



I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes With Death

Maggie O'Farrell

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THE SUNDAY TIMES NO. 1 BESTSELLER, AND BOOK OF THE YEAR IN *THE SUNDAY TIMES*, *THE TIMES*, *GUARDIAN*, *IRISH TIMES*, *OBSERVER*, *RED* and *THE TELEGRAPH*.

'O'Farrell takes up a bow and arrow and aims right at the human heart' *The Times*

'Absolutely, in every possible sense of the word, brilliant... spectacularly moving' Max Porter

I AM, I AM, I AM is a memoir with a difference - the unputdownable story of an extraordinary woman's life in near-death experiences. Insightful, inspirational, intelligent, it is a book to be read at a sitting, a story you finish newly conscious of life's fragility, determined to make every heartbeat count.

A childhood illness she was not expected to survive. A teenage yearning to escape that nearly ended in disaster. A terrifying encounter on a remote path. A mismanaged labour in an understaffed hospital. Shocking, electric, unforgettable, this is the extraordinary memoir from Costa Novel-Award winner and *Sunday Times* bestselling author Maggie O'Farrell. It is a book to make you question yourself. What would you do if your life was in danger, and what would you stand to lose?

I AM, I AM, I AM will speak to readers who loved Cheryl Strayed's *WILD* or Max Porter's *GRIEF IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS*.

I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes With Death Details

Date : Published August 22nd 2017 by Tinder Press

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Author : Maggie O'Farrell

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From Reader Review *I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes With Death* for online ebook

Lotte says

4.5/5. There were three things that made this book stand out to me:

- The **nonlinear narrative structure** – the seventeen chapters, the eponymous "seventeen brushes with death", are told non-chronologically, all covering a certain point in Maggie O'Farrell's life spanning from early childhood until now. It was never confusing to read, but made for an interesting and wholly original account of a life.
 - The **writing style**, which I fell in love with from page one. It's absolutely beautiful written with very vivid descriptions and amazing imagery. It reads a lot like a novel, while still feeling honest and true to life, and I never felt like O'Farrell was sensationalizing her own experiences in any way.
 - It was **incredibly moving**, especially the last two chapters really pack a punch and had me close to tears. This book makes you aware of the fragility of life, while ultimately being life-affirming, but never in a preachy or over-the-top manner. Maggie O'Farrell is undoubtedly a remarkable woman and her resilience is quite inspiring.
- (- Plus, an extra point for that amazing cover and the cool chapter headings.)
- I've read some very forgettable memoirs before, but this is definitely one that will stick with me for a while!
-

JanB says

The author has certainly led an interesting and adventurous life! This book is a series of essays, all related to her near brushes with death, and uniquely titled according to the body part that nearly did her in: cranium, lungs, circulatory system, etc. She is either extraordinarily unlucky or her admittedly risky lifestyle makes her more vulnerable than most. Or maybe it's a little of both.

As with any essay collection some of these stories resonated with me more than others but I enjoyed them all because they are so beautifully written. The author never sensationalized the stories or made them overly dramatic. Instead, they are reflective and heartfelt. I appreciated that she doesn't preach to her readers or tell us what to take away from the stories, but leaves that up to us.

With this type of book, I like to dip into a story or two now and then instead of reading straight through. The stories that bookend this collection were particularly moving. In the first, she encounters a potential killer while out hiking, and it was riveting. I admired her clear thinking in the face of such danger. The last story where she recounts the life-threatening allergies that cause no fewer than 15-17 anaphylactic shock reactions in her daughter, is heartbreaking.

This is certainly a unique memoir, unlike any I have read before. Few of us like to dwell on our mortality, but I didn't walk away depressed, instead, I was feeling pretty lucky! The tone is hopeful, and invites us instead to focus on the joy and adventure of this life we have been given.

The writing is where this collection shines. Highly recommended!

Dem says

I am a fan of Maggie O' Farrell Novels and love her descriptive writing. Her story telling is unique and fresh. Her latest book is totally different as it's a memoir that is quirky, interesting, honest, revealing and vivid.

