

Goodbye to Mum and Dad: Taking Stock of the Past Year

Andrew Kirby-Pugh

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Andrew Kirby-Pugh's memoir *Goodbye to Mum and Dad* is a bittersweet account of his parents' lives and deaths.

Jose Kirby and Len Pugh met at the Woodman Pub that her family owned. Not ones to rush into things, they dated for four years, were engaged for four more years, and, after four years of marriage, they had one son, Andrew Kirby-Pugh. For decades, the family of three led an idyllic life in the respectable English suburb of Winchmore Hill, their time punctuated by visits from lively friends and pub patrons. But Len's health began to decline; his troubles were followed by Jose's. Kirby-Pugh recounts his experiences with caring for his elderly parents up to their deaths in language that is variously warm, funny, and heartrending.

The book begins with jovial family histories of the Kirbys and the Pughs, shared in overarching terms. It even lists the family's preferred musicians through the years, including Judy Garland to Jimi Hendrix. Such sections are rambling and stream-of-consciousness, reminiscent of oral histories. Interchangeable family friends and cousins slide in and out of the story, and this—along with the lack of a thematic through line between this early history and the rest of the book—muddies the narrative.

But early- to mid-twentieth-century England is captured with a sense of rosy nostalgia. Kirby-Pugh's scene details, as of Wellington boots and vaudeville performances, are delightful and charming. Glimpses of rigid social norms come through accounts of Jose's mother's apparent mortification upon finding out that she was pregnant with Jose late in life, when she had three adult children already; she coped by "jumping off the kitchen table and bathing in gin," and once asked her elder daughter to pretend that baby Jose was hers in public.

The book's later chapters are more focused, centered on chronicling Kirby-Pugh's parents' health declines, and lingering on each moment of realization of loss. The contrasting tones and pacing of portions of the book highlight the poignancy of Kirby-Pugh's grief. His narration includes several intimations of guilt and worry that he, as his parents' only son, had not done enough or cared enough for Jose and Len. Such concerns are coupled with the recognition that, though any death is tragic, Jose and Len lived long lives that were full of joy.

Andrew Kirby-Pugh's memoir *Goodbye to Mum and Dad* recalls his time as a caretaker for his parents; it is a complex, touching account of grief.

PAIGE VAN DE WINKLE (March 11, 2021)

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