

Cease

by Lynette Loepky
OOLICHAN BOOKS
\$22.95/340 PP.



Cease. What an apt title. This memoir cries for cessation of pain, waiting, doubt. Author Lynette Loepky has combined stylistic excellence with raw honesty to create a gripping read.

Lyn has, in her own mind, put her eight-year relationship with Cecile Kaysoe (Cec—Cease) on a one-year trial. They both hold down well-paying professional jobs in Calgary while living on and operating a hobby farm south of the city. Lyn feels insecure and heartsick with Cec's remoteness, persistent criticism, withdrawal from sex. But because Cec lost her mother nine months ago, Lyn decides it would only be fair to cut her partner some slack.

With three and a half months to go in the trial year, and the relationship limping along, Cec experiences abdominal pain that proves to be a symptom of ovarian cancer. It's a little more than three weeks from the time Cec is admitted to hospital until the time she dies.

In the course of telling an intimately personal story, Loepky raises serious questions about the healthcare system. From the beginning of her hospitalization, during which she undergoes surgery and suffers from numerous complications, Cec suffers intense pain that the medical people can't get under control. Why? Some nurses are scrupulously attentive while others are downright negligent. Loepky must endure the psychological pain of watching someone so close to her endure agony, and neither of them can get much information. Why? Doctor after doctor shies away from mentioning death or dying; only when the word "palliative" slips out of a physician's mouth do the two women know the prognosis for sure. Why, why, why?

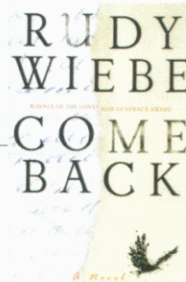
Cease captures particularly well the perception of endless time for a caregiver on a deathwatch. Loepky makes no bones about her ambivalence. Sometimes she feels resentful. Sometimes she kicks herself for not having left before Cec's health broke down. At no point does the author represent herself as a selfless soul or a holy martyr. And perhaps because of her unerring honesty, she earns respect from the reader for taking on, committing to and carrying out the caregiver role right to the end. What decency.

The subject of love comes up frequently. "I loved you big, but not good," Cec says a few days before her death. But in the couple's last days together, Cec softens considerably. "The surprise for me," Loepky writes, "was her comfort with her own vulnerability, and her trust. I was experiencing the potential I had always sensed existed, in her and between us—her capacity for gentleness, kindness, surrender."

—Rona Altrows is an editor and fiction writer in Calgary.

Come Back

by Rudy Wiebe
KNOFF CANADA
\$26.95/268 PP.



Rudy Wiebe's new novel, *Come Back*, succeeds in doing a rare thing—articulating grief in its full weight and depth while also buoying it with love. Hal, the 75-year-old protagonist, a retired literature professor, is mourning his beloved wife Yolanda and spends his days drinking coffee at the Double Cup on Edmonton's Whyte Avenue. But another grief is at the centre: Hal's son Gabriel (Gabe) killed himself 25 years ago, at 24. During a late-April Edmonton snowstorm, through the glass of Double Cup, Hal sees Gabe, unmistakable in his orange parka.

Hal runs after him, out into the intersection, causing drivers to curse him and rear-end each other. From here begins memory of that "*barranca*... violent chasm torn through the eroded mountains of his life." Hal makes it home that afternoon and lies on the kitchen floor awhile, recalling the day of Gabriel's death. In the basement are boxes of Gabe's things, things organized and labelled by Yolanda, and so to the basement Hal goes, knowing that there he will "find the hardest earthly stuff, more than enough." It is enough to fill "what he locked down so carefully, every day, every minute."

The work of Rudy Wiebe, which has earned the author two Governor General's Awards, is well-known to many Canadians. The character of Hal appeared as a young boy in Wiebe's first novel, 1962's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. With *Come Back*, Wiebe echoes his own work and life—he too lost his son.

From here the novel proceeds with a near-hypnotic quality of story-within-a-story—Gabe's voice leaps into the narrative through his diaries and notebooks, bringing with it his infatuation with Ailsa, a sweet 13-year-old; bringing also Gabe's contemplations as he travels from Frankfurt to Italy to Greece and questions his existence while in the National Gardens of Athens. In the present, Hal avoids his usual coffee shop and grapples with the mystery of Gabriel, his life and death.

Gabe, in his notes, struggles with identity, with how to be a person in the world. Many of his entries are heartbreaking in their paralysis and yearning and loneliness. But what's striking is that the novel shows love and goodness as the frame of all the houses it has built: inside Gabriel is also "this childhood, discovery, happiness, family, laughter; this being held safe."

Wiebe's writing has been called formally difficult, but in this case, remarkably, the third-person narrative voice is so closely aligned with Hal's, and so attentive to the gaps and continuities, that the whole just glides. It feels, in fact, like a song, a hymn even, lyrical, gripping and heartbreaking—the kind of song that stops you on the spot and reaches into the chasm.

—Jasmina Odor teaches at Corcordia University College. ■