Told through 17 near death experiences that the author experienced throughout her life, you find yourself reading with bated breath as O Farrell draws you in with words and descriptions that make the reading experience very real and poignant.

At O'Farrell's near-catastrophic childbirth, a mysterious man in beige steps in with an unexpected kindness. She writes, "When he took my hand he taught me something about the value of touch, the communicative power of the human hand." . A simple gesture and yet this has simple act had such an effect on the author and on me as a reader it simply brought tears to my eyes.

It's a book that makes you question your own life experiences and you find you dig deep in your own past of near misses that you may never have thought about until you read this book. I found her experiences with hospitals, consultants and doctors very interesting and frank. I was a little worried to begin with that this book would be morbid and difficult reading but O' Farrell manages to keep it upbeat and while there were times my heart strings were tugged and I felt tears prickling, there were other times I smiled and felt uplifted and this is due to the author's exquisite prose.

I am, I am, I am is not narrated chronologically but by the organ or body part primarily affected, which may seem odd to begin with but make sense as you read the book.

The first story in the book is called NECK and sent shivers down my spine, chilling but so well recounted that you feel you are there with O' Farrell in this terrible moment and each and every story had pretty much the same effect on me.

I listened to this one on audible and the narrator was excellent.

Veronica ?? says

I am I am I am is moving extracts from a life less ordinary; a life lived to the full.

"Is this your life?" She asks.

"It's not.....it's just.....snatches of a life. A string of moments. Some chapters will be long. Others might be really short."

The chapters are at times terrifying and at other times heart breaking. These short snippets of a life give an insight into the personal life of Maggie O'Farrell and really show the reader who she is.

O'Farrell shows us that real people, just like you and I, have unexpected brushes with death throughout our life. These moments are around us all!

The stories pull you in and each one is told with so much depth and feeling that they make this book very hard to put down.

Highly recommended even for those, like me, that don't generally read nonfiction.

Angela M says

I have read three of her novels and count Maggie O'Farrell as one of my favorite writers and I know I have to get to those that I haven't read. This memoir is as beautifully written as her novels. O'Farrell shares with us some very personal experiences, memories of times in her life when she was in danger, close to death. As in her novels, she had me feeling and thinking about the complexities of life, sometimes the danger that lies near all of us. While she writes about things that happened to her, some of these are things that others can relate to - miscarriages, the heartbreaking emotional difficulty of acceptance and understanding, illness that impacts your life, a child's illness, and some things that most of us have not likely experienced - being mugged at knifepoint, the impending danger of being stopped by a stranger in a deserted road. We see a vulnerability that we can recognize in ourselves as she reveals so much of her feelings and thought processes. All of this making me so very glad that she had this moment:

"And, one night, in the monsoon season, when the rain is a constant, lulling hum outside the windows, when our clothes, the windows, the pictures are growing mould in the humidity and it's too hot to sleep, when I have been reading subversive versions of European folktales, I get the urge to put down some words. I get up, find a pencil, open an exercise book at the table and as Anton sleeps, I start to write."

Esil says

I have never read any of Maggie O'Farrell's fiction. It is not for lack of good intentions. I have certainly heard good things about her writing, which is what made me jump at chance to read an advance copy of this brief memoir.

At first blush, the way O'Farrell has chosen to organize her memoir is odd. Each chapter is focused on a near death experience. The chapters are out of chronological order. And while each chapter deals with a particular experience, it meanders to many other parts of O'Farrell's life, gracefully connecting everything together.

Is O'Farrell more unlucky - or lucky, depending on how you look at it - than most people? In some ways she is unlucky - most notably she had a very serious childhood neurological disease and her daughter has severe life threatening allergies - in other ways we could probably all pull together a string of similar experiences to most of those that she recounts that may have turned out deadly if things had worked out differently.

But I absolutely loved reading *I Am, I Am, I Am*. O'Farrell's writing is straightforward but intricate and engaging. There is no self pity or pretension - as in so many memoirs. Somehow, while taking the reader through many unnerving and sad experiences, O'Farrell emerges as someone with a genuine appreciation for life.

