

Letters to Kate: Life After Life

Carl H. Klaus

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Kate Franks Klaus arrived home at one o'clock on a November Saturday afternoon following a morning spent shopping at an art fair. One minute she was showing her husband the pottery bowls she'd bought, and then next minute she was lying paralyzed on the kitchen floor. Less than four hours later, she'd be dead from a massive cerebral hemorrhage. With that, a vibrant woman of only sixty would be gone, and her husband of thirty-five years would be left to make sense of a world without her.

Founding director of the University of Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program and a renowned essayist and diarist, the author dealt with the profound shock and bewildering enormity of his grief in the only way he knew how. As he'd done in his previous books (*Vegetable Love*, *Weathering Winter*, and *Taking Retirement*), Klaus approached this confounding new phase of his life practically and methodically, an outwardly calculated, organized response that belied his interior emotional turmoil. Beginning a week after her death and continuing for the next twelve months, Klaus wrote letters to Kate. Day by day, he'd tell her everything that was on his mind, just as he would have if she were still there. From his anguish at not being able to hold her as she lay dying, to his frustration with the menial tasks of domestic life, Klaus's letters paint an achingly realistic portrait of a man, a woman, a marriage.

Carrying on this one-sided correspondence was a curious endeavor, one that undoubtedly perplexed his family and friends the longer it continued. But Klaus knew what he was doing, and why. "Dear Kate: Here it is, eight months since you died, and I'm still trying to keep in touch, bringing you back to life through words alone. A life after death in language ... a life in words is more durable than flesh and blood."

If writing these letters to Kate helped Klaus cope—and they did—then sharing them can only help others be better prepared when their time comes. Klaus's fiercely poignant memoir of his first year as a widower adroitly chronicles the mourning process. As award-winning offerings by Joan Didion and John Banville attest, death and grief are hot literary topics these days, fueled by society's perennial search for ways to comprehend such an overwhelming concept. In his deeply personal, yet universally recognizable way, Klaus advises readers to take it one day at a time. CAROL HAGGAS (August 18, 2009)

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