



Bough Down

Karen Green

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With fearlessness and grace, *Bough Down* reports from deep inside the maelstrom of grief. In this profoundly beautiful and intensely moving lament, artist and writer Karen Green conjures the inscrutable space of love and loss, clarity and contradiction, sense and madness. She summons memory and the machination of the interior mind with the emotional acuity of music as she charts her passage through the devastation of her husband's suicide. In crystalline fragments of text, Green's voice is paradoxically confessional and non-confessional: moments in her journey are devastating but also luminous, exacting in sensation but also ambiguous and layered in meaning. Her world is haunted by the unnameable, and yet she renders that world with poetic precision in her struggle to make sense of not only of death but of living. In counterpoint, tiny visual collages punctuate the text, each made of salvaged language and scraps of the material world—pages torn from books, bits of paper refuse, drawings and photographs, old postage stamps and the albums which classify them. Each collage — and the creative act of making it — evinces the reassembling of life. A breathtaking lyric elegy, *Bough Down* uses music and silence, color and its absence, authority of experience and the doubt that trembles at its center to fulfill a humane artistic vision. This is a lapidary, keenly observed work, awash with the honesty of an open heart.

Bough Down Details

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Author : Karen Green

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From Reader Review Bough Down for online ebook

Lillian says

This brought me up short:

Strangers feel free to e-mail:

Nobody knew you before your husband took his life.

Nobody knew me, nobody knew me. I think this may be true.

because I knew very little about Karen Green or her artwork except for the fact that she had created a forgiveness machine after David Foster Wallace took his life.

On another page there is this:

I made our house with what I could gather and the support guys helped. I didn't know I was making that shape. I thought I was making something geometrical, with clean lines and a solid roof.

I found the shape of this book beautiful ... devastating, but beautiful.

Matt Evans says

“Death excites people but from a distance,” writes Karen Green. She is a pastiche artist. She makes art from small images and fragments of text either written for the nonce purpose of being excerpted or clipped from old books, pulled from old contexts, made anew in her hands. She is an exceedingly exciting writer, and she is a suicide's widow.

Karen Green knows what she's talking about. Her husband was and is famous, and he belongs now to the world, as ashes belong to the wind, paste themselves to the ground. Death begets life; life leads to death. Why does death excite people but from a distance? Why do lions and bears caged in zoos excite us from a (safe) distance? Exactly. Excitement is a word I refuse to seek the etymology of in order to find the meaning to. Etymological essays are, in the final analysis, bullshit. I succumbed to the temptation. Excitement is to call forth, to arouse. Does it matter? I don't think so. The point is that death calls forth life. And life leads to death. Karen Green has written a very brave book. When my wife's brother killed himself in March 2010, I saw, up close and personal, how devastating death is when you loved and knew the decedent (such a formal and distancing word, an autopsy word). You don't ever get over the death of a loved one; but you do get used to it. Get used to pain. It's like living with a nagging injury.

Because he is still alive, not dead, will never die, will live again. You can't forget.
But his cell number belongs now to another, even though his voice remains on the greeting.

Karen Green has written a book that is an ouroboros of grief, a snake eating its tail; the oroanal god of life. It takes and it gives.
Just an amazing book.

Richard says

:(

Roxane says

Quite a lovely grief memoir. The fragmented moments are rendered in ways that speak well to the nature of grief as raw and meandering and as beautiful as it can be ugly. There are some particularly wonderful turns of phrase, throughout.

More than once, Green asks her husband's memory if her life, in mourning, is what he imagines as a better existence for her and to see the rage of these questions and to see how much she clearly and genuinely misses him is deeply affecting.

I wondered about the ending but it may also be fitting given that there is no neat or appropriate ending to grief.

