

READING

the quiet club

How do you help a silent sufferer through a miscarriage or stillbirth? Two books offer insight and solace.

BY NELL CASEY

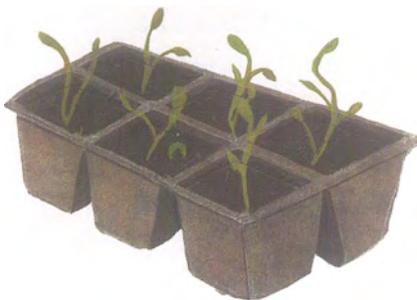
It was very strange to have been so happy so recently," writes Elizabeth McCracken in her new memoir, *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*, "and I felt that if I puzzled it over enough I might be able to find my way back—not to experience it again, of course, but to conjure up the smell on ... an article of clothing, to touch in some abstract way something that had innocently, casually touched my happiness, since there

would be ... nothing literal for me to touch." McCracken's baby was, in heartbreaking paradox, born dead. And with that, the author was suddenly set upon a divergent path, headed in a very different direction from the one she'd just traveled for nine months. In recounting her story, McCracken explores the quiet threat that pregnancy poses all along: loss.

You might think our generation would have pried this subject wide open by now; it's not as if we haven't looked into other dark corners of motherhood. Still, a reality needs to be acknowledged—that pregnancy

and loss can be sorrowfully intertwined and that, as McCracken points out, the emotions of this tragedy are made all the more surreal for its abrupt about-face on joy. Thankfully, McCracken's memoir (as lyrical as her National Book Award-nominated novel, *The Giant's House*) and Jessica Berger Gross's 2007 anthology *About What Was Lost: 20 Writers on Miscarriage, Healing, and Hope* have set an honest and intelligent precedent for discussion.

There isn't statistical information available on the number of stillbirths in the United States—



THE READING LIST

An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination, by Elizabeth McCracken (Little, Brown)

About What Was Lost: 20 Writers on Miscarriage, Healing, and Hope, edited by Jessica Berger Gross (Plume)



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For more on how to help others cope with miscarriage, visit cookiemag.com/go/miscarriage.

mainly because there is no standard medical definition of the term *stillbirth* (a depressing indication of just how alienating the experience must be). But it is known that nearly a quarter of all pregnancies end in miscarriage. Which means many of us have encountered a similar tragedy, either in our own lives or a friend's. Accordingly, these books offer two opportunities: For insiders, they're a chance to read narratives that offer a sense of kinship for all shapes of grief (stillbirth, early miscarriage, multiple miscarriages); for outsiders, they're a vivid glimpse of what these experiences feel like and of how one might reach through the suffering to console.

"Privately, I worried that I'd brought on the miscarriage," confides Susannah Sonnenberg in her piercing essay. Later she writes, "'The uterus is amazingly resilient,' I said [to patients at the women's-health clinic where she worked], but my fertility was trapped in a medieval narrative of special charms and impossible bargains." There is an undeniable sense of responsibility—"It happened on

my watch," as McCracken puts it—that comes with the territory of being the physical vessel through which a baby must pass. And there are so many candidates for blame these days. "Eaten something. Failed to eat something," McCracken posits. "Rested too much or exercised too much. Got pregnant too old. Was smug." It is so hard to allow the devastation to be the mystery it often is—many of these women secretly punish themselves as a way of imposing order and reason on the experience. "Mis-carry: The word itself creeps with guilty error," Emily Bazelon points out in her *Lost* contribution, "as if you've carelessly dropped something that you were meant to hold."

Throughout these essays, there is a stark sense of innocence lost. It's a strange word to use—*innocence*—since most of these women are in their mid-to-late 30s, established professionally, married, and keenly aware of life's complexities and trade-offs. Still, it *is* an innocence that is taken away—a simple sense of pregnancy and its promise. Instead, a lonely sense of superstition takes its place. "[I held] myself back from the second pregnancy ... so I wouldn't be fooled again," *Lost* contributor Dahlia Lithwick recalls. "I wrote letters to both my babies through each pregnancy. The first bunch is jolly and silly, the letters ending abruptly. The second is spare and fearful and cautious."

These books provide a worthy insight for those comforting someone who is suffering in this way: Be frank. Frequently these writers rail against stock condolences—"It's nature's way of telling you something"; "It's better this way"—and, worse, deafening silence as insulting prompts to move right along. Such attempts offer what seems like a naive sense of closure to a person who can no longer afford naivete.

"Wendy burst into hysterical tears at the sound of my voice and asked me questions until I'd told the whole story," McCracken writes about a friend who made her feel

better. "'Was he a beautiful baby?' she wanted to know, and I wondered how she knew to ask: she was the only one who did."

There is, of course, no one-size-fits-all condolence. ("Was he a beautiful baby?" reads as an almost shocking question without the emotional context of this friendship.) What these women consistently yearned for was genuine and brave emotion. McCracken theorizes that she needed everyone to offer condolences for the very reason that there is no one right response—it takes a patchwork of support to help make it through the days. "They *moved* me," she writes of the many letters that she received from friends and colleagues. "That is to say, they felt physical, they budged me from the sodden self-disintegrating lump I otherwise was. As I was going mad from grief, the worst of it was that sometimes I believed I was making it all up. Here was some proof that I wasn't."

In many of these stories, pregnancy, having once offered tragedy, soon offers hope again. "I don't know how long we'd known that [our baby] was dead before we declared that we would have another child," McCracken writes. "Certainly it was within minutes of hearing the bad news, and we both kept repeating it, not because we were done with this baby, but because that sentence—we'll have another child ... —was like throwing out a towline.... We vowed to try as soon as possible."

McCracken did, indeed, have another baby (as did many of the contributors to Gross's anthology). But ever the truth seeker, she narrates this turn of events not as plain old salvation, but rather as the double entendre the experience turns out to be. "Every day as I love this baby in my lap, I think of my other baby. Poor older brother, poor missing one," she writes. "I see the infant before me, the lips fattened and glossy with nursing, the nose whose future ... I try to predict daily. The love for the first magnifies the love for the second, and vice versa." ❖

WHAT THEY YEARN FOR FROM FRIENDS IS GENUINE AND BRAVE EMOTION.