

Widow: A Four-Letter Word

Judy Crowell

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This open, honest, and revealing memoir looks back on a life full of great loves and adventures.

Widowed at sixty-three after forty-two years of marriage, Judy Crowell embarked on an introspective journey. *Widow* is the account of that reflection. Tender, funny, and heartwarming, this book looks forward even as it looks back.

"My first Social Security check came yesterday, and I have a man wooing me," Crowell writes pertly, noting the potential incongruity of those two facts. The memoir alternates present-tense accounts with chapters centered in the past that incorporate some of the men who helped to shape the course of Crowell's life. The two streams eventually catch up to each other and intertwine, and this creative framework functions very nicely.

The scion of a family meat-packing empire in St. Louis, Crowell attended Vassar but ended up marrying a local boy, Bill. He, of course, is one of the dominant men in her memoir, which also features her grandfather Babu; her beloved father; her inseparable younger brothers, Fritz and Kit; her first love, Sean; her adventurous and flamboyant best friend, Brendan; and her only son, Billy. In fact, many of the chapters are simply titled with these names.

The author writes honestly and in sometimes-painful detail about her life and interactions. As Bill fights the cancer that eventually takes him, Crowell is there: "On good days, we made plans. On bad days, we made bargains. On many days, we made love."

The memoir unfolds at just the right pace. Her childhood and college years are followed by their early married years in Germany, where Bill was stationed, serving as military policeman in the army. The story moves with them to Chicago and the New York, as Bill becomes a CBS account executive and while they raise three children. Descriptions of suburban life in the sixties and seventies offer a unique glimpse into that time and place.

Crowell is a true storyteller, and her prose is superb. Describing a favorite dress from high school, she writes: "skinny green satin straps...and a skirt that flared at all the right places and at all the right times." While describing her relationship with a confirmed bachelor intent on wining and dining her, she breathes empathy into the text, detailing her tentative, trepidatious steps, making it easy to understand her hesitancy. She writes: "I'm a sixty-plus-year-old woman faithful to one man all her life. And I'm not ready to give myself to love again. Yet."

More than thirty black-and-white photos accompany the text, putting faces to names so lovingly written about, now identifiable to curious readers. These enhance and complete the author's story. The cover features the author and her late husband on their wedding day: smiling, frozen in time, forever young and happy.

The text emphasizes that the author despises the word "widow," so the second "w" is stricken out whenever the word appears. Because it's now only four letters, she relates that she's come up with a "litany" of other four-letter words to help her get through the grief, but perhaps a clearer explanation might be needed for readers unsure of the reasoning behind it.

This open, honest memoir will resound with anyone who's lost someone important in their life. Readers who enjoy biographies will also absolutely love this talented writer's look back on a life well-lived and well-loved.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (February 25, 2016)

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