Andrew says

Beautiful and just achingly sad. For what is essentially a collection of free verse poetry, the entire thing is wonderfully cohesive and really readable. The way Green is able to juggle the articulation of more understandable moments (day to day realities of depression, substance reliance etc.) with the impossible-to-articulate pain of losing a spouse to suicide is nothing short of magnificent. There are individual moments where a certain turn of phrase or couplet hits right in the heart, but the whole work is never crushingly morbid or self-pityingly depressive. It's ultimately very affirming, whilst still being one of the saddest things I've ever read.

TinHouseBooks says

Cheston Knapp (Managing editor): What can I say but the book floored me. For those few who don't know, Green is David Foster Wallace's widow, and though it's not formatted this way, the book is basically a journal of her grieving. The entries are jagged and raw, jump around tonally, from lyricism to a kind of throat-punch bluntness, and they accrete in such an overwhelming way that I found myself having to put the book down from time to time. Green is, first and foremost, a visual artist, and she's intercalated pieces of her art and it's fascinating to watch how the visual and textual gears click together, how they're in conversation and develop. Basically, I felt like as I was reading, the book was carving out a kind of alcove or hypogeum in my mind, where it alone will sit, singular and self-assured and so, so haunting.

Suzanne says

Could not put this down--gorgeous & devastating.

Neil says

Karen Green approaches her loss from so many angles: anger (*Freckled thing, don't fuck with the psych patients*), shame (*I call the doctor: I am suffering, it's embarrassing, and I need I need I need*), guilt (*you left the house*), the distractions (*I cannot keep the love of a dog safe anywhere*), other people (*there is someone with a rescue complex knocking at my door*), and even talking with ghosts.

Her resources to cope are slim: she has the slow healing of time and pills to help her think less.

why didn't he want

The hurt colors all parts of her life. Sometimes it intrudes and other times it kind of messily coexists. Her everyday existence is altered because she survived him but through the wounds she finds therapy in her writing (*Ouch, but look what I found in the dirt.*)

Amy Bernhard says

I'd give this a 3.5 if I could. Some lines just destroyed me: "I don't want him at peace," or "Some of us would rather die than be misunderstood." But other times, the language and imagery was so abstract, I found it difficult to access the emotion like I wanted to. Though admittedly, I prefer a more narrative style.

The mood of the book, though--all the white space, the blank pages--really got to me. I felt spooked. I felt sad. So it's worth a read.

Ellie says

I confess to reading this book because it is written by Karen Green, David Foster Wallace's widow. But the experience become so much more than that. This is a heart-wrenching book of loss vividly recreated with just enough occasional slight humor to make it bearable.

Much of the book consists of small blocks of text surrounded by white margins that seem, both visually and textually, to be cries against-against what? The world, the loss, the love she has for the man who is gone. The anger at him and herself all mixed up with the wish to undo the past.

The text is interspersed with tiny collages with words that are barely legible, if at all. As though words fail in the face of deep loss. And yet are necessary. As art is necessary. And as though none of this is consolation but nevertheless essential, a part of living, even when that life has become almost unbearable.

There is some recovery, in the forward and back way of grief. But not an easy, everything-is-better recovery. There is no great prize drawn from the wreckage, unless it is this work. But even so, there is never any question that the work is no consolation for the loss. It's just all there is. The great jazz lady, Billie Holiday, sings here in fragments and her song is both beautiful and haunting. Just like this book.

Never says

I picked this up not knowing a thing about it. I thought it was a very pretty book design and i liked the art and the few pages i read. I then went on to read the whole thing (in basically one ravenous sitting) and pretty much had my heart torn out. What an amazing book. KG is a fantastic writer. It wasn't until I got home and googled her that I realized the husband in the book was another writer I'd read, a famous one. I'm glad I didn't know that going into it. I love this book.

karen says

anniversary float, for reasons.

i was afraid to read this book. i was afraid it was going to knock something loose in me, emotionally, and that it would be the book to cut the "i-don't-cry-at-books-karen" to her knees.

this is a book written by dfw's widow, after his suicide, and is a collection of free-verse musings about the end of their lives together, and the period following his death, interspersed with her artwork.

