle rouses a sense of abandonment. I'm impatient with other people, their will to live, their universe. Attracted by a decision to withdraw from everyone.

Difficult feeling (unpleasant, discouraging) of a *lack of generosity*. It troubles me. I can only put this into some relation with the image of *maman*, so perfectly generous (and she used to tell me: you have a good heart). I had supposed that once she was gone I would sublime that absence by a sort of perfection of "kindness," the surrender of all kinds of nastiness, jealousy, narcissism. And I am becoming less and less "noble," "generous."

I had thought that *maman's* death would make me someone "strong," acceding as I might to worldly indifference. But it has been quite the contrary: I am even more fragile.

It is said that Time soothes mourning — no, Time makes nothing happen; it merely makes the emotivity of mourning pass.

What have I to lose now that I've lost my Reason for living — the Reason to fear for someone's life.

To think, to know that *maman* is dead *forever, completely*, is to think, letter by letter, that I too will die *forever and completely*. There is then, in mourning, a radical and *new* domestication of death; for previously, it was only a *borrowed* knowledge (clumsy, had from others, from philosophy), but now it is *my* knowledge.

For the last few nights, images — nightmares during which I see *maman* sick, abused. Terror. I am suffering from *the fear of what has happened*.

Like love, mourning affects the world — and the worldly — with unreality, with importunity. I resist the world, I suffer from what it demands of me, from its demands. The world increases my sadness, my dryness, my confusion, my irritation. The world depresses me.

When *maman* was living (in other words, in my whole past life) I was neurotically in fear of losing her. Now (this is what mourning teaches me) such mourning is so to speak the only thing in me which is not neurotic: as if *maman*, by a last gift, had taken neurosis, the worst part, away from me.

The truth about mourning is quite simple: now that *maman* is dead, I am faced with death (nothing any longer separates me from it except time).

Mourning: At the death of the loved being, acute phase of narcissism: one emerges from sickness, from servitude. Then, gradually, freedom takes on a leaden hue, desolation settles in, narcissism gives way to a sad egoism, an absence of generosity.

Disappointment of various places and trips. Not really comfortable anywhere. Very soon, this cry: *I want to go back!* (but where? since she is no longer anywhere, who was once where *I could go back*). I am seeking my place.

## **Pardis Parto says**

Amir says

**David says**

Barthes' mother died on October 25, 1977. Her son, Roland, being an invalid-type had been nursed and coddled by her most of his life, but in their years of his mother's illness adopted the role of nurse himself. Barthes' relationship with his mother was one of extreme intimacy: he lived with her his whole life, and when she passed the world as he knew it changed irremediably. To chronicle this change he kept a "mourning diary" in which he scrawled away, inconsistently over the proceeding two years, short accesses of emotion, insight, and reflection. *Mourning Diary* is a strange volume, far more personal even than Barthes' autobiographical *Roland Barthes*, far more fragmented and disjointed than *Lover's Discourse*. This diary makes an excellent accompaniment to his *Camera Lucida*: his mother's death and the subsequent sorting of her belongings and photographs results in the discovery of a photo which will dominate the latter half of Barthes' discourse on photography, and the death of his mother casts a shadow on the entirety of that work.

I am reminded profoundly of Proust and of Proust's narrator whenever I read Barthes, particularly the deeply personal portion of his work. Barthes was an avid re-reader of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and in his *The Pleasure of the Text* he identifies it as his "infinite text": the textual lense through which he views the world: "...I read according to Proust... I recognize that Proust's work, for me at least, is *the* reference work, the general *mathesis*, the *mandala* of the entire literary cosmogony." The parallels between Barthes and Proust (and his narrator) are numerous: both are deeply reflexive, both profound aesthetics, both are sensitive, homosexual (perhaps not the case for Proust's narrator); they are delicate, porcelain dolls: invalids, attached to their mothers to the extent bordering on unnatural, nearly Oedipal. However the reflexive nature of both Barthes and Proust discover in themselves the profound egoism of grief, jealousy, love. For Barthes, he painfully acknowledges the ego-centrism of his grief:

