

Not Really Gone

Blaire Sharpe

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This compelling memoir provides a friendly comfort, especially for those with a loved one who is slowly dying.

Not Really Gone, by Blaire Sharpe, is a memoir about a grandmother's deep, abiding love. While Sharpe's story is sad and painful, she focuses on love and hope. And while she remembers her grandmother as full of light, she doesn't shy away from the older woman's humanity—it's her humanity that makes her love so compelling.

Sharpe's formative years were difficult; her parents divorced due to their infidelity and alcoholism, and she and her siblings were put in the custody of her grandparents. Sharpe's grandmother, Eleanor Lavinia Phillips, quit her job to take on raising the three little ones. This initial self-sacrifice set the tone for their family going forward. Phillips became their family's rock, according to Sharpe. But, as anyone who has raised three kids knows, the storms were not over. Sharpe and her siblings had rocky teen and young adult years, and just as that storm was clearing, Phillips's health began to fail.

The book begins with childhood reflections and then travels, step by step, toward grown-up pain and loss. Sharpe shares her own battle with addiction and her grandmother's role in helping her heal. The most poignant reflections, and the ones that compelled her to write the book, are her memories of watching Phillips's health deteriorate. But just as striking as her grief is her pride in being able to care for her grandmother during her last years—and even in that she's thankful to her grandmother for her steadfast support.

The book has a nostalgic tone, at times even elegiac. Occasionally, Sharpe's words are filled with regret, but mostly they're just open, honest memories—the good and the bad mixed together and told crisply without sentimentality.

As a writer, Sharpe's attention to detail and narrative flow are engaging. She deals well with emotional territory, using apt emotional descriptions (such as “anticipatory grief—the grief you experience when you know a loss is coming”) rather than overwrought emotive prose. The chapter names are all gerunds that point to the theme of the chapter but also to the rhythms that characterize life: “Surviving,” “Believing,” “Accepting,” “Honoring,” and more.

Sharpe's personal story will appeal most to others who have watched as someone they loved died gradually, slowly reliving memories of love and struggle as the end approached. Her voice provides a friendly comfort, even in the midst of aching memories.

While Sharpe's aim is to honor her grandmother, what she shares most compellingly is herself.

MELISSA WUSKE (September 10, 2015)

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