

GIFTS FROM CATHERINE



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Declaration

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This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Author's Note

The memoir in this body of work has developed from five personal essays on grief submitted for a Master of Fine Arts in Writing at the University of San Francisco in 2002. Two conversations between my daughter and myself have been reproduced verbatim, one on pages 40 & 41 and the other on pages 81 & 82, as well as two of Catherine's notes on pages 45 & 46.

My intention in writing *Gifts from Catherine* has been to honour my daughter's life and tell my story. Although my memoir is a work of non-fiction, based on real events, it is a story recreated from memory and written from *my* perspective only. I have taken every precaution, including using many fictional techniques, to ensure confidentiality of the characters. I have changed all names – except for my mother, my daughter and myself – altered locations, condensed time, embellished characters and on two occasions I have combined the characteristics of several people into one to further protect their identity.

Acknowledgements

It is impossible to thank adequately all the friends, family and colleagues who have supported me in the writing of my memoir and my exegesis. Their availability during my candidature has made it possible for this project to reach fruition. However, some people deserve particular thanks.

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Finally, I wish to acknowledge the two most significant people in my life. My mother Jean Cleave, my greatest fan, died before I finished writing *Gifts from Catherine*. Mum, I miss your eyes lighting up when I walk into the room and your unwavering confidence in me. When I asked you to stay around for the launch of my book you promised, "I wouldn't miss it for the world!" And I know you'll be there, looking on and cheering. My last thank you goes to my daughter, Catherine Jean Cleave, who has made me the person I am today.

"We did it sweetheart. We did it!"

Abstract

The major work of the Ph.D. (Creative Writing) is a memoir dealing with the first year following my daughter's death. Catherine was just eighteen years old in 1998 when she travelled to Melbourne and met a boy. They began living together and five weeks later she was dead from a heroin overdose. I felt as if I had lost everything: my only child and the future I had imagined, my identity as a mother and many core beliefs such as *big tragedies only happen to other people and parents shouldn't outlive their children*.

After a year and a half of intense grieving and weeping onto the page, I decided to write *Gifts from Catherine* in part as a way to come to terms with my daughter's death. I wanted to understand why she died, how it could have happened and why I didn't suspect she was at risk. My story represents a journey, both metaphorical and actual. After identifying my daughter's body in Melbourne, I travelled to India, to Amsterdam and to London before finally returning to Melbourne to meet the boy who I believed was responsible for her death.

When I began writing *Gifts from Catherine* I thought I would be simply recording what had happened. I soon realised my task was much more complex than that. I had to relive my guilt and experience fierce anger time and again until I was able to move beyond writing 'therapy on the page'. I also had to address difficult ethical questions. How reliable was my memory? Did I have the right to speak for my daughter? Or others? Were there some things better left unsaid? The question that troubled me most concerned

the relationship of my memoir to what I understood as the ‘truth’. These concerns are expressed throughout the major work.

The topic of my exegesis, entitled *The Ethics of Life Writing*, grew out of the questions I explored in the process of writing *Gifts from Catherine*. In my exegetical essay I addressed three main questions: What does it mean to write the ‘truth’? What must I consider when writing about others? Should I reveal information that is regarded as secret or private? Although I discovered few answers, the act of exploring the ethics surrounding these three main questions created the framework for me to ultimately complete my memoir.

Note: I have used American spelling and punctuation in this memoir for the purpose of possible publication in the United States. A selected list of works consulted is included with the critical essay that accompanies this thesis.