*How I loved maman: I never resisted going to meet her, celebrated seeing her again (vacations), put her within my "freedom"; in short I associated her profoundly, scrupulously. Acedia comes from such desolation: no one around me, for whom I would have the courage to do the same thing.*

and again:

*Mourning: At the death of the loved being, acute phase of narcissism: one emerges from sickness, from servitude. Then, gradually, freedom takes on leaden hue, desolation settles in, narcissism gives way to a sad egoism, and absence of generosity.*

The egoism of grief is profoundly different from the narcissism of freedom, though they are related. Where the narcissism of relief is one of independence (I am responsible for no one), the egoism of grief is one of icy solitude (there is no one who I care for). Grief, like all extremes of emotion, is a wholly reflexive process, or

rather state: "No progress in pleasures (neither in grief), nothing but mutations."

Grief has a rhythm, a texture to reality, a vacillation and wave of intensity, rather than a progression or "adaptation" period. For Barthes, love, grief, never *fade*, if they are genuine they are ever renewed in sharp waves of emotion. Despite sharing the same imagery, Barthes' views on the ocean of sorrow are different from many before him. Henry James wrote:

*Sorrow comes in great waves — no one can know that better than you — but it rolls over us, and though it may almost smother us it leaves us on the spot and we know that if it is strong we are stronger, inasmuch as it passes and we remain. It wears us, uses us, but we wear it and use it in return; and it is blind, whereas we after a manner see.*

For James, sorrow is an ocean which wears us down, but which we redirect, which we overcome, which *passes us by*. There is a calming solace in the repetition of waves crashing, but slowly a resistance building, and ultimately a vast ocean overcome like a summer rain. For Barthes, the imagery of the ocean is one of recurring pain, renewed intensity: the dull acedia of the trough and the jarring pain of the crest.

*If only I could utter the profound desire of self-communion, of withdrawal, of "Don't concern yourself with me," which comes to me straight and inflexibly from the somehow "eternal" suffering - a self-communion so true that the inevitable little struggles, the caricatures, the wounds, everything that inevitably occurs as soon as one survives, are nothing but a bitter froth on the surface of a deep sea...*

It is the rhythm and *routine* of suffering which haunts Barthes, it is the on-off up-down vacillations which renew the strength of his pain.

What affects me most powerfully: mourning in layers—a kind of sclerosis.  
[Which means: no depth. Layers of surface—or rather, each layer: a totality. Units]

It is the illusion of discontinuity which is the cause of pain in grief: the feeling that it weakens, that it goes away, even if for a minute, that instills both hope and horror that one day grief will die away, fade.

*I waver—in the dark—between the observation (but is it entirely accurate?) that I'm unhappy only by moments, by jerks and surges, sporadically, even if such spasms are close together—and the conviction that deep down, in actual fact, I am continually, all the time, unhappy since maman's death.*

But like all great passions of emotion: grief is self-indulgent. The retreat into oneself is the surest form of egoism. The diary is a profoundly egoistic format; it is a mirror into oneself which bars entrance to others, which gives the illusion of inaccessibility and uniqueness of feeling: but which ultimately a self-guarded prison. Barthes' grief is self-propagated, it is deliberately given vigor: Barthes' pain is a recurring self-infliction. The naked heartbreak in his diary may as well be written with a knife upon his heart, coming in waves themselves: frequent enough to sustain pain: never enough time for the sutures to heal. For Barthes, his own pain is the only "monument" which he feels worthy of his mother's memory. While he knows that his mother would hate to see him suffering, he cannot bear the thought of a release: one which would afford him an access of happiness in a world without his loved mother. Despite the seeming self-effacing nature of this sacrifice, it is a morbid narcissism: it is the hope that someone will suffer eternally for him. In his mother's death he sees the last barrier to his own death brought down, he sees his death as inevitable: mortality as universal: all men must die, I must one day die. If she lives on in his memory, it is a horrible second-hand life, a life which no one can want, least of all a mother. Like King Lear casting off his love to

indulge in the egoism of flattery, or immortality in filial love, Barthes adopts acedia, casts off pleasures, retreats into his excesses of emotion: sacrifices to the false idol of immortality in grief.

