

Notes From a Minor Key: A Memoir of Music, Love, and Healing

Dawn Bailiff

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Ready to play the Saint Saens Piano Concerto #2 with the Houston Symphony Orchestra, Dawn Bailiff stepped onstage, bowed with the conductor to the sound of applause, sat at the piano, and began to play. But what was happening? Her hands felt numb, her arms shook, her brain was disconnecting; she crumpled to the floor in front of 2,000 stunned onlookers. At age twenty-two, Bailiff learned that the diagnosis for her breakdown was multiple sclerosis—an effective end to her musical career.

Notes from a Minor Key is a memoir-in-dialogue—or creative nonfiction—beginning in 1986 when Dawn was a new student at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. Her chapters alternate with sections “told” by her future husband, Paul, also a Peabody student, although it’s not clear to readers until the end that all the chapters were actually written by Dawn Bailiff. This format of alternating voices moves along nicely as the two friend’s personal and professional lives unfold. Dawn was an especially talented pianist, appearing as a pre-teen with Leonard Bernstein at Tanglewood and playing with symphonies across Europe before she was twenty. In her Peabody years and after, however, she was plagued with constant, unexplained physical pain as well as “lovesick jealousies” over Paul’s other girlfriend.

After many ups and downs, Dawn and Paul were married in 1991; Dawn continued to endure undiagnosed pain (she went to doctors, therapists, healers, to no avail) while Paul suffered from a bipolar, often-depressive personality. Finally, that devastating day in Houston brought everything crashing down.

Bailiff agonizes openly and honestly about her love life, her career, and her pain. In fact, the book might have improved with a little less romantic detail. Embracing her native Judaism, she seeks more spiritual help through Buddhists and Christians, but the MS diagnosis (and the end of her concert career) does not end the tragedy. Her one-year-old son dies of a heart defect, and in his grief and depression, Paul shoots himself. Lose heart? Give up? Never. Exhibiting a stamina surpassing only her determination to pursue a piano career, Bailiff weaves a new career out of writing poetry, translating, and managing research. Hers is an incredible story, a heartfelt tribute to the power of maintaining hope.

LINDA BECK (November 12, 2007)

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