

The mourning after

Dealing with his wife's death and his own guilt

SAY HER NAME, by Francisco Goldman. Grove, 350 pp., \$24.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

So many dead people. So much grief. So many books about it. Critics have asked if Joan Didion might have said all that was necessary on the topic in "The Year of Magical Thinking"; readers can be forgiven for wondering if they can stand to read one more word.

The answers are, no, she didn't; and yes, you can. "Say Her Name" brings something new to the rime of the grieving survivor: fresh supplies of imagination, ruthlessness and over-the-edge crazy love. Believe me, you haven't been harrowed like this in a while.

The brilliant novelist and investigative journalist Francisco Goldman ("The Divine Husband," "The Art of Political Murder") met 25-year-old Aura Estrada, a Mexican graduate student and aspiring writer, at a reading at Columbia University in 2003. The morning after their first night together, he came out of the bathroom to find her looking at his driver's license. Forty-seven! she exclaimed.

Middle-aged he may have been, but he soon was besotted in a way he never knew possible. "It was all new for me, this degree of intimacy and trust and its requirements:

an expansion of attention and a concurrent narrowing of focus to be able to take in everything, past and present, inside the radius of Aura's life that I could." The intensity, tenderness and heat of this love is extraordinary; how many of us have ever been loved so well? Or would recognize such love, were it not laid out with such intelligence and precision?

Shortly, the lovers are engaged. Aura loses sleep fretting that she's condemned herself to an early, miserable widowhood. Frank assures her she can stick him in a nursing home when he's 75 and start a second life. Soon, they are just too happy to worry about it. When Aura calls him to ride an hour back and forth on the subway to have lunch with her, he always goes, helpless against her sweet fiat. "Francisco," she chides, "I didn't get married to eat lunch by myself."

Then, two years later, Aura breaks her neck bodysurfing on vacation in Mexico. She lives a day, then slips into a coma and dies. As she tells her mother with one of her last

EXCERPT
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selection
from "Say
Her Name"



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Aura Estrada and Francisco Goldman on their wedding day in 2005

breaths, "Fue una tontería." It was a stupid thing.

This part of the book was published in The New Yorker magazine as Personal History — which means fact. Of the unembroidered, verifiable kind. But to this foundation of fact, "Say Her Name" adds layers that require the freedom of fiction. Chapters imagine Aura's childhood, her years at the university, her entwined relationship with her mother, Juanita, her one encounter with her estranged father. These are journeys a memoirist cannot take. This imagined past is interwoven with charming stories of the marriage and brutal narratives of mourning. Goldman's grief takes him into the beds of her friends, leads to drunken head injuries, provokes behavior that is, by turns, pitiable, ugly and disastrous. Meanwhile, Juanita's bereaved frenzy causes her to sever relations with Goldman, seeing him not as the love of Aura's life but as her murderer.

Goldman is obsessed with his degree of culpability, with the idea that he is, metaphorically, the wave that killed her. Recalling the terror he used to feel on subway platforms, he writes of "how

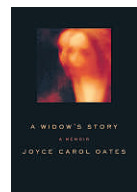
vulnerable she was — so caught up in her own excitement, not paying attention, so physically slight — to a shove from behind by some fiendish lunatic off his medication, into the path of an oncoming train. This recurring fear of a crazed subway pusher was sometimes so strong that I would almost feel the urge to push her off the platform myself, as if the fiendish lunatic was me and I needed to get the inevitable over with, or as if I just couldn't endure so much love and happiness one more second, and simultaneously, in a silent burst of panic, I'd pull her to safety . . . rescuing her from phantom fiends but also from myself."

I urge readers just discovering Goldman to go back to his 1992 novel, "The Long Night of White Chickens." Though the half-Guatemalan, half-American protagonist of that book seemed very close to the author, the plot was not autobiographical . . . yet. The beloved woman at the center of the story is dead when the book begins. That this was Goldman's subject even then increases the beauty and mystery of both works.

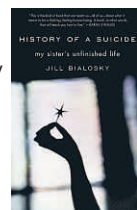
Remembering their loved ones

Grief is the subject of several recent memoirs:

A WIDOW'S STORY, by Joyce Carol Oates (Ecco). The prolific author is undone when her husband of 46 years dies suddenly of an infection.



HISTORY OF A SUICIDE, by Jill Bialosky (Atria). A poet and editor revisits her sister's suicide at 21.



THE LONG GOODBYE, by Meghan O'Rourke (Riverhead). Based on a series of columns the author wrote on Slate.com after her 55-year-old mother's death from cancer.