and quickly, so as not to dwell or invite sympathy: i have been there. i have found a body. i have spent nineteen years wondering what i could have done differently, how i could have been better, given more, how i could have interpreted the signs better, to have been the kind of person who doesn't have this memory following them.

i bought the book yesterday, and i knew if i didn't read it right away, it would be just one more book in the stacks, sandwiched between cookbooks and frothy YA dystopias and it would stare at me, accusingly, every day, as one more reminder of my failure of character, of my reprehensible fear-stasis, and it would lose all potential impact from having become a just another familiar prop in my house. so i sucked it up, and read it all alone in my house on a rainy friday evening, during the worst of all possible weekends. and it hit me again and again, but it did not make me cry. so there's that.

i was not prepared for the loveliness of it. for how much it would be a better-expressed manifestation of my own voiceless rage, despair, self-recrimination, and nostalgia. theirs was a different relationship than the one i lost, but it's got the same infrastructure, and nearly the same emotional aftermath.

there are so many passages i wanted to type out here, but it almost feels too revealing, too personal, to do so, if that makes any sense. and it's the kind of work that is difficult to excise a portion of to hold up to the light - it works better as a progression, even though it doesn't read chronologically. but there is a raw emotional-logic to its narrative.

and it plays rough. it is like being exposed to all the stages of grieving at once, and while there are glimpses of humor, it seems inappropriate to respond to the humor, pressed up against the wall of so much confusion and despair as it is. every single time she mentioned the dogs, my heart ached.

the news of dfw's death floored me. i remember the phone conversation that broke the news to me. i just whispered "no," and thought "not again," like it was a mistake, or a prank. and i didn't even know the man. a couple of exchanged letters, a single late-night phone conversation, some broken plans; but it still felt like a

betrayal. *infinite jest*, from the first time i read it, was and is one of the most impressive books i have ever read, and i felt that anyone who could have written something like that must surely have been above the kinds of self-doubt and disappointments as the rest of us, with our comparatively shabby intellects.

but obviously not. and this book adds a dimension to the man and his legacy that was lacking in many of the self-serving memorial-speeches and articles that came out after his death. and she sort of addresses this, with such casually-sharp insight. this is a genuine love letter; a true expression of grief and the fucking howling anguish that follows you around like some kind of horrible shadow forever.

but it is never manipulative or pity/attention-seeking. (except that on the copyright page, there is an offer to obtain "a special signed and numbered edition" of the book, which seems inappropriate and a little ghoulish)

but apart from that, it is a jewel of a book, and while i still abhor the act that gave this book life, it does help, in some small way, to understand.

come to my blog!

Shannon says

Amazing, best book I've read in 2015 so far. I didn't want to shell out the almost 40 bucks for this, so I library'd it, but now post-reading realize it is worth buying. Maybe I'll write a better review later but in the meantime you should go obtain this.

Claudia says

Too cryptic for me. There were some strong moments, but I kept feeling as though I just didn't know enough about what was going on to really understand.

And, from a practical point of view, the collages made me crazy, because they were so small. I admit I'm very near-sighted (and getting new glasses soon), but I honestly couldn't make out half the images. They might be brilliant, but I wouldn't know.

Aubrey says

This is the other side of the curtain for me, the mourning rather than the mourned that outnumber me ten to one. Lots of other little things work for those mentally alike myself, but this right here for me is it. The end all argument. The intractable, inexorable, eternal fail safe of I-will-never-put-another-person-through-this. Ever. I can't say that I'd die before doing so, but for any who have existed inside major depressive disorder and/or any other breed of self-annihilating impulse, you know how death pales beside the barbed wire vagary augury of this. Supervivere; Latin; from super of 'in addition' to vivere is to 'live'. You would not believe the ballast that small structure gives.

