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Autobiography & Memoir

Phantom Limb
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"We need a new language for pain so we don't experience it as simply a message delivered by an insulted nerve. Instead let us read pain as a story of all that has happened in our lives." The author, a widely published poet and essayist, and author and editor of the anthology *The Writer on Her Work*, accomplishes just this. She thrusts the reader into a life riddled with pain and illness, life and death.

This book's title refers to the feeling that amputees retain of the presence of the missing limb. Some notice a sensation that the limb is still attached. Others feel excruciating pain, like Sternburg's mother, who underwent a below-the-knee amputation for circulatory problems. Often the pain retreats and comes back years later. Theory holds that the pain is felt the same as before the loss of the limb—signals continue to carry pain. Some doctors believe that this is not memory, but the "body's unwillingness to relinquish its past."

This volume spills memories of mental illness that touched the author's childhood and tainted her adulthood, phantoms that wouldn't die. Schizophrenia wracked her Uncle Herbie, causing violent tendencies that required a lobotomy. Depression also scarred her Aunt Francie, who failed psychiatric and electric shock treatments. She later needed a minimal lobotomy to stop suicide attempts. These quests into the depth of the family's dysfunction are discolored by the author's breast cancer, her father's stroke, and her mother's subsequent leg problems.

"A phantom limb turns out to be essential for walking. When a prosthesis is strapped on, the phantom shoots out and 'fills' it. The brain then begins to accept the artificial leg as though it were part of the body, able to be used for walking." In essence, this story is the missing limb, the way the mind deals with the pain and grief in life. This life story embraces the reader and invokes faint memories, giving them intensity.