

Marrow: Love, Loss, and What Matters Most

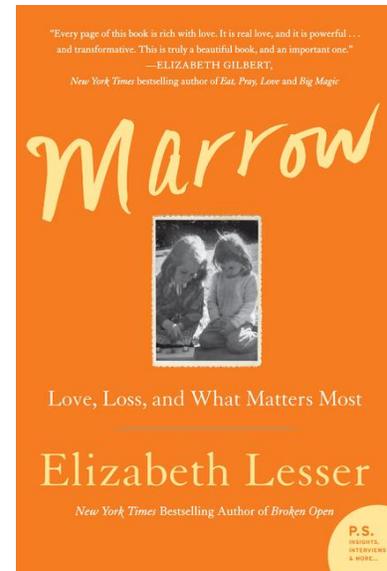
Harper Wave

By Elizabeth Lesser

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Introduction

The author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Broken Open* returns with a visceral and profound memoir of two sisters who, in the face of a bone marrow transplant—one the donor and one the recipient—begin a quest for acceptance, authenticity, and most of all, love.



A mesmerizing and courageous memoir: the story of two sisters uncovering the depth of their love through the life-and-death experience of a bone marrow transplant.

Throughout her life, Elizabeth Lesser has sought understanding about what it means to be true to oneself and, at the same time, truly connected to the ones we love. But when her sister Maggie needs a bone marrow transplant to save her life, and Lesser learns that she is the perfect match, she faces a far more immediate and complex question about what it really means to love—honestly, generously, and authentically.

Hoping to give Maggie the best chance possible for a successful transplant, the sisters dig deep into the marrow of their relationship to clear a path to unconditional acceptance. They leave the bone marrow transplant up to the doctors, but take on what Lesser calls a "soul marrow transplant," examining their family history, having difficult conversations, examining old assumptions, and offering forgiveness until all that is left is love for each other's true selves. Their process—before, during, and after the transplant—encourages them to take risks of authenticity in other aspects their lives.

But life does not follow the storylines we plan for it. Maggie's body is ultimately too weak to fight the relentless illness. As she and Lesser prepare for the inevitable, they grow ever closer as their shared blood cells become a symbol of the enduring bond they share. Told with suspense and humor, *Marrow* is joyous and heartbreaking, incandescent and profound. The story reveals how even our most difficult experiences can offer unexpected spiritual growth. Reflecting on the multifaceted nature of love—love of other, love of self, love of the world—*Marrow* is an unflinching and beautiful memoir about getting to the very center of ourselves.

Questions for Discussion

1. Lesser explains a wish to write about authenticity, “a truer self, an essential self, a core, a soul...a fullness of being.” How do you define authenticity? Why is it important to Lesser? What is the role of authenticity in communication and connection? Why might something so important be so elusive?
2. KaLiMaJo, the four Lesser sisters, each took on archetypal roles in the family. How and why does this happen with siblings? What is potentially valuable or limiting about the roles we assume during childhood? What role do you have in your own family? How would your parents or siblings describe you? Do their descriptions line up with how you see yourself now?
3. What was Maggie like as a girl? How was she different from her sisters? How did she change over the course of the book? Think about the arc of your own life: for better or worse, what have you kept of your childhood identity?
4. Lesser explains that “conditions of worth” when growing up can be a healthy form of encouragement but can also “squench the uniqueness right out of a kid.” How did this apply to her and her sisters? What were conditions of worth in your family? If you are raising a family now, how might you instill a value system in your children that leaves room for uniqueness, personality quirks, and self-expression?
5. As she begins to reconnect with Maggie, Lesser is reminded “how little we know about the deepest heart of those closest to us.” Think of your own primary relationships: What obstacles do you think prevent us from truly knowing one another?
6. Lesser shares the Greek myth of Elpis—hope—who stayed behind when all other gods and spirits escaped from Pandora’s jar. Why do you think she shares this story? What is the role of hope in everyday life? What role does it play for Maggie during her illness? In what way might hope be problematic?
7. Lesser presents the body’s interaction with donor cells as a metaphor for the way humans “interpret difference as danger and, in covert or obvious ways...reject or attack otherness.” Why is this so? Why does Lesser believe such instincts must be overcome? How is this possible?
8. When considering supportive therapy with Maggie, Lesser acknowledges that “being brave one-on-one with another person...takes the most courage.” What are the potential rewards for being courageous in this way? What are the challenges to such focused intimacy?
9. Consider the insight offered by one of Lesser’s heroes, Gerda Lerner, who says that women have a particular challenge to overcome culturally generated “deep-seated resistance” to accepting themselves and their knowledge. What are some of the

sources of these cultural limitations? How do they manifest in Lesser and Maggie? How do they confront and change them? What cultural limitations do you see in your own life and how do they impact you?

10. Quoting Adrienne Rich, Lesser observes: “An honorable human relationship...is...a process of refining the truths...[and] it is important because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us.” What does Rich mean by “refining the truths”? What else is necessary for an “honorable human relationship”? Why is something so important seemingly so rare?

11. What do Maggie’s field notes add to your understanding of her experience? How might her completed version of the story have been different from Lesser’s?

12. Lesser spends a great deal of time and energy trying to deeply understand the relationship between herself and the stem cells taken from her for Maggie. What is the relationship between the mind and the body? What are the limitations and possibilities of healing the body with the mind? What is value do you see in the physical and psychological melding that results in Maggie-Liz?

13. At the center of Lesser and Maggie’s journey is Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of “amor fati.” What is “amor fati”? Why is it so important to Lesser? What role does it play in both of their lives during Maggie’s illness?

14. What is valuable about mindfulness and meditation? How might one begin to incorporate these qualities and behaviors into daily living? If you already have a mindfulness practice, what impact do you feel it has in your life?

15. Of all the sisters, Lesser seems “the logical choice as a guide through illness.” What qualities and abilities make her such a good guide? What are some ways she must change to fulfill the role well? If someone is sick or suffering in your life, how might you be a source of comfort for them?

16. What important role does Maggie’s art play in her experience with illness? What role might art play in healthy living?

17. After her long battle with cancer, Maggie elects to exercise Vermont’s death with dignity law. How do you feel about the “right to die” after a terminal diagnosis? What role did this choice have in Maggie’s ability to live well and to die well?

18. Why did Maggie consider a year of such suffering and difficulty “the best year of her life”? What experiences—in health or in illness—are essential to a good, satisfying life? How are those elements present in Maggie’s year?

19. Are there people in your life with whom you would like to go deeper into the “marrow” of your relationship? Are there people you should avoid doing this with? Why? How might you get started on this journey?