Thirty Days: A Journey to the End of Love

Mark Raphael Baker

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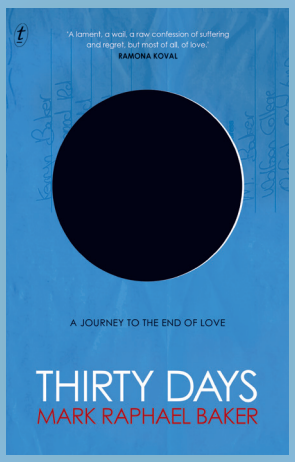

PRAISE FOR *THIRTY DAYS*

'During his first thirty days of mourning, Mark Baker wrote about his wife Kerryn Baker, who lived an "ordinary" life, as most of us do, but who was extraordinary in the courage, dignity, and above all, the gentle, wise grace of her dying. Few of us will be able to die so well, but every reader of this book will be inspired to do so. Baker recalls their life together and writes of Kerryn's death and dying in many tones—lyrically, tenderly, with self-deprecating irony, embarrassed candour and more—but one hears in them all pain so raw and need so desperate that it sometimes threatened to unhinge him. He writes of love and grief with power that brings back to our hearts knowledge that is too often only in our heads—that the disappearance of a human personality will forever be mysterious to us because every human being is irreplaceable.'
RAIMOND GAITA

'A lament, a wail, a raw confession of suffering and regret, but most of all, of love.'
RAMONA KOVAL

'Piercing, unsparing, and sweet, this book will break your heart and put it back together again.'
MIRANDA RICHMOND MOUILLOT, AUTHOR OF *A FIFTY-YEAR SILENCE*

'A courageous and intimate portrait of a marriage that will leave you devastated, enriched, irrevocably altered.'
EMILY BITTO

'A beautiful memoir, not just about one marriage, but the nature of marriage itself.' READINGS

ABOUT MARK BAKER

Mark Raphael Baker is the author of *The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey Through Memory*, a best-selling and seminal book on his parents' experience during the Holocaust which won a NSW Premier's Literary Award. He is Director of the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation and Associate Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies in the School of Historical Studies at Monash University, Melbourne.

A READER'S INTRODUCTION *TO THIRTY DAYS*

Sitting by his wife Kerryn's graveside, Mark Raphael Baker wishes to restore her to life, in an echo of the magic tricks he performed as a child. Now with childhood long behind him, words, rather than tricks bought in an arcade shop, are the tools he has to conjure her life, in memory if not in actuality. 'Zakhor is the biblical injunction to remember', (pp. 14) Baker tells us, and so this book is as much about re-creating Kerryn's life as it is about marking and making sense of her death. It is about trying to understand the mysteries of life and death more generally. And it is an attempt to write himself out of grief. (pp. 257)

As part of trying to understand his wife, he also wants to understand their marriage.

He wants to know whether Kerryn 'found happiness with me. Or had I failed to fulfill her longing for escape from a sadness that felt like a vast shipwreck?' (pp. 175) He wonders whether he could have done more in his marriage, whether he put himself first too often, whether he truly understood and appreciated his wife. And he applies these questions more broadly—is it possible for couples to maintain passion without the threat of death hanging over them?

Baker's Judaism is an integral part of his life and writing. The inheritance and importance of Jewish tradition is strongly present, despite Baker's professed atheism. And from the start, Baker draws a connection between deaths in the Holocaust and death by cancer. The Holocaust, he reminds his students, was the death of a

