



The Guardians: An Elegy for a Friend

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The Guardians opens with a story from the July 24, 2008, edition of the *Riverdale Press* that begins, “An unidentified white man was struck and instantly killed by a Metro-North train last night as it pulled into the station on West 254th Street.” Sarah Manguso writes: “The train’s engineer told the police that the man was alone and that he jumped. The police officers pulled the body from the track and found no identification. The train’s 425 passengers were transferred to another train and delayed about twenty minutes.”

The Guardians is an elegy for Manguso’s friend Harris, two years after he escaped from a psychiatric hospital and jumped under that train. The narrative contemplates with unrelenting clarity their crowded postcollege apartment, Manguso’s fellowship year in Rome, Harris’s death and the year that followed—the year of mourning and the year of Manguso’s marriage. As Harris is revealed both to the reader and to the narrator, the book becomes a monument to their intimacy and inability to express their love to each other properly, and to the reverberating effects of Harris’s presence in and absence from Manguso’s life. There is grief in the book but also humor, as Manguso marvels at the unexpected details that constitute a friendship. *The Guardians* explores the insufficiency of explanation and the necessity of the imagination in making sense of anything.

The Guardians: An Elegy for a Friend Details

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Author : Sarah Manguso

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anaïs says

You know how I feel about Sarah Manguso. Beautiful spare prose about losing a friend to tragedy. About loving people and meeting new people and loving them and time and grief and dybbuks and how no one can observe the colour of your grief but you. Beautiful and important.

Bitchin' Reads says

Manguso, a fighter for the perfect and tiny and tight prose, is whirlwind of encouragement to work and always work and push to perfect writing. Having been to a craft talk and reading of hers, speaking to her of my own struggles as a writer, I look back on this book as an example of what I want my work to someday be compared to. I want my trials and tribulations worded so poignantly and clearly. I want someone to one day ask me, "How did you do it?" just as I did to Manguso.

She writes of her survivor's guilt when her friend Harris dies from jumping in front of a train after escaping a psych ward (his third admission to one). She feels partially responsible, unforgiving of herself for not noticing the signs and not being there for him when he needed her and everyone dear to him close by. It took her a few years to approach this event, too hard for her to touch and prod. But she fought through it, and you can see it in her writing: it is segmented, as if she is touching the pain and then baking off when it hurts too much.

I cannot wait to reread this book. And I look forward to meeting her again one day!

Erica Freeman says

This elegy is about many topics, gives voice to many registers. Speaking from my position as a doctoral student in clinical psychology, I was especially moved by Manguso's occasional reflections on the ways we as a society (and as a profession, we psychologists) understand, categorize, and manage mental illness. I admire and appreciate Manguso's fine job problematizing oversimplified distinctions between, e.g., sane and insane, reality and fiction / story, even as she moves through the deep waters of grief over the loss of her beloved best friend.

Karen says

I loved Sarah Manguso's book, *The Two Kinds of Decay*, but nowhere near as much as love this book, *The Guardians*, a sparse, but beautiful book about the author's investigation into the suicide of a friend. I could get lost in her prose and her raw emotions. There's just nothing more to be said.

Linda Chavers says

"To claim oneself a writer when one is not a writer is an insult to writers, but to call oneself crazy when one is not crazy is an insult to crazy people. It belittles what they've accomplished." (91) -- As the title suggests this is in praise of a friend and of love. It is also in praise of the man who was sick and does not talk against his illness. This is a moving elegy about a woman's mourning and one of its biggest themes is journey and searching. Like Harris whose last ten hours consisted of walking Manguso writes in search of. She looks for closure, she looks for meaning, for coincidence, she especially looks for blame. Whether it's to blame herself, mental illness, psychotropic drugs, people, life, death, she writes and writes and writes in hopes that a thing will come out of this. That thing takes on the form of regret, of joy, of guilt and maybe resentment.

I loved this book. There were too many moments I softly gasped recognizing myself in her and her words. I'd imagine that there's no proper way to discuss a loved one's suicide but this comes pretty close.

