



AFTER EFFECTS

A MEMOIR OF
COMPLICATED
GRIEF

ANDREA GILATS



DISCUSSION GUIDE

AFTER EFFECTS: A Memoir of Complicated Grief

by Andrea Gilats

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“I am enormously grateful that the world is finally welcoming a deeper and more complex understanding about grief and grieving. Andrea Gilats makes a vital contribution with this honest account of her husband’s death and her long journey through complicated grief to arrive at her hard-won ‘fringes of happiness.’”

—**JUDITH BARRINGTON**, bestselling author of *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*

“Andrea Gilats has given us a beautifully written story of the heartbreaking problem of complicated grief that is now officially called prolonged grief disorder. Her detailed, honest account of almost two decades of intense suffering after the loss of her beloved life partner will help others understand that there is no shame in grieving in this way—that grief is a form of love. Importantly, though, there are ways to gently guide people like Andrea much sooner in the process to find ways to honor the deceased as well as the life of the bereaved they leave behind.”

—**M. KATHERINE SHEAR, M.D.**, founder and director, Columbia University Center for Prolonged Grief

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrea (Andy) Gilats is a writer, educator, artist, and former yoga teacher. She is author of *After Effects: A Memoir of Complicated Grief* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022) and *Restoring Flexibility: A Gentle Yoga-Based Practice to Increase Mobility at Any Age* (Ulysses Press, 2015), as well as many essays and articles about aging. During her long career at the University of Minnesota, she cofounded and

directed the legendary Split Rock Arts Program as well as Split Rock Online Mentoring for Writers. She also directed Encore Transitions, a holistic seminar series for people contemplating retirement, and she taught yoga to a diverse cross-section of older people through her community-based teaching practice, Third Age Yoga. To support her writing, she received a Next Step grant from the Twin Cities Metropolitan Regional Arts Council. Currently, she is working on a memoir about entering old age during the coronavirus pandemic.

MORE INFORMATION: andragilats.com

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has reading *After Effects* affected your sense of empathy? Has Andrea's story changed your feeling for people who have survived the death of a loved one from Covid-19? What about people who have lost loved ones unexpectedly in a mass tragedy or a war? What about family members and friends who have suffered a significant loss?
2. How long should "normal" grief last? What factors might contribute to prolonged or complicated grief? Have you ever experienced emotions that somehow went beyond normal? Can you imagine yourself ever suffering from prolonged grief disorder?
3. After Tom died, Andrea lost the ability to take pleasure in activities she had always enjoyed. This can also be a sign of depression. From your personal perspective, do you feel that there are differences between grief and depression?
4. After Tom died, Andrea's health worsened. What part, if any, do you feel grief played in that? Do you feel that there is a connection between grief and health? How might acute grief affect our ability to function each day?

5. Do you feel that it is possible for people to recover their former state of “wholeness” after a significant loss? Why or why not?

6. Andrea writes that grief never fully fades into the past but instead becomes “a fixed part of character.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

7. Do you feel that Jewish mourning customs and remembrance practices affected Andrea’s experience of grief? If so, how? How might your cultural or religious heritage affect the ways you express grief? Do you feel that our deceased loved ones remain with us forever?

8. How did Andrea’s grief influence her reactions to important events in the world, such as the death of Senator Paul Wellstone and the election of President Barack Obama? Had she not lost Tom, do you think these events would have affected her in the same ways?

9. How did finding purposeful creative activities, such as painting, teaching yoga, and creating new kinds of lifelong learning programs, affect Andrea’s ability to heal? From which parts of yourself do you draw strength?

ANDREA GILATS’S PERSONAL LIST OF RESOURCES RELATED TO GRIEF AND LOSS

Columbia University Center for Prolonged Grief

<https://prolongedgrief.columbia.edu/for-the-public/complicated-grief-public/overview/>

Columbia’s Center for Complicated Grief is the country’s most comprehensive, credible source to learn more about complicated grief, now officially called prolonged grief disorder. Their website offers free pamphlets to download, as well as a national list of psychologists and social workers who have earned certifications in complicated grief counseling through the Center’s training programs. To learn what, exactly, complicated grief is and how it can be treated, turn first to the Center’s website.

Websites Offering General Information and Advice About Grief

If you search online for information and advice for people who are grieving, you will find a plethora of websites offering online resources and links to providers who offer grief counseling and related mental health services. In my research, I found that the sheer abundance of information is not only confusing, it is often contradictory. The sites that focus on social connection and story sharing, rather than those touting therapies and counselors, may well be your safest, most helpful choices if you feel comfortable connecting online.

Further Reading

If you enjoy reading, you already know that books can open your eyes, heal your heart, relieve your cares, light up your mind, move your soul, and even save your life. The literature of loss is vast, and I have not read widely in it, but I would like to recommend a few special books that I read after my husband died. In the acknowledgement section of *After Effects*, I briefly discuss two books by widowers that helped ease my early-stage grief: *Without* by Donald Hall, a touching collection of poems about Hall's late wife, and *A Grief Observed*, the heartrending journal that writer C. S. Lewis kept during the first weeks after his wife died. In addition to these two, here are three exquisitely honest memoirs written by three esteemed American writers in the months after their husbands died.

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)

A Widow's Story by Joyce Carol Oates (Ecco Press, 2011)

The Light of the World by Elizabeth Alexander (Grand Central Publishing, 2015)

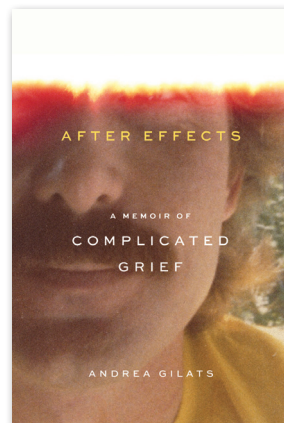
These three memoirs illuminate their authors' immediate experiences of grief, especially grief as a trickster who will ambush you at every turn as you try to move forward. Didion's and Alexander's husbands both died of heart attacks in their homes, while Oates's husband died unexpectedly of a virulent virus he contracted while hospitalized for pneumonia.

In late 2003, when Joan Didion lost her husband, her recently married daughter was seriously ill and died about eighteen months after her father. It seems miraculous that Didion could write at all; that she did is evidence that the act of writing was helping her survive. After a year of writing, she

stopped, telling readers that her “account” was finished because her first year without her husband was finished, but her unadulterated record of that chaotic year stands as one of the most powerful memoirs of its time.

We know from her memoir that Joyce Carol Oates began writing what would become *A Widow's Story* about a week before her husband's death, while he was hospitalized. The intensity of her descriptions feels like a balloon blown to its bursting point. Brilliantly, this intensity captures and holds the reader for four hundred pages. The book ends with Oates's introduction, six months after her husband's death, to the man she would marry only months after that.

The death of poet Elizabeth Alexander's husband left her with two teenage sons who had lost their beloved father. Because she is a poet, it seems fitting that her memoir is softer, more poignant, and more poetic than Didion's and Oates's. Her gorgeous writing holds the reader in a reverie throughout the book, which ends a year and a half after her husband's death when Alexander and her sons begin new lives in New York City: college for her sons and new career opportunities for this eminent American poet.



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MORE INFO:

z.umn.edu/aftereffects