I found DFW after he was dead, good = avoiding any chance of too true empathetic shock and bad = the fuckery of the career path I'm still patching up because who switches from 3.5 years of Engineering to

English and a waste of time/money/patience/enough that counselors lie to your voice and education begs to institutionalize. Good = I apply my Engineering work ethic to English and wonders never cease, bad = no matter how many phone calls I make or deadlines I achieve or occasions I socialize, this is it till I trust the meds/the docs/the healthcare system with the contents of my skull. Good in that, like Woolf and so many others, Wallace was writing in transit between one point and that much sensationalized next, and it is evidence of such that, next to the person I live for, I trust above all else.

I don't think people sing much at funerals in my country. I don't think there are many dirges, or pieces of mourner's poetry, maybe an organ or a choir or work like this in the bluest of blue moons but grief? What is grief in the USA. I see people thinking Green's capitalizing off her husband's death, I think about women and women of color and people of color writing slave narratives and mysteries to feed and medicate their children, I look at the intersection between capitalism and writing and death. Due to my experiences with reading *Infinite Jest*, I cannot forgo the importance of literature like so many are comfortable able, or forget that what works for me will not be nearly as effective for someone else due to barriers of whiteness, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, gender, class, grief. Grief. To mourn, with ships and gold and human sacrifice, with songs and drugs and poetry, with something that forbade me from quoting any of this because 'out of context' is not for what is to be found here, with a four star rating cause that's how I feel it is. I write enough to escape the boundaries of that line of shapes above, but boundaries are what I need. Freedom's a fall in my line of thought.

You get such a heavy confluence of contextualized word and you wonder about coincidental matters in the vein of fate and hubris. One could say cult, but I hope not. One could say circle, but that's rather unfeeling to my Judgement Day trained sense. One could say I and so many others are here today because of Green and DFW, and that would be true.

Bruce says

Heartbreaking, but in a way that helps us appreciate that grief hurts only because love was there to begin with (and that it continues on).

Ms. Green's talents are many. She laces the book with her own visual art, and her gift for poetic expression is remarkable.

Ms. Green does not speak directly of her late husband David Foster Wallace, but he is implicitly mentioned in many paragraphs and indirectly a part of all of them.

I expect that I will re-read this book many times. It is unique.

Sienna says

(Art-breath, grief-gasp, madness of love and mind. Will tonight be the night that I actually feel capable of reviewing *Bough Down*, a book that I've read three times in the past month? Probably not, but I have to try.)

I wonder whether it bothers Karen Green that her identity is wrapped up in his, that all of the praise, heaping and sincere, follows the careful admission that Green is David Foster Wallace's widow. I imagine devotees of his work looking for traces, clues, fingerprints in Green's own language and collages, finding her own signature, sharp and colorful. I assume or fear or suspect or hope that relationship, each of the connections

between them, informs the hues she selected, the shape of her words as they spilled onto other texts. Writers write not in isolation but in relation to their teachers, their peers, their own lives and loves. While part of me feels self-conscious almost on Green's behalf about the very personal speculation into their marriage and the man she knew as husband, partner and friend, I recognize that she wrote (and chose to publish) on precisely that.

Before I went to work we were under the olive tree and you were doing what you called psych patient smoking and you said, I don't want to be Satan but will you join me and we pulled up our shirts to rub bellies and yours was so much flattered but filled with garden bread anyway anyway up went our shirts, solar to solar plexus, and it was a comforting ritual we daily did and I said, Let's do this for the rest of our lives. You said, You look lovely.

It's hard to remember tender things tenderly.

Anyway, *Bough Down*: a kind of obeisance, a splintering loss of limb. The knowledge that life must go on, somehow. A sign of respect. We write on vegetable pulp now, of course, and Green's book makes of it a palimpsest, all messy handwritten ink transparent upon cut-out serif messages that may be the author's own, or repurposed meaning from another's words in a personal dictionary, because though she resurrects love with these leaves, others robbed her of it. Behind that, texture concealing snapshots in verbal and collage form. Green shows us both human and animal grief and fleeting contact with others unsure how to handle the situation alongside her tempestuous collection of emotions. The dogs, the friends, the doctor, the mirrors.