Francesca Maccani says

93 pagine che sono un condensato di dolore, amore, nostalgia, disperazione.

Non l'ho trovato molto distante dal nucleo profondo de "L' anno del pensiero magico" della Didion.

Il salto ti scava dentro con una prosa secca ma lirica, attraverso descrizioni che sono dei piccoli flash, isolati, anche graficamente, ma che assomigliano ai croccantini di cioccolato nello yogurt. Il dolce tuffato nella lattiginosa e densa crema acidula.

Un libro apparentemente ridotto all'osso come una poesia ermetica. In poco dice tutto.

E quel tutto tocca le nostre corde più profonde e ci porta con Harris sul binario dal quale ha spiccato il suo ultimo volo. Il suo salto

Sian Lile-Pastore says

i thought this was so beautifully written.

it's about the death of Harris, a friend of the author, and even though it's a slight book, it also covers depression, intimacy, suicide, belonging, writing and 9/11.

it's a sad book about losing a friend 'It doesn't sound like much when I say my friend died. He wasn't my father or my son or my husband.'

I like how Manguso writes about grief:

'I can't measure my grief and I can't show anyone what color it is. I can offer testimony that others can reject or accept on faith, but my grief is always just my grief, unobservable by anyone but me, and then imperfectly. And maybe it isn't even grief anymore; maybe it's envy of people who aren't grieving, or shame that my grief is lasting so long when I'm not even part of Harris's family.'

The back of my proof copy compares it to Joan Didion's 'Year of Magical Thinking', which is kind of obvious but not far off - it has a similar writing style, but also felt much more raw.

Owen says

"I want to set aside every expectation of how I should feel or act given that my friend had a bad death, and try to explain what has actually happened to me—if, in fact, anything has actually happened to me." (p. 86)

This brief book is Manguso's attempt to make sense of the death of her close friend Harris. When she had been out of the country and hadn't seen him for a year, he escaped from a psychiatric hospital and threw himself in front of a train. But the Harris she knew had not been troubled or crazy or suicidal, certainly not at first, and Manguso parses every step in the evolution of her feelings toward the Harris she remembers and the Harris, perhaps somehow a different one, who committed suicide.

At the start, in its portrait of young people feeding and feeding on the artistic energy of New York, it reads like Patti Smith's *Just Kids*; in its later search for an authentic expression of her grief, it reads like Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. It's not quite as resonant as either of those, but then that would be a very tall order.

Sara says

If there you are mourning -- or need to mourn -- this is a brief but suitable companion.

Two sensations dominate this prose elegy: grief, obviously, and much less obviously, akathisia, a dauntingly abstract state of "torment, restlessness, pulling or drawing or twisting sensation." Akathisia is a known side effect of a range of anti-psychotic drugs, such as the one the narrator's dead friend was given the same day he jumped in front of a moving train. The narrator believes that it was akathisia that led her friend to jump, but akathisia's presence in the narrative is not the forensic solution to the mystery of her friend's death; its function is to mirror back the ineffability of grief itself. "If there were a way to describe the experience of this disorder (akathisia) more clearly, clinicians might better be able to diagnose it, treat it, and prevent its common outcomes" (37) she speculates at one point. But instead of performing this clinical task, her short work instead more precisely describes the processes of grief: "I want to set aside every expectation of how I should feel or act given that my friend had a bad death, and try to explain what has actually happened to me," she announces, quickly qualifying this ambition with "if, in fact, anything has actually happened to me at all." (86). Which is at the core of her anguish: grief can't be measured or accurately observed from outside. Grief, indeed, might not bear any logical relationship to the loss that prompts it. It is not, she observes, for the person who has died, and after a time, it is not even for the community of living who mourn him.

In attempting to communicate the mysteries of this suffering, Manguso veers close to hipster-twee in the first thirty or so pages, as she substitutes the observation of irrelevant details for statements of feeling. Hang in there. A deeper affect emerges in the last two thirds of the book, and it lends a resonance to the first thirty pages that they won't have on the initial read.