Don't be deterred by the organizing theme in *I Am, I Am, I Am*. Also don't read it looking for thrills in near death experiences. Read it because it's beautifully written and recognizably ordinary.

I also just noticed that it's the second book with flowers growing out of a heart I've read this year — and it's only the middle of January. This one was much better than the last one, and the cover is a great illustration for the feel of the book.

Thanks to Edelweiss and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy.

Debbie says

OMG OMG OMG! Pogo stick time!

Dear Maggie O'Farrell,

I'm bouncing high, zigzagging through your 17 brushes with death. Barefoot because my socks were knocked off. I can't stop! Yep, I'm downright manic! What an amazing memoir you wrote! One of the best books I've read this year!

I am I am I am absolutely in love with your book. I can't help it that I'm stuttering. It's that or remain speechless, which isn't my style.

My brain is on fire! Matchy-matchy: My head, your language. Oh, your tone! The way my brain is wired, your sentences are electricity: both jumpy sparks and smooth rivers of fire. I know, I know, I sound all dramatic, but it's your fault I'm talking this way. I love all your commas, your flowy narrative lists of how and why; bullet points not required. Punctuation for maximum impact, without being overly dramatic.

I'm glad you stuck with brushes. I'm glad you called your events "brushes with death" because frankly, if you had called them "near-death experiences," I wouldn't have believed you. No one almost dies 17 times! Plus, I might not have picked up your book, because near-death experiences usually are woo-woo—you see god or angels or ghosts or white or light—and that's not my thing. Calling them brushes with death is perfect.

Shiver shiver, I'm scared! You sure have some scary stories, missy. And such a variety! Your several scary hospital stories are super sad, and I feel for you because I know one of them will be with you forever. Your three scary water stories are harrowing (and really wet and cold) and they make me glad I don't play in the water anymore. The three Scary Strange Men stories had my heart pumping fast; it doesn't seem fair that you had more than one such encounter.

Tell me I don't just like to watch train wrecks, please! I wondered why I was so jazzed to be watching your train wrecks: What kind of jerk am I? Am I just looking for drama? That's not cool! And then it hit me—as I was reading, I knew that you would survive in the end. That soothing thought is so unlike what occurs when I read a novel, where I have no idea whether the good guy is going to make it. I love it that you don't play the victim even though you are one. The times when you are reckless, you cop to it and try to understand it. Good stuff.

Thanks for having lunch with me. Well, that's what it felt like, anyway—I might as well have been sitting

across from you in a café gulping down your stories, which were so heartfelt and honest, vivid and human. It would have been a long lunch, for sure! Your writing conveys so much emotion, which is what makes great art.

Forgive me my gush:

- There isn't one story that I didn't like, not one.
- Your book reads like a novel yet feels so very personal.
- I love it that you don't sensationalize events that would have easily allowed you to go overboard.
- I love your imagery.
- I love it that you're so self-aware, and so insightful about the human condition.
- I love how you introduce each chapter with a classy and intricate drawing of the organ (or body part) that the event affected: very clever!
- I love it that there is even suspense—I was so wound up, wondering how in hell you would get out of scary jams.
- I love the pace: You sometimes give a hint of what happened, and then you talk about your past a while, before completing the story. I never felt like I needed to get back to the action.
- The idea of your book is so completely unique.
- I feel like the book concept gave me the best possible reading experience—I got to go to scary places but I knew you'd be okay.

Wow, you're the queen of narrative lists! Remember how I mentioned your “narrative lists”? There's one long sentence with a zillion commas that sums up your twenties—your words are so carefully chosen, your succinctness noted and appreciated.

Here's a snippet of that sentence:

“...the dreary rental flats, the uncertain and mind-shrivelling jobs, the late-night urban wanderings, the last buses, the monthly travel passes, the skipped meals, the ill-judged boyfriends, the pressing calls made from phone-boxes...”

