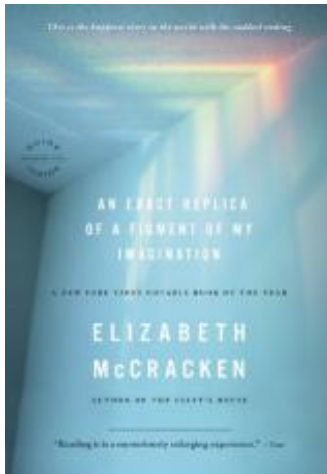


An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination

by Elizabeth McCracken



About the Book

"This is the happiest story in the world with the saddest ending," writes Elizabeth McCracken in her powerful, inspiring memoir. A prize-winning, successful novelist in her 30s, McCracken was happy to be an itinerant writer and self-proclaimed spinster. But suddenly she fell in love, got married, and two years ago was living in a remote part of France, working on her novel, and waiting for the birth of her first child. This book is about what happened next. In her ninth month of pregnancy, she learned that her baby boy had died. How do you deal with and recover from this kind of loss? Of course you don't --- but you go on. And if you have ever experienced loss or love someone who has, the company of this remarkable book will help you go on. With humor and warmth and unfailing generosity, McCracken considers the nature of love and grief. She opens her heart and leaves all of ours the richer for it.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the timing of the memoir. What do you think led Elizabeth McCracken to tell this story so soon after Gus was born? Do you think it would have changed the telling of the story if she had let more time pass? How so?
2. McCracken struggles with labels and defining herself after losing her first child. For example, when she's pregnant with Gus, she's unsure how to answer when people ask her if she's a first-time mother. Do you think McCracken has found a way to resolve this uncertainty by the end of the memoir? Does she continue to define herself as a woman whose first child was stillborn?
3. McCracken writes that Bordeaux and France were ruined for her after Pudding's death. Discuss how, throughout the book, locations are inextricably tied to the events that take place there. McCracken also writes about her quest for the geographic cure and taking her sadness on the road with her. Do you think physical escape provided some emotional escape for McCracken and her husband?

4. McCracken writes honestly about the discomfort she felt when she faced people after losing Pudding, and she says that one of the hardest things was dealing with people who didn't mention it. Discuss why we avoid recognizing the painful situations of others, and how we can better approach uncomfortable topics.
5. Discuss the role that superstitions played for McCracken and her husband through both pregnancies. What comforts, if any, did these superstitions provide?
6. Even in a book about loss and grief, McCracken is able to infuse her story with dark humor. How do you think this changes the memoir?
7. McCracken raises the idea that we are greedy about our dead loved ones, putting words in their mouths and describing what they would have wanted. What does this say about how we manage grief and death?
8. McCracken is honest about her feelings and impulses throughout the memoir, acknowledging her frustrations and freely admitting when they were irrational and misplaced. But toward the end of the book she deals with the question of blame for Pudding's death, and whether it was her responsibility, or the responsibility of Claudelle and Sylvie, to have done something differently. How do you see the issues of blame and forgiveness in this story?
9. The woman in Florida, mentioned at both the beginning and the end of the memoir, asked McCracken to write a book about the lighter side of losing a child. McCracken says this is not that book. But do you think she succeeded in writing a book that allows her to remember the pleasure of Pudding's existence and not just the pain?
10. What do you think of the book's title? Near the end of the story McCracken says that *"an exact replica of a figment of my imagination"* is what her life feels like some days. To what do you think the replica is referring?

Author Bio

Elizabeth McCracken is the author of eight books, including *THE HERO OF THIS BOOK*, *THE SOUVENIR MUSEUM*, *BOWLAWAY*, *THUNDERSTRUCK & OTHER STORIES* (winner of