Michael Livingston says

Manguso dissects her grief and friendship with gorgeous spare prose - this is 100 pages of pure, compressed

power. Glorious.

Nicola says

I read this in one day, in couple of sittings, and I just didn't get into it. I hate to say that a grief memoir left me cold, but it did. I've never lost a friend, so I'm going to hold onto it and perhaps it will mean more to me in future.

Vivek Tejuja says

One of the most difficult things to write about is the death of a loved one and how it completely changes you, or at least most parts of you. Death, being the common factor to our lives, since we have all lost someone special and dear to it, is almost something that doesn't let go. The loss is felt at various times and places and to document that to me is a work of remarkable restraint and courage. "The Guardians" by Sarah Manguso is one such book. After reading, "The Year of Magical Thinking" by Joan Didion, I thought I was done reading about loss and grief, however guess I wasn't.

"The Guardians" by Sarah Manguso, as the title also suggests is an elegy for a friend. Sarah grieves for a best friend through this book. Her friend, Harris died on the 23rd of July 2008 under the wheels of a train. The Guardians is a heartfelt meditation on friendship and grief. It is about love and how it changes the world of a person, when the other is not around. At the same time, the book is not sentimental or wallowing in self-pity. It is written the way Sarah feels it. The book is about Sarah trying to make sense of death and how it changed her life and the way she thought to some extent.

I could relate a lot to the book, maybe because like I said, we have all lost that special someone, so it is only fair that the reader would be able to relate to a book of this nature. The writing is sparse, extending only at one hundred and twenty eight pages and yet Manguso manages to say what she has to. She shows some parts and aspects of Harris's life and covers some, rightly so, given the book could get either very personal or very distant. She speaks of mourning and the process of grief in most endearing ways: "I want to set aside every expectation of how I should feel or act given that my friend had a bad death, and try to explain what has actually happened to me" she states most eloquently. Grief to her cannot be measured at all and that can be seen throughout the book.

The book is deeply personal and when you read something this personal, a part of you cannot think, it can only feel and the other wants to think and connect everything that is read. For me the book was difficult in parts. I choked at some and at other times I closed the book, and revisited it after some time. Like they say, grief is way too personal. One's relation to it in whatever form is also very personal and this book stands out to unite people in grief, at a very superficial level, but nonetheless it binds through the situation and words and feelings. I for one cannot imagine what would happen to me if my best friend were to die. This book is a short treatise on loss, love and friendship. Something that I will not recommend you miss.

Ksenia says

I love reading in bars and crying, see my highlights for some gems. Recommended to anyone who wants to explore grief and mental illness.

Abby Howell says

In brief paragraphs, images, and sections, Manguso explores the grief of losing a friend to suicide. And the grief of her still being "lucky". Of her making it through her own life, despite her own bouts of mental illness. I was moved by the content and engaged with her spare style. The reader can see both Sarah and Harris through Manguso's eyes. The joy of what these two people were together. And the deep, deep grief of what they didn't have. Maybe what no two human beings can have.

Gus says

The second book by Manguso that I have read. She is so good at brevity and emotional brutality. Like this is heartbreaking and so was *Ongoingness: the End of a Diary*. I think we share a lot of the same types of worries. Idk.

christa says

The thing with death is that the solution key to so many mysteries, including the final whys and hows and "what does that feel like," all get buried with the body. In the case of Harris, the inspiration for Sarah Manguso's elegy "The Guardians," there are an additional 10 hours worth of mysteries that occurred between when her friend left the hospital without money, a phone or identification, and when he tossed his own body in front of a train.

Manguso met Harris in college and was good enough friends with him to get invited to his family's home for a holiday. They lived together with a handful of roommates for awhile in New York City in a loft with makeshift cubicle style rooms. And when the World Trade Centers fell, it was his arm around her and his out-of-town getaway stop where they took refuge in the aftermath. Between them they had inside jokes and a poem by Mangusos. They had drinks and birthday cakes and conversations about the size of his junk.