I'll probably reread it several times over, it's so good. Paragraphs like that one leave me in awe.

Where did your stories take me, missy? They took me down memory lane, where I plucked my close calls out for closer examination. Yes, I did have one Scary Strange Man story. Yes, I did have one scary hospital story. Yes, I did have scary motherhood stories. I still find myself searching my brain for other close calls. And like I thought as I was reading your stories, what if one or two factors had altered the close calls and had left me deformed, incapacitated, or dead? It made me think about luck, fate, fear, unfairness, randomness. About what-if's, about bravery vs. stupidity. It made me think about how a mere second can make a difference between life and death.

Why did you let them give you two covers? I'm jealous—I know there are a bunch a people who got a cool cover with a heart on it. I, on the other hand, got a cover with a big ugly brown feather that, splat, blocked out part of the title. A nasty smudge—wipe it off, please! As an ex-editor who needs all letters and words to be strong and visible, I claim I got ripped off. I really really wanted the heart cover.

All I can say is, where have you been all my life? I will be running to your other books, no doubt about it, because—

This is what makes me obsessed with reading. This, right here.

Thank you for listening,
An avid new fan

Eve says

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am."—Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

I thoroughly enjoyed this unique take on a memoir! I've never read any of O'Farrell's books, and I'm so glad I started here. O'Farrell recalls seventeen close brushes with death at various points in her life, dividing each chapter into both year and organ(s) that was endangered.

The writing was so compelling and the language beautiful, that I could have easily read this in one sitting. However, appearances are deceiving, and the seemingly enjoyable chapter sunk deep into heart as I realized how heavy a subject it really was! As each chapter concluded with death narrowly averted, my sense of discomfort, horror (at times), and unease made me close the book for that day. Usually with a sigh of relief and other times with too many unanswered questions, like in the chapter entitled: Bloodstream (1997). What happened afterwards?! Details.

The final chapter, in which she discusses her daughter's chronic health issues really tore at my heartstrings. What a wonderful mother she is, and I was touched to read in the Acknowledgements that proceeds from the sale of this book will go to the Anaphylaxis Campaign and funding for the training of Medical Alert Dogs for people living with life-threatening illnesses.

Elyse says

Unless a 'memoir' literally shifts me -changes my thinking - transforms me in some major way -
I tend to retreat to my standard 3 star rating.

I didn't equally 'enjoy' each story in this collection -

It's a mix collection for me.

A few stories felt embellished.

In the middle of the book - I started to feel as if I had enough. A couple of the stories felt a little narcissistic—

....but then I felt sad for Maggie's sick child - heck I felt awful for Maggie, too, when 'she' was a child in the hospital petrified!!!

but...

overall - I'm kinda 50/50 about this book.

However I believe 'one' story will stay with me forever. The first one!

The very 'first' story was frightening-absolutely chilling - a story hard to shake. Maggie was hiking when a

man with binoculars came up to her. SHE KNEW INTUITIVELY 'that man' was dangerous and that her life was in danger. I learned from Maggie. The way she handle her situation was worth the 'entire' book for me. Wow - she was a pro and it saved her life!!!
I read 'carefully' taking mental notes.
I do a lot of hikes 'alone' on quiet trails. I was nervous as hell reading Maggie's hiking story.
MAGGIE SAVED HER OWN LIFE BY REMAINING CALM.

I only hope I'm never in that situation-but if I am - I hope I could handle it with the same success Maggie did.

It was still a chilling -creepy - awful story..but 'whew' as in THANK GOD, for Maggie!!!!

I liked the science/artistic symbolic body parts at the start of each chapter...
giving a clue into the body part most affected in the story about to be told.
.....yet that same structure began to feel a little monotonous after awhile -especially when some of the stories were less interesting than others.

Overall 3.3 - 3.4 rating.

Zoeytron says

Memoirs are not my thing, but I was unable to ignore a couple of my GR friends' fine reviews for this book. It's good to amble over to a different genre from time to time. This one will have you looking back at the times of your life for near misses, and how your decisions may have changed your direction, if only slightly.