*To whom could I put this question (with any hope of an answer)?*

*Does being able to live without someone you loved mean you loved her less than you thought...?*

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## Rowena says

**“That’s how I grasp my mourning. Not directly in solitude, empirically, etc.; I seem to have a kind of ease, of control that makes people think I’m suffering less than they would have imagined. But it comes over me when our love for each other is torn apart once again. The most painful point at the most abstract moment...”**- Roland Barthes, Mourning Diary

I doubt I'd have picked this book up had it not been for my uncle's recent death. Grief isn't the sort of thing I exactly want to think about but in this case I had to confront it, and felt reading someone else's thoughts might help put things into perspective for me.

Barthes' diary is about the death of his mother, who he was obviously very close to, and it is one of the most heart-wrenching pieces of writing I've ever read:

*“Suffering, like a stone...  
(around my neck,  
Deep inside me)”*

It was so very touching, perhaps even more so as I was thinking about my late uncle, life, death, grief... And I've also been writing, though nothing as gut-wrenching or as emotional as Barthes did. In fact I forgot about my grief and dwelled on his, a man who has been dead since 1980. The impact of the written word is eternal.

From the little I know about Barthes, I'm aware that he was a linguist among other things and indeed he had some thoughts on the language of mourning. Which got me thinking about the cultural aspects of grief and mourning but I'm still dealing with/thinking about that:

**“My suffering is *inexpressible* but all the same *utterable*, speakable. The very fact that language affords me the word “intolerable” immediately achieves a certain tolerance.”**

The composition of the diary was very short diary entries over the space of several months but there was so much emotion distilled in each entry:

*“As soon as someone dies, frenzied construction of the future (shifting furniture, etc.); futuromania.”*

What I appreciated was the personal explorations of how grief plays a part in all parts of life. There are levels of grief, and our grief changes how we see almost everything. And there's no time-frame to get over the grief

either. But grief as something personal is something I've heard a lot over the years, and I realize nobody can really understand our grief. As Barthes said, "Each of us has his own rhythm of suffering."

Highly recommended.

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## **Brian says**

2013 is the ten year anniversary of my mother's death.

Pre-dawn, Las Vegas, August 17. "I'm sorry to wake you," my sister's voice through the receiver, "but Mom died last night."

C.S. Lewis: *No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.*

Barthes conjures words wrenched from suffering. A day's events are distilled and filtered through the lens of loss. Every ache, an intensity that wounds anew. Barthes: *At each "moment" of suffering, I believe it to be the very one in which for the first time I realize my mourning.*

I went to bed late the night of August 16th, smug from having won \$4,000 playing blackjack. I envision the specter of time tapping me on the shoulder as I laid my head upon the hotel pillow and whispering in my ear, "You will use that money to bury your mother."

Barthes: *As soon as someone dies, frenzied construction of the future (shifting furniture, etc.).* August 18 – 22 in Houston. Our family room is filled with every chair in the house to accommodate visitors. Everyone looks and acts like they are in a play in which everyone has forgotten their lines. My father offers people food, cooked and delivered by other people. I give a dirty look to anyone who unwittingly sits in Shirley's favorite chair.

November, 2004, a year after Shirley's death. I am home for Thanksgiving, the second without her. My childhood home has become a Shirley museum. A year after her death and everything is exactly as it was the day before her death. Her medicine bottles sit bedside, clothes in the closet, recipe book open on the counter. I expect to see her walk into the room at any moment. I am the only family member that seems to be bothered. This is the last time I will spend the night in this house, the last holiday celebrated.

