

# An elegy to a lost friend

A bittersweet memoir about a friend's suicide provides a beautiful meditation on grief and loss

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*This article appears courtesy of [The Barnes & Noble Review](#)*

Henry James' famous exhortation to "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost" clearly hasn't been lost on Sarah Manguso. In "The Two Kinds of Decay," her fiercely observant, wrenching 2008 memoir of her struggle with a rare, life-threatening autoimmune disease that struck in her early 20s, Manguso wrote: "This is suffering's lesson: pay attention. The important part might come in a form you do not recognize."

Exquisite focus is also key to Manguso's new book, "[The Guardians](#)," a bittersweet elegy to a friend who "eloped" from a locked psychiatric ward on a torrential July day in 2008 and, some ten hours later, threw himself in front of a Metro-North train in Riverdale. Although they were never lovers, Harris Wulfson was one of Manguso's closest friends for ten years. A brilliant musician and composer, Harris, as she refers to him, had suffered three psychotic breaks in the three years prior to his death.

Manguso brings her own experience with anxiety and depression — and with the potentially calamitous side effects of psychotropic medication — to bear on her friend's death. Intensely concerned with the various ways memories and feelings can be evoked through the artful manipulation of language, she explores the extent to which we are our friends' guardians and, in outliving them, the guardians of their

memory.

It is not essential to have read Manguso's compact memoir to appreciate "The Guardians," but it helps explain her extreme reaction to Harris's death. Chances are, reading one of these two books will make you want to read the other. I read her new book first, and, not knowing her back story, had the erroneous impression that the primary source of her past misery was psychological. She mentions being in lockdown for suicidal despair, and her eleven years on psychotropic medications. Her struggle with a terrifying physical disease called chronic idiopathic demyelinating polyradiculoneuropathy (in remission for years) gets no explicit mention, perhaps because she feels she put it to rest in "The Two Kinds of Decay."

Reading the volumes out of order also highlights Harris's absence from the earlier book — making one wonder if his importance to her increased in retrospect. Manguso doesn't flag the fact that, in the years that Harris was struggling with mental breakdowns, her literary star was rising: a Rome Prize fellowship sent her abroad for what turned out to be the last year of his life — which was also the year that "The Two Kinds of Decay" was published to great acclaim.

The question arises: why would one want to read about such unrelievedly grim subjects? The answer lies in the writer's literally transcendent prose. Manguso's writing manages, in carefully honed bursts of pointed, poetic observation, to transcend the darkness and turn it into something beautiful. The results are also deeply instructive, not in the manner we've come to fatuously call "self-help" but in the way that good literature expands and illuminates our realm of experience.

How does Manguso pull this off? First, by making us understand who Harris was to her. While she questions the intensity and validity of her grief given her non-privileged mourner status as neither girlfriend, wife, nor family member, she travels in memory to his downtown Manhattan loft, where a changing cast of recent college graduates, including herself for a time, took up residence. As in her memoir, she is refreshingly matter-of-fact about sex. She replays conversations about Harris's reportedly "majestic organ," which they could discuss "as if it were an amazing restaurant in another town" precisely because they weren't physically intimate. Writing with just the right blend of wistfulness and whimsy, she adds, "Now it is among the great mysteries."

She recalls Passover at his mother's house on Long Island, where they enjoyed the thought that his grandmother might mistake them for a couple. On September 11, 2001, they stood huddled together on the Brooklyn side of the East River watching the Towers collapse before heading out to Great Neck: "And of course the whole memory of that morning has been written over with what has happened since: My friend, who stood with me and helped me, who hugged me as we walked back toward the city from the river shore, is dead."

Manguso returns to July 23, 2008, repeatedly, trying to imagine Harris's last hours and moments. Her

belief in “the possibility of unendurable suffering” prevents her from being angry at her friend. She explains the akathisia she believes drove him to his death — unbearable discomfort and restlessness that are known side effects of the medications he’d been put on in the hospital. (What enabled him to act on this misery, however, was fatal human error: being carelessly let out of the locked ward.)

A self-described former poet who “traded poetry for a longer life,” Manguso is fascinated not just with memory and language but with narrative form. Fiction, one gathers, eludes her. She writes, “I have no interest in hanging a true story on an artificial scaffolding of plot, but what is the true story? My friend died — that isn’t a story.” In a 2009 interview, she described her work-in-progress as a novel about surveillance and paranoia, called “The Guardians.” In the book that turned out to be a meditation on grief and loss rather than a novel about surveillance and paranoia, Manguso comments: “The ten missing hours would make a good story if I liked making up stories, but I don’t,” and then adds a puzzling coda: “I try not to make anything up, and I fail every time.”

Hmmm. Whatever else is fabricated, and however artfully conveyed, the sentiment here is real: “Love abides. There is no other solace.”

*More Heller McAlpin*