I am not a lover of memoirs in general, but

I am glad to have read this one.

I am returning to the dark side now.

Amalia Gavea says

“There is nothing unique or special in a near-death experience. They are not rare; everyone, I would venture, has had them, at one time or another, perhaps without even realising it.”

How difficult it is to write a text about a memoir...No matter if you liked it or not, no matter whether you shared the writer's views or not, a memoir is a testament of someone's heart and soul and how can anyone

dissect it so light-heartedly? This memoir by Maggie O'Farrell is one of the most poignant, powerful, altering reads we will ever experience. Therefore, if this review looks to you a bit all over the place, I apologize because I never succeed in explaining my feelings adequately. Once you read this book, I don't think you will ever view life through the same lens as before.

‘I’m trying to write a life, told only through near-death experiences.’

17 times when Death's shadow came too close to her and her children. 17 times when she fought with all her might and succeeded in defeating the enemy who was in a hurry to claim one more soul much too early. She lets us into her life by revealing her most vulnerable moments. Hidden in these memories are shocking details about dangers that came out of nowhere, thoughts on how love started, a boyfriend who was an egoist to the core, a horrible doctor who served a misogynistic, Victorian view of "helping" women with their labour, her saviours, the people who made sure she would return, her beautiful family. There are so many aspects of O'Farrell that I admire and marvelled at. She is such a free spirit, her wanderlust comes alive through the pages as she narrates her experiences in diverse places. China, Chile, France, Italy, Wales and her native Northern Ireland. Her affinity to the sea and hiking, her aversion to tea, which I share completely. I was particularly touched by the birth of her first child because I was a star-gazer baby myself that put my mum in extreme danger during labour. There is also a beautiful reference to Karen Blixen's Seven Gothic Tales.

O'Farrell's writing strikes your feelings, your heart. I always feel uncomfortable with hospitals, I've been to one only once- thank God and all the Heavens- and even reading about them makes me feel terrible. Therefore, the experience of her illness as a child was terrifying to read as was the behaviour of her classmates. This verified, once again, my conviction that children are often the most heartless creatures in the universe. She describes the era when the HIV nightmare began vividly and full of compassion. In many cases, it is evident that women face extensive dangers because of our sex. As I often say, it is the absolute loss of any trace of equality. As long as we are unable to feel secure beyond any doubt while we're walking in the street, equality is non-existent. It is an empty word written in such charades as "so-called" legislations just so the governments have the opportunity to feel politically correct. It is a utopia, a wish that will never become a fulfilled reality...

The impact of the language she uses is such that even though I knew she survived, in every incident my heart was pounding in agony. Then, you start thinking "what if?" What if things have turned out differently? What if this happened to me? What would I do? It definitely makes you think about living and making every moment count, as morbid or detrimental as it may sound. How fragile and, at the same time, how strong our bodies are. Her thoughts on miscarriage should be read by every woman.

This is a book you will live in. Your feelings, your thoughts, your entire self will experience it. I know it changed me, even a small portion of me. I know that I need not complain about mild headaches, seasonal flu or the common cold. The strength she shows in coping with her daughter's challenges -as it happens with every mother who faces similar situations- is a source of endurance and strength for all of us. I don't think that a reader can finish this book and remain untouched. The realisation of our own mortality and the fact that there are no limits despite the moments when contradictions hit us like an earthquake. The only limit is this stranger with the dark clothes, waiting in every corner...

‘We are, all of us, wandering about in a state of oblivion, borrowing our time, seizing our days, escaping our fates, slipping through loopholes, unaware of when the axe may fall.’

My reviews can also be found on <https://theopinionatedreaderblog.wordpress.com>

Hannah says

I might have been too excited about this. I have been looking forward to this memoir ever since I first saw this stunning cover. I finally caved in and bought myself a copy and started it the moment it arrived. And I enjoyed this. But it wasn't quite the revelation I was maybe expecting.