million individuals—'one plus one plus one'. (pp. 10) So too is his wife an individual. There are more connections for Baker: How can one go on living after such enormous loss? How can one understand such loss? How can one mourn? How could a God allow such loss?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Baker compares the baldness of chemotherapy patients with the shaven heads of Jews in the prison camps. (pp. 67) He echoes a litany of the names of cancer drugs with a litany of the names of death camps. (pp. 54) Later Baker describes Auschwitz as 'my only reference point for suffering'. (pp. 155) Do you think there are universal connections between the Holocaust and cancer, or is Baker finding his own links because of his own background?
2. In his youth, Baker decided that 'Anything other than total surrender to Jewish ritual was to accord Hitler a posthumous victory'. (39) What do you think of Baker's decision to practise the rituals of Orthodox Judaism despite his declared atheism? What about Kerryn's desire for a non-kosher steak at the end of her life?
3. 'Death is death is death'. (pp. 67) Can the horror of any death be compared with another? Does death by cancer have special status in our society?
4. In the early pages of the book, Baker reflects on some questions 'Why her? Why not me? Would the children have been better off losing their father rather than their mother? And then 'How will I find life now that she is dead? How much of me died with her? (pp. 30) Are any of these questions answerable? Then later 'Why us was a question we often asked ourselves, but it was unanswerable. There was no divine voice that spoke to us from a whirlwind, and all the theodicies I had studied as a student were meaningless when we were confronted with the reality of her fate.' (pp. 182)
5. 'The world has its own logic, sometimes random, at other times casual. But beware to those who look to God for the source of the answer'. (pp. 88) Do you agree? Is it harder to make sense of life's mysteries with or without religious belief?
6. For years, the question about the Holocaust—'How was it humanly possible?'—asked by his lecturer at the Hebrew University has followed Baker. Is it harder or easier to answer more specific questions about the Holocaust than about death more generally?
7. Similarly, are questions about love answerable? 'Why me?' Baker wants to ask his wife about their relationship, (pp. 47) but soon writes 'In the end, love defies rational categories'. (pp. 51) Why are people drawn to one another? Do you agree that 'the words I love you may be a cliché, but they are the truth, the essence of life and relationships'? (pp. 245)
8. It is only when she falls ill that Kerryn feels that Mark has 'come back'. (pp. 177) 'I allow my fantasies to reinvent a past that would have been our future, if only she had survived with the acute awareness of what we had almost lost', Baker writes. (pp. 28) Is it possible to live as if aware of an impending end? Is it possible to maintain passion throughout a marriage?
9. Baker describes himself as an historian, wanting to find coherence in the narrative of Kerryn's life and of their life together. Does he achieve this? He also acknowledges the fallibility of memory and the subjectiveness of the stories we tell and asks how he can be trusted to tell his and Kerryn's story. Can he be trusted? Does it matter if this is a partial story, with possible errors of fact, and told from only one perspective?
10. Baker then goes on to ask whether he has the 'right' to represent her in any form. (pp. 44) Does he have the 'right' to re-create his wife's life after her death? Was he right to lie when Kerryn asked him whether he was planning to write about her? (pp. 102) Does Kerryn's ultimate command that he should write their story change your view?
11. 'Everyone loves a story about death,' Kerryn says as she continues to challenge Baker about writing about her. (pp. 104) Is that true? Why or why not?
12. Why is cancer the 'Emperor of Maladies', as a documentary Baker watches is titled?
13. 'No act of will-power or heroism can ward off death when the time comes. Medicine fights cancer as best it can. But the mind can't halt the spread of malignant cells; it can't beat secondary tumours' (pp. 115-6). Why do you think there is such belief in the power of the mind to combat cancer? What about the belief in some of the 'quackery' that people suggest to Baker?
14. Baker says that Kerryn made her dying and her death her own (pp. 201) and reports that people around her said that she 'showed us all how to die'. The rabbi at her funeral said she proved 'that one can transform the hideous affront and indignity of cancer into a triumph of the human spirit. She did it without denial or anger, sentimentality or subterfuge, but with a tough, vigorous eloquence, a startling directness, a delightful humour and a sweet pathos'. (pp. 201-2) What do you think is the best way to die? What do you think is better—Dylan Thomas's raging against the dying of the night versus Kerryn's response of grace while she 'submitted herself to a fate that was out of her control'? (pp. 206) How do you think you would conduct yourself?
15. Baker's family has a tradition of 'dancing through the pain', of dancing and crying at the same time. Is this something to aspire to?