The doppelgänger can knot a cherry stem with her tongue and brew perfect tea at the same time. I like her potty mouth, the paint under her nails and the way her red dress elevates ordinary kitchen duties. She is qualmless. Her mind is a wilderness park and she sells tickets to it. I admire her quick-wittedness at a time like this and her ability to take up space. I would like to give her the facts, just to see her hat and its rabbit. I know she's out there.

There are bits of before and after, inside and out — I mean the house, the doctor's office, other places that lack adequate names, the tree in the yard that became something else.

I worry I broke your kneecaps when I cut you down. I keep hearing that sound. We fly from the world, right, like shrapnel angels, but why is everything so laden around here?

She watches her doppelgänger respond with a skill and competence to which she cannot relate, recognizes and embraces a tendency towards self-destruction her capable twin couldn't begin to understand, but oh, she'll try. She'll give herself up to trying.

Spring or summer, and even my flirting is life or death. Someone smart knocks at my door and my brain catches on fire. Suddenly I remember my ways. I say all the wrong sentences and I say them on purpose. Some people would rather die than be understood. Not me. My chess pieces are transparent. I move them around with a ropery, spotted hand. The other hand makes a mess of things under the table.

I found this book harrowing, dream-like, painful in a way that abolishes metaphor. I found it unbearably sad and true. I found that I wanted to press it upon everyone, saying, "Here, this is one woman's experience. It is so far from mine, from yours, and yet I see all of us in these pages. I fear us and fear for us and love us all the more for knowing that I'm not alone. You are not alone." And I found that words were not enough, memories were not enough, hopes and fears were not enough. But community, communion, just might be.

There is a church bell in town made out of the mortared skulls of everyone who ever had a migraine. At night I know where the sound comes from, how it was born and where in the body it reverberates. Every hour on the hour it tells me what I did and do wrong. You did not see that cloud or that fluttering lid as portents, you did not decipher the acrostics, you left the house, you live in the past, you left the house.

Stephanie Kelley says

nothing I could type here would ever do justice to this work and what it felt like to read it

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

"Untied, Undone: *Bough Down* by Karen Green" review by Maggie Nelson at LA Review of Books: <http://lareviewofbooks.org/article.ph...>

"KAREN GREEN'S NEW — and incredibly, her first — book *Bough Down*, from Siglio Press, is an astonishment. It is one of the most moving, strange, original, harrowing, and beautiful documents of grief and reckoning I've read. The book consists of a series of prose poems, or individuated chunks of poetic prose, interspersed with postage-stamp-sized collages made by Green, who is also a visual artist. Collectively the text bears witness to the 2008 suicide of her husband, the writer David Foster Wallace, and its harrowing aftermath for Green. The book feels like an instant classic, but without any of the aggrandizement that can attend such a thing. Instead it is suffused throughout with the dissonant, private richness of the minor, while also managing to be a major achievement."

David Schaafsma says

This is pretty amazing. It's a sort of grief memoir by the wife of David Foster Wallace, an attempt to explore several aspects of her grief. She's an artist and writer, though this is her first book. She alternates postage stamp-sized collages with what seems to be prose poems, or free verse. I'll call it poetry. It's elliptical writing; she's not writing for us as much as for herself, sometimes angry, sad, mystified, all the things you'd expect, but not in any sort of analytical or any other kind of order.

Green's writing never names Wallace, but is often directed to him. I wondered if I would be at a disadvantage since I had not read any of Wallace's works yet, but he is in some sense (at least as writer) somehow beside the point. She doesn't talk about him as a writer. He was her lover.

This is a soul writing and art-making, and it is passionate and strange and sometimes distancing and

sometimes intimate. It is never warm and inviting and clear about what is going on. It is a series of fragments, which matches her failure to make sense of this act. It is not about getting over grief, or conquering it. It is about living it and trying to make sense of it. It is an amazing book, rich with language and observation.