So what happened to Harris: He'd been hospitalized twice before and it's his third stay when he walks out the front door, does something indiscernible for 10 hours, then jumps in front of a train. Manguso can't remember exactly when she last saw him. She'd been abroad for a year. Now that he's gone, he's stuck in her craw. This story seems to be a way of exorcising him, or considering what happened.

Manguso isn't interested in a journalistic account of events. She doesn't want to interview the conductor from the train or Harris's parents. She's also not interested in writing fan fiction to invent the missing 10 hours. She has some hypothesis on the whys -- ranging from the side effects of his medication or being encouraged by a dybbuk. Manguso's background is poetry, which she uses to create memory vignettes.

I don't find this kind of writing lovely, I find it annoyingly coy. Her sentences dance around the edges of what she means. Like: She refers to her now-husband in memories as "The man who wasn't yet my husband." Occasionally all that swirling pushes out a great sentence or a great idea. But for the most part it feels like reading vague status updates from your most emo Facebook friend. Some people would like the way this is written and I can appreciate that. But it's a stylistic issue for me and this just feels too super-serious and purposefully fuzzy.

Kasey Jueds says

I found this beautifully written, and very, very moving.

The subject is the suicide of one of the author's closest friends... but as with almost all books I love, it's about much more: the meaning of family and relationship and marriage and friendship, and how slippery and undefinable, finally, those things are; grief and mourning and how undefinable they are, as well; how we try to understand our lives, and how impossible it is to do that, and the necessity of continuing to try.

The Guardians is brief, but intensely full of feeling. It's written in a series of episodes/fragments/snapshots that aren't chronological, and that seem completely appropriate to the author's process of trying to document, understand, accept something that is unacceptable to her in a fundamental way. There's nothing clichéd about the writing or the feelings Sarah Manguso describes; I kept being surprised and startled, and completely believing in the truth of what she writes. I think this book will stay with me for a long time. And I'm happy I own it, because I know I'll want to read it again.

On a sort of side note, one of the things I most appreciated about the book--along with Sarah Manguso's intense honesty, and her graceful writing--is the fact that it's about what many people would consider a "secondary" kind of relationship: a friendship, not a marriage or intimate partnership or familial relationship. At one point, the author writes about the difficulty and confusion of grieving someone who isn't family or her husband. To me, the book is a gorgeous illustration of how much those other relationships can matter, if we're lucky enough to have them (and the last word of the book is "lucky"); they can be as rich and deep and essential as the relationships that we're often told should take priority over them. Sarah Manguso says this way more beautifully in *The Guardians*, of course, without actually saying it.

Kim Fay says

I love small, perfect books. Books that can be read in one sitting, with enough time left over afterward, to bask in them, think about them, savor them. "The All of It," by Jeannette Haien. Penelope Fitzgerald's novels. "Fifty Days of Solitude" by Doris Grumbach. And this book, "The Guardians," by Sarah Manguso. Unlike many books about death, it is not also about affirming life. This is a book about someone dying, and how that death affects another. A man jumps in front of a train. A woman reads about it in the newspaper. The man turns out to be the woman's dear friend. This is not fiction. This is an essay about Manguso coming to terms with her friend, Harris, taking his own life. Manguso is a poet, and there is a poet's economy in the telling. But I would not call her writing poetic in any flowery sense of the word. She writes with great strength about how grief is individual and private. The beauty in this is that she captures its privacy so well that she spoke to exactly how I feel about my own experiences with grief: "Don't tell me about the rich variety of mourning customs throughout the world from the beginning of civilization to now ... I don't care to

know how others act out the playlet of their ruination. I want to know about my particular grief, which is unknowable, just like everyone else's." Having devoured this book, I will go back and reread it slowly, and slowly again. Next up: Manguso's "Ongoingness."

Peter Rock says

Such a sad and compassionate and intelligent book. I'm really taken with her unsparing way.

Tasha says

"Some parts of the story are gone, but they have left a heavy imprint, and even now I can detect the shape of what made it, the shape of what used to exist."
