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TITLE INFORMATION

LOVE DEATH LOVE

Ellen Long Stilwell

BalboaPress (116 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A debut volume of true stories explores the myriad facets of loss and grief.

Stilwell asserts at the beginning of her slim book that she's extremely experienced when it comes to final care and death. She was taught by a Buddhist monk/hospice chaplain to be a death doula, a kind of trained companion for somebody who's going through a momentous health change. The author was raised Irish Catholic, became a registered nurse, and is now a certified hospice palliative nurse, skilled at helping patients and their loved ones through the ends of their journeys. She makes clear that she's also well acquainted with death in her personal life, and her book is intended to distill all that suffering—as well as the happiness and serenity—into a series of stories and insights that might help readers going through similar things. Stilwell fills the volume with her own experiences: the losses of loved ones and relatives, the various jobs she's had, and so on. This autobiographical strand continues through her reflections on various patients she's known, individuals whose backgrounds stretched across many religions and cultures, from a spry, older Jewish woman to a Muslim refugee from Yemen. A wealthy, cantankerous woman named Gertie was brought gradually over the course of months to a peaceful acceptance of her own impending death, and Stilwell writes how she felt herself transformed by that recognition. These and other stories are told with an affecting simplicity that neither cloys nor preaches. The hard realities of the hospice experience are present on every page, but so, too, are the author's compassion and faith in the value of simple connections. These tales are touchingly filled with little details: whispering with a sick individual in the mornings; sitting with patients while they remember their intricate lives; hearing people's final attempts to make sense of their complicated family relationships. Readers who have been through the palliative care experience will be quite moved.

A poignant collection of subtle and emotional tales of the dying.

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