

# A LIFE IN MEN

Life Imitates Art: Notes on (Not) Writing the Dead

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Questions for Discussion





# Life Imitates Art: Notes on (Not) Writing the Dead

BY GINA FRANGELLO

A year ago, my lifelong friend and surrogate sister, Kathy, was found dead in her apartment by her fiancé. She had metastatic ovarian cancer, and we knew that her chances of ever reaching old age were slim. At the time of her death, however, she was almost finished with her first round of chemo and was on the verge of remission, which could have bought her healthy, symptom-free years. Then, while getting ready for work, she threw a blood clot—a side effect of cancer, which is a thrombotic disease—and died, hopefully instantly. We'd been friends since we were sixteen—since she cornered me in a bathroom at school and confessed her passionate, unrequited love for the guy who sat behind me in Physics. In the nearly thirty years that followed, I had remained her confidante—a kind of emotional big sister, although to describe it that way would be reductive. We were also partners in crime, sneaking flasks of Jameson into booze-free events, or wearing our leather pants to children's birthday parties. She was also the first “nanny” my twin daughters ever had, and ten years later, the loss of her hit my three children almost as hard as it did me. She had visited me in every country I'd ever lived in, including several that appear in my new novel, *A Life in Men*. After her death, there was not a bar, a restaurant, a bookstore, a vintage clothing shop, a nail salon, or even a European city I seemed able to

enter without her ghost accompanying me. We had been *everywhere* together. We had lived a sprawling, messy, intertwined life, and now I was set with the task of navigating this ghost town alone.

Kathy was not the inspiration for the character Mary. The novel sold, in fact, just weeks before her shocking cancer diagnosis. Prior to that she had no symptoms of illness, and I had never known her to be sick. In fact, *I* was the one always being hospitalized for one thing or another, and before she met her fiancé, she often joked that she would marry my husband when I kicked the bucket.

Tragedy is hard—maybe impossible—to define. Kathy was forty-three at the time of her death. She had traveled the world, had many friends, had worked and lived independently for years, and was madly in love. Surely her death was premature, and devastating to those who loved her. To call it “tragic” might be a stretch in light of so many who, like Mary in *A Life in Men*, live daily with the reality of terminal illnesses, or who, like Mary’s best friend, Nix, meet chilling fates born of human violence. Still, like Mary and Nix in the novel, I have found myself quite literally haunted by the absent presence of my friend, speaking aloud to Kathy on empty streets late at night, trying to figure out what it means to be, as Faulkner wrote, “one of those who is doomed to live,” with all the privileges and burdens it entails to carry the dead with us, to live for ourselves as well as them.

When I was twenty years old, I arrived in London for a semester abroad only weeks after the Lockerbie disaster of 1988. Many of my new friends in London had lost friends in the plane explosion, but it had not touched me directly. I did, however, find myself living that semester with a beautiful, whip-smart, fearless woman named Sarah who read Updike and worshipped the band Miracle Legion. We traveled together; we picked up guys together; we swapped our sometimes-boyfriends’ ripped jeans. Sarah had cystic fibrosis. The man she fell in love with in London, in fact, called her “Cystic” as a pet name, which I found so irreverently tender that it may be the only direct detail about Sarah to have survived in the pages of my novel. After our semester ended, we didn’t keep in close touch, but some five years later I saw

her again in Boston. Her health had deteriorated, but she had continued to travel, as had I. Five years after that reunion, Sarah died, at age thirty, while living in Jordan among the Bedouin people. She had been pursuing a degree in cultural anthropology. Considering that I had seen Sarah only once in the past decade, her death hit me perhaps bizarrely hard. I am a hard sell about admiring people, but I had admired the hell out of her. She was, in the least cheesy possible application of the word, *inspirational*. She lived large and hard, often against the counsel of doctors and friends. She never let her illness define or confine her. She also loved as hard and recklessly as she had lived. In a fit of nostalgia and sadness, I wrote to Sarah's mother, whom I did not even know, and asked if I might write her biography. I never heard back from her, which does not, in retrospect, surprise me. Likely this grieving woman had never even heard of me. Sarah's story was not mine to tell.

It would be ten years before I would begin *A Life in Men*—a fictional novel centered around a woman traveler with cystic fibrosis. I purposely gave Mary an unusual genetic mutation of the disease, because I did not want this to be a novel about CF, a condition I don't personally have, so much as about what it is to struggle to live on a large canvas despite physical—and psychological—limitations. The countries Mary travels to are not based on Sarah's life but my own; in all cases except for Gander, Newfoundland, the book became autobiographical when it comes to geography, and in other, more unexpected, ways, too. I wrote the novel to honor Sarah's memory, but in many senses the more I wrote, the more anything based on her receded from its pages. By the time it sold to Algonquin, it had become the most deeply personal work of fiction I've ever written.

It would be fair to say then that losing my own best high school girlfriend five months after selling the book was one of those instances of *Life Imitating Art*—in this case, in a most unwelcome way. In the months leading up to the novel's publication, I have found myself walking in Mary's shoes, trying to relearn life without Kathy much as Mary has to without Nix. Who are we without the audience,

company, and conspiracy of our closest friends? What do we want to do with the time we have left, however long that may be? What do those who are gone continue to teach us?

*A Life in Men* was inspired by one courageous woman, whose life was ultimately very separate from my own. And yet ironically, after my own childhood friend's death, the book became *my* inspiration and template for how to go on from there, as I found myself living its pages in ways I had never expected. As I had once learned things about bravery from Sarah, so my own novel has strangely instructed me in the ways of grief and memory as I mourn Kathy. The book is dedicated to two very different women, both of whom taught me difficult, sometimes frightening, and ultimately freeing things about how to live.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Mary longs at one point for Geoff to forgive her for being “weak and selfish when the ill were supposed to be strong and heroic” (page 310). Where do our notions of the terminally ill as noble, pure, and heroic come from? Which popular films and novels support these ideas? Why might it be comforting to the survivors to think of the dying as somehow “stronger”?
2. Although Nix’s death takes place between the first and second chapter of the novel, the reader does not learn the specifics of how she died until late in the third chapter, when Mary reveals the details of Nix’s death on Pan Am Flight 103 to Kathleen, a virtual stranger (page 102). Why is Mary able to speak openly about Nix for the first time to a woman she barely knows when she has withheld these details from the men close to her, like Joshua and Yank? What impact did it have on you to learn of Nix’s death this way? Did it prompt you to think differently about Mary’s behavior in London? Why do you think the author chose to withhold this information from the reader until Mary was ready to talk about it?
3. The body plays an intense role in this novel. In particular, the gritty realities of a life-shortening lung condition are juxtaposed against the strong and burgeoning sexuality of a young, attractive woman. Reflect on some of the struggles Mary endures to identify

as a sexual being despite her condition. What does sex represent to Mary? Is our society's construction of young women's sexuality compatible with Mary's life experiences?

4. Mary and Nix both strongly react against their mothers' lives, wanting something different and "larger" for themselves. Yet Mary ends up understanding her adoptive mother better as she faces infertility, and Nix ends up—like her mother—choosing to keep an unplanned pregnancy that might limit her opportunities. How do you think we begin to see our parents' choices differently as we age and face similar challenges? Although neither Mary's nor Nix's mother makes a concrete appearance on the page, did you as the reader think these women were likely as "simple" as their brash, college-age daughters made them out to be? What might your own mother's story "look like" in a novel versus the way you thought of it when you were younger?

5. At the beginning of the novel, Mary and Nix assume that Nix will long outlive Mary, and Nix's untimely death serves as a catalyst for Mary to begin a more adventurous life. How does the tragedy of Nix's death ultimately serve to make Mary live more fully? How conscious do you think most of us are in our daily lives that life is precarious, not only for those who are ill, but for everyone? What does it mean to live each day as though it may be your last? If you were suddenly to find out that your life expectancy was much shorter than the norm, would you make any changes? What would they be?

6. Discuss the role of "survivor's guilt" in the novel. First, Nix's feelings of guilt regarding Mary's illness (and her behavior with Mary's first boyfriend, Bobby Kenner) prompt her to make a sacrifice that is much greater than she could have understood going in. Later, Mary struggles with the guilt of being the one still living when she was supposed to be the one to die young. Still later, Mary's guilt is complicated further as she begins to realize the truth of what Nix did for her in Greece. Why are we so often haunted by guilt over things we cannot control?

7. *A Life in Men* is written in a style that permits readers to uncover certain mysteries at their own pace. At what point in the novel did you

realize that Nix was dead? That she had been raped in Greece? How do the various stages at which the different characters learn things add to your cumulative understanding of events?

8. *A Life in Men* tells us that there is never only one truth, but rather, “there is only one truth at a time” (page 339). How does that play out in the story? How does that play out in real life?

9. The author shows you Mary’s life from several angles by getting into the minds of numerous characters, including Geoff, Kenneth, Daniel, Eli, and Leo. What are some of the insights you gained from those points of view that you might have missed out on if the novel had relayed only Mary’s perspective? The story ends not with Mary’s death but with Hasnain—a character the reader has never met before—as he revisits his relationship with Nix after his flight is grounded in Gander on 9/11 (page 376). How does this final installment of Mary and Nix’s story add to your understanding of the whole? What is revealed, and how does it change things? Whose novel, ultimately, is this?

10. The characters in *A Life in Men* are not “religious,” and yet spiritual identity plays a key role in several characters’ journeys. Mary is surprised to learn, as an adult, that she is of Jewish descent; Hasnain struggles with his identity as a Muslim man in a world torn by stereotypes and violence; Nix seeks to find peace through yoga and Buddhism. In a contemporary, global world, how does our access to the smorgasbord of world religions impact us? What do you think the novel’s overall sensibility is in terms of the role religion plays in human connection and fragmentation?

11. Very close to her death, Mary refers to Geoff as the “man of my life” (page 339). And yet in many ways, she appears to be more intimate with Kenneth, with whom she feels an unsurpassed “recognition” and kinship, and whose acceptance she sees as unconditional and unflinching. What characterizes Mary’s relationships with these two very different men? What are the differences and overlaps of romantic love, sexual attraction, and friendship she feels with each? Do you think Mary’s relationship with Kenneth

is “immoral”? Is their bond a betrayal of Geoff? Is it possible to love two people at the same time? Does Mary’s illness have an impact on what she is “entitled” to in this regard?

12. What did you think of the appearance of the character Rebecca at the end of the novel? Does it matter, in the end, whether this is the same Rebecca that Daniel has mentioned as Mary’s biological mother or is simply another woman by the same name who has given up a child?

13. *A Life in Men* is full of six-degrees-of-separation “coincidences,” such as Geoff’s walking into Mary’s hospital room in Cincinnati and Mary and Leo’s encountering Sandor at the gallery party mere weeks after he has seen Yank playing saxophone. The author sets up these coincidences—Geoff is, after all, a doctor, and Leo and Sandor are both artists, living in the country where Sandor was born—but even so, are such coincidences believable? Have you ever had an implausible coincidence in your own life that led to other important developments?

14. The author writes, in the essay that follows the novel, that she initially wanted to write a biography of her college roommate who had cystic fibrosis but that the story was not hers to tell. She goes on to speak of the ways *A Life in Men* became instead infused with her own travel experiences, and then—when her high school girlfriend met an untimely death—became a template for teaching herself about grief. Talk about the differences between fiction and nonfiction in terms of accessing “emotional truths.” What freedoms do our imaginations grant us, and how might they work to dig deeper than “facts”?

BLAIR HOLMES



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