Barthes: *The most painful point at the most abstract moment...*

The family is in the hearse heading to the grave for the ceremony, leading the long line of mourners. Police tag-team the stoplights; we avoid all traffic. I laugh, actually laugh, thinking of Dennis Miller's joke: "It is a cruel irony that we spend our whole lives waiting at stoplights, and when we die, we don't have to stop at them. 'Well, I'm dead, but I'm making good time!'" I cover my chuckle, turn it into a sob. No one notices.

Barthes: *Don't say Mourning. It's too psychoanalytic. I'm not mourning. I'm suffering.*

Holiday season, 2012. I call my sister and say, "Doesn't it bother you that ten years after mom's death she still doesn't have a headstone?" She agrees with me, says it is time we get her one. We have both tiptoed

around this issue with our father, but I can't take it anymore. I imagine people scouting the graveyard for a nice plot, see the unmarked area, inquire and find that it contains an interred beloved. So beloved that they didn't bother to give her a grave marker. I call my father, tell him we are getting a headstone. "I'll do it," he says, defeated. "It just has always felt that to do so would make everything ... so final."

Barthes: *To see with horror as quite simply possible the moment when the memory of those words she spoke to me would no longer make me cry.*

It's been ten years, Shirley. I have a daughter you've never met. I am married to a different woman. Would you even recognize me?

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### **cristina c says**

Nell'Ottobre del '77 Roland Barthes perde sua madre; il padre era morto quando lui era piccolissimo e forse questo fatto, unito a screzi e difficoltà di rapporti col resto della famiglia materna, aveva reso il loro rapporto esclusivo dandogli una connotazione più simile ad un rapporto di coppia che filiale.

Dal giorno successivo alla morte e per circa due anni Barthes tiene una sorta di diario; sono annotazioni di stati d'animo, sprazzi di ricordi, brevi riflessioni. Frammenti di un discorso doloroso e intimo.

Per due anni lo scrittore abiterà totalmente il suo dolore analizzandolo e cercando la nettezza di parole che possano descriverlo, perché "una tristezza inesprimibile diventi tuttavia dicibile". E il suo vivere nel dolore del distacco non vuole conoscere tregua, tanto che scruta con severità gli attimi di ritorno al sentire quotidiano.

Se lo sorprende la dolcezza dell'odore della pioggia si domanda se questa sia una sorta di smobilizzazione del dolore, se il lutto stia acquistando un'andatura da crociera, come annota sarcastico e che senso abbia la vita che, stupida, continua. Il rimanere nel presente continuo del distacco esorcizza il distacco profondo, quello irrimediabile quando le parole sono state ormai consumate.

"C'è un tempo in cui la morte è un avvenimento, una ad-ventura, e, a questo titolo, mobilita, galvanizza, interessa, tende, attiva, tetanizza. E poi, un bel giorno, ecco che non è più un avvenimento, ma un'altra durata, compressa, insignificante, non narrata, tetra, senza rimedio: vero lutto che non è suscettibile di alcuna dialettica narrativa".

I viaggi, i desideri, la libertà quotidiana perdono senso, diventano un vagare senza tregua nell'assenza che non può usare nessuna delle forme di consolazione. "Vedo le rondini volare nella sera d'estate. Mi dico - pensando con strazio a mam.- che barbarie non credere nelle anime - all'immortalità delle anime! che verità imbecille il materialismo!"

Malgrado tutto questo non è un libro totalmente triste. Nell'osservarsi, nel descrivere le sfumature delle proprie emozioni, nel cesellare gli strumenti del linguaggio e nel definirli c'è un lavoro che consola, c'è una lucidità che permette una presa di distanza. Colui che è osservato diventa anche osservatore.

Se i Frammenti di un discorso amoroso hanno insegnato a molti qualcosa in più sull'amore e sul desiderio, questo libro insegna qualcosa in più sulla loro perdita e quindi sulla vita.

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### **????? ??? says**

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