I love the framing of this memoir: Maggie O'Farrell tells her story as a series of essays, each concentrating on a near death experience. I do like memoirs that play with format and I enjoyed the unchronological way this book is structured a whole lot. Especially the four essays bookending this memoir were absolutely incredible. The first essay sets the tone and shows the danger of being a woman on her own, while the last two essays change the way I understood this work and this woman. I love that in books.

The structure, while one of the biggest advantages of this, also works against the reading flow in parts. While I was fine with the last essays changing a lot of what came before, in parts the essays don't feel quite complete without the recontextualization the ending offers.

This is very readable, easy to dip in and out. It just is not the best memoir I have read this year (and I thought it would be a contender). I do read an awful lot of memoirs though, so your mileage might vary.

Also, one final comment: I love, love, love the cover. The whole book is just ridiculously stunning.

First sentence: "On the path ahead, stepping out from behind a boulder, a man appears."

You can find this review and other thoughts on my blog.

Michael says

British novelist O'Farrell provides us an unusual collection of personal essays on the theme of near-death experiences in her life, with each chapter headed by an image and label for the relevant vital organ. From her childhood we get the events and aftermath reactions of nearly getting run down by a car while crossing a road, nearly getting caught by her mother slamming a car trunk, and serious bout of encephalitis. As an adolescent, near drownings after jumping off a pier or getting caught in a rip tide. As an adult, an interlude with an armed mugger, an occasion of getting lost in a wilderness with inadequate supplies, and a near bleed-out during the delivery of her first child.

Most of these events are common enough that most readers can directly identify with the author. However, at least for me, we tend to dwell as little as possible in terms of framing meanings and broader links to the many feelings such events stimulate. O'Farrell often shows brilliance in mining of her experiences in terms of the paradoxes of mortality vs. vitality, helplessness vs. competence, chaos vs. logical unfolding, randomness vs. some kind of karma. On the obvious question as to reasons why she has had many more brushes with death than most people, O'Farrell identifies some unfortunate elements of risk-taking in her personality as a contributing factor, related she supposes to her wanting to surmount the vulnerability and stigma from her earlier experiences. Her neurological damage from the early brain infection leaves her with a poor proprioceptive sense, which sometimes contributes to enhanced risks but often makes her more wary and

proactive in sussing out dangers. Where it came to her daughter's continual threat from life threatening allergic reactions, she readily became an ideal mom in terms of obsessive vigilance and preventative actions.

I was captivated with the first handful of examples in this memoir, but my personal reading pleasure declined with the continual playing out of her themes under their common format. I recognize her care in trying to keep the progression lively with fresh perspectives and insights in each chapter. However, I failed to avoid my mind getting numbed to her nuances. Maybe readers could improve their experience by taking on only one or two chapters a day instead of wolfing it down in three settings like I did. The quality of her prose and narrative pacing are quite satisfying and enough to make me want to pursue her novels.

The most moving piece of the book was when at seven, alone in a hospital under prolonged care for her encephalitis, O'Farrell freaked out from the strange noises and confinement associated with a CAT scan and had to be restrained and sedated to complete the test. On top of that trauma, she was dreadfully disturbed to overhear one nurse talk about the likelihood she would die. Psychologists now recognize the lifelong negative impact for such adverse childhood experiences (called ACES in a respected screening tool). My housemate suffered most from the adverse impacts of being isolated for months in a room due to perceived infection risks of her encephalitis in her childhood. For O'Farrell, she is quite remarkable for her resilience and ability to come out of all her escapes from death by feeling blessedly lucky instead of oppressed.

This book was provided for review by Penguin Random House through their First to Read program.

karen says

At the time, I gaze up at the sky, the birds, the fast-moving clouds, and I am thinking about the dense forest behind us, about how I do not want to be dragged in there, not at all. I do not want to see the trees closing over my head, feel the scratch and pluck of bushes against my skin, my clothes, the cold damp of the ground in there. My thoughts are very simple. They pulse through my head: let me go, let me go, not the forest, not the ground, please.

conceptually, this is wholly original and a bit chilling - a memoir told through all of the author's near-death experiences, with a total of seventeen chapters.

that's too many, right? i became outraged at capital-d death on her behalf, for cat-and-mousing her around so much - go pick on someone your own size, etc etc.

but it's not quite as dire as it appears - the final chapter is about her daughter, whose severe food allergies reminded me of another memoir - Don't Kill the Birthday Girl: Tales from an Allergic Life, so it's really only SIXTEEN *personal* near-death experiences, which is much more reasonable; slightly more lives than a cat, considerably more than most humans.

and some of the situations in those sixteen chapters are nearer to death than others - going for an AIDS test after your partner has been unfaithful is a far cry from having a machete held to your neck. although, machete-to-neck should be weighted to count for at least two, especially if it is not the first time a killer has threatened your life via that slender stalk. and just some friendly advice - after three near-drownings, you need to take the hint and stop going into the water. it does not want you inside of it and is saying "no," the only way it can.

it's a very novelistic approach to writing memoir, both the novel-ty (HA!) of the approach, and the style of the writing, which is vivid and descriptive, expands and contracts in focus, wraps anecdotes around other anecdotes, and switches from first to third to even second-person from chapter to chapter.

although the premise seems designed for thrills, it's a much more reflective than sensational approach. she's very pragmatic about her experiences:

There is nothing unique or special in a near-death experience. They are not rare; everyone, I would venture, has had them, at one time or another, perhaps without even realising it. The brush of a van too close to your bicycle, the tired medic who realises that a dosage ought to be checked in final time, the driver who has drunk too much and is reluctantly persuaded to relinquish the car keys, the train missed after sleeping through an alarm, the aeroplane not caught, the virus never inhaled, the assailant never encountered, the path not taken. We are, all of us, wandering about in a state of oblivion, borrowing our time, seizing our days, escaping our fates, slipping through loopholes, unaware of when the axe may fall.

the chapters are titled after the part(s) of the body made vulnerable by or responsible for each close call, with a nice olde timey anatomical rendering of said parts.

i've chosen a pull-quote from each chapter to entice you with her writing chops or the shivery allure of the situation. there's a lot packed into these stories, and i definitely recommend this one as an intriguing alternative approach to memoir.

NECK (1990)

I am careful to use strides that are confident, purposeful, but not frightened. I am not frightened: I say this to myself, over the oceanic roar of my pulse. Perhaps, I think, I am free, perhaps I have misread the situation. Perhaps it's perfectly normal to lie in wait for young girls on remote paths and then let them go.

I am eighteen. Just. I know almost nothing.

(this story was really frightening, but it reminded me of an even more horrifying close call story, which you need to watch here: <http://www.trutv.com/shows/the-chris-...>)

LUNGS (1988)

At sixteen, you can be so restless, so frustrated, so disgusted by everything that surrounds you that you are willing to leap off what is probably a fifteen-metre drop, in the dark, into a turning tide.

SPINE, LEGS, PELVIS, ABDOMEN, HEAD (1977)

I remember that I kept going. I kept moving my feet, kept powering on through the mountain air, as if nothing could touch me, nothing bad might happen, if I could just keep going, keep running, keep moving.

WHOLE BODY (1993)

The air is filled with screaming, with curses, with prayer. A man with blood coursing out of both nostrils starts to yell in a language I don't understand, gesticulating wildly. Drops of blood scatter from his face to mark the seats, the ceiling.

NECK (2002)

We had more money in our pockets and bags than we'd ever carried before, at any time in our travels. The man takes it all from us, pulling it out from the various places in which we'd stashed it. We hand it to him, in exchange for my neck, its arteries, its tendons, its muscles, its trachea, its oesophagus, for it all to remain in its current unbreached state.

ABDOMEN (2003)

The floor was awash with blood and people were running. It is never a good sign, I've found, when medics run.

BABY AND BLOODSTREAM (2005)

You will watch your body backtrack, go in reverse, unpicking its work: the sickness recedes, your breasts shrink back, your abdomen flattens, your appetite disappears.

LUNGS (2000)

I straighten my swimwear, watch the water drawing the blood off my skin and whirling it away, as if it has need of it, as if it has some purpose in mind for it.

CIRCULATORY SYSTEM (1991)

Because why not? Why not let a man you've never met, a man you have no reason to trust, throw a fistful of knives at you?

HEAD (1975)

"There was that other time," she says, "when you didn't stay in the car. Do you remember?"

CRANIUM (1998)

She is aware of having dodged something, of having pulled her leg out of the trap, once again, at the last moment.

INTESTINES (1994)

What came out of me was streaked with blood, mucoid, meaty in texture.

BLOODSTREAM (1997)

Infidelity is as old as humanity: there is nothing about it you can think or say that hasn't been thought or said before. You go back and back over the days, the conversations, the walks you took, wondering why on earth you hadn't seen it, how you could have missed it, how you could not have known. The pain of it is

interior, humiliating, infinitely wearying.

CAUSE UNKNOWN (2003)

Right now, my son is nine weeks old and I'm finding my way, blundering forward with this new job, this new life. Right now, I'm in France, for reasons that are no longer clear to me, trying to breastfeed in a hot car by the side of the road. Right now, Will has disappeared over the dunes to look at the sea and two men are rustling their way out of the maize field on the other side of the road.

LUNGS (2010)

He can't swim, is what is going round and round in my head. He can't swim and I've brought him out here because of what someone told me. He can't swim and I've brought him out into deep sea on the advice of an idiot.

CEREBELLUM (1980)

I gather, from all the listening in, that I am to have what is called a CAT-scan. The name of it is a comfort to me, conveying as it does fur, paws, whiskers, a long and curled tail. It will, from what I can glean, take photographs of my brain and these will tell the doctors how to make me better. I like the sound of this CAT-scan: the photographs, some manner of feline involvement, the making-better.

DAUGHTER (the present day)

We never leave the house without her medication, her emergency kit. We know how to inject her, how to administer cardio-pulmonary resuscitation, how to recognize the signs of low blood pressure, respiratory distress, urticaria, the onset of cardiac failure.

I know I must nod calmly when people tell me they understand exactly how I feel because they have a gluten allergy, which makes them really bloated whenever they eat bread. I know to be patient and genial when I have to explain that, no, it's not OK to bring that hummus into our house. No, it's not a good idea to give her a little bit to get her used to it. No, please don't open that near her. Yes, your lunch could kill my child.

and although, thankfully, this following quoted portion does not end in a near-death experience for the author (although i can certainly envision it going that way), i just wanted to include it because what it describes is what i imagine heaven to be; what i hope will be waiting for me after my axe falls.

My mother instructed us not to touch the kittens, not yet, and we nodded gravely. As soon as she had gone back to the kitchen, however, I told my younger sister to keep watch at the garage door. Obviously, I reasoned to her, there was no way I wasn't going to touch these kittens. No way at all. The keen joy of plunging in your hands and lifting up all four kittens in a mewling, writhing mass and burying your face in their aliveness, their softness, their miniature faces, their never-walked on paws: how could I forgo this?

how could ANYONE?

come to my blog!

Diane S ? says

Love her fiction so wanting to read her memoir was a no brainier. A different take for sure as she recounts the near death experiences she has encountered in her life. Reading this made me think of all the mishaps I have had, that could have turned fatal. Something I think we all share to various degrees.

Honest and open are the two words I thought of while reading this. The things she shares, private moments, secrets she had held close, but now share. Yet, it her experiences with motherhood that impressed me the most. The sadness of miscarriages, joy of holding a newborn, the terrible concern and the ever preparedness she has at all times with her daughter. The frustration and yes, so much love. Hoping others see beyond the surface to the wonder her daughter is, so poignantly told.

As always when next I read her fiction, after reading these details of her life, it will be with new eyes. Hope she has a new book in the works, and I thank her for sharing this very personal collection of essays with us, her readers.
