

Beautiful Unbroken: One Nurse's Life

Mary Jane Nealon

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Each year, Graywolf Press publishes the winner of the Bakeless Prize for Nonfiction, and neither the publisher nor the Breadloaf Writers Conference (which administers the Prize) has put forward a wrong foot yet. Mary Jane Nealon's *Beautiful Unbroken*, the 2010 winner, is another satisfying link in this solid chain. The book leaves a memoir lover both satiated and in search of more from the author, eager to turn pages and sorrowful of approaching the final one. If more poets like Nealon published memoirs, perhaps the much maligned modern genre would find its way back to favor with readers who have grown skeptical.

In *Beautiful Unbroken*, Nealon traces her path from a childhood overshadowed by unexpected death, through a nursing career and family life. Her journey is fueled as much by compassion and self-surrender as a need to understand what it means to honor the human body, and the connective tissue between self and others.

Coming of age in the 1970s, the author embraces a certain sexual and working girl freedom, selecting a traditional career but with unconventional choices—moving frequently, remaining single, and finally, working with the first wave of men suffering from HIV/AIDS in New York City hospitals. Everything, eventually, leads her home again, in physical, psychic, and emotional ways.

It is by way of Nealon's communion with suffering that she is able to unravel her own strong ties and painful disconnections—with family, difficult memories, and a world that seems to demand ever more from its healing professionals. On these pages too, a reader is pulled, often gently, but sometimes fiercely, insistently, into an assessment of one's own comfort with questions of conscience. Nealon looks at how one reconciles the tug of selfishness necessary to pursue a calling with the need to recognize how seemingly selfless acts can sometimes also be a form of self-seeking affirmation.

Having published two books of poetry and earned numerous literary awards, the author infuses her prose with a poet's perceptive hand, but is careful not to bury her sure story arc beneath a breathy, abbreviated style. She illuminates the murky corners of a full life without obscuring that which is felt but difficult to explain; in other words, any reader who has faced family, career, or relationship challenges (in other words, everyone) will find herself somewhere in Nealon's story, too. Isn't that, after all, the meaning of memoir? And the purpose of nursing, too? To find what connects us, and inspire compassion.

LISA ROMEO (September / October 2011)

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