

In a Dark Wood: A Memoir

Harper Perennial

By Joseph Luzzi

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Introduction

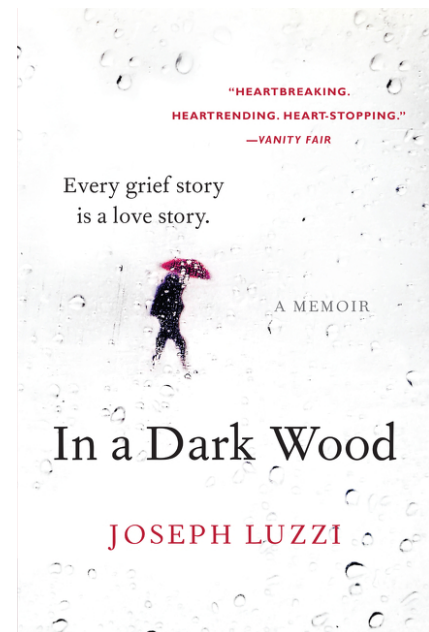
On a cold November morning, Joseph Luzzi found himself racing to the hospital—his wife, Katherine, eight-and-a-half months pregnant, had been in a horrible car accident. In one terrible instant, Luzzi found himself both a widower and a first-time father.

In this candid memoir Luzzi writes about the days and months that followed this life-changing moment. The product of a big-hearted, Italian immigrant family, he had distanced himself from his working class roots as he embraced a cultured career in academia. Yet in the painful aftermath of Katherine's death, Luzzi feels compelled to return to his hometown and entrust the care of Isabel to his mother Yolanda, finding his family's traditional ways now serve as a ballast for him and his daughter.

Beautifully written, poignant, insightful, and flawlessly balanced, *In a Dark Wood* is a hybrid of heartrending memoir and a meditation on the power of great art to give us strength in our darkest moments. Drawing us into man's descent into hell and back, it is Dante's journey, Joseph Luzzi's, and our very own.

Questions for Discussion

1. The book begins with the powerful statement, "Every grief story is a love story." What might this mean?
2. What was your understanding of grief—how it functions, how it should be confronted—before reading *In a Dark Wood*?
3. What are some of the key elements in Dante's life and themes in *The Divine Comedy* that provide such relevant help to Luzzi after Katherine's death?
4. What are the challenges of Dante's exile and Luzzi's "profound sense of displacement"? How, as Luzzi eventually realizes, might such a state also be transformative?



5. Dante's Francesca makes the powerful claim that, "There is no greater pain, than to remember happy times in misery." What does she mean? Do you agree? Can pleasant memories serve us well during difficult times?
6. Central to both Dante's struggle and Luzzi's is the question of how love might or should exist for a person no longer physically present. What are the potential values and dangers of loving from afar or in absentia?
7. The *Dolce Stil Novo* or Sweet New Style poetic movement saw love as a "lacerating illness that elevated the soul but destroyed the body." How did this idea influence Dante? In what ways might it be helpful or harmful?
8. As much as Luzzi needed support from friends and family, he also speaks of a desperate need for solitude when wrestling with his grief. In what ways might solitude be helpful? When might it become unhealthy?
9. Luzzi refers critically to various kinds of "magical thinking" that can result from profound grief or pain. What does he mean? How can we tell whether such thinking is fueled by unhealthy denial or something better like imaginative hope?
10. Consider the very important Yolanda Luzzi, Joseph's mother. How does her traditional, effortful life help balance her son's in the wake of Katherine's death? What's most admirable about her?
11. In a key, transformative moment, Luzzi feels his daughter's breath on his shoulder and realizes it—more than any physical place—is "home." What does this suggest about the nature of home? What are its essential elements?
12. Luzzi offers the subtle, complex insight that "grief is electric," that it "heightens your sensations and feelings" in a seductive but troublesome way. What does he mean? What is potentially unhealthy about such sensitivity?
13. In what various ways is tennis, both literally and as analogy, important to Luzzi?
14. Luzzi's successful academic work, "the closest [he] would come to true prayer," eventually becomes limiting for him. What changes? What does he come to need or want that such reading and writing doesn't provide? How might one balance "long study and great love"?

15. Thinking of Aeneas, Dante, and even Luzzi's father, what is the role and importance of a guide during difficulty or even throughout life? What various forms can this take? Who were important guides in your life?
16. Luzzi claims that he grew up with "a magnificent father figure—but no real dad." What might he mean? What are the essential qualities of both?
17. What's important and also difficult about accepting "the greatest gift of all," free will?
18. The experience of seeing Eddie Knight, the driver who struck Katherine, turns Luzzi from hatred and blame to a more compassionate understanding. How did this occur?
19. In the blossoming of his *vita nuova* with Isabel and Helena, Luzzi begins to embrace "all the chaos and energy that comes from true love." What does this mean? How does such an understanding of the force of love help?
20. What does it mean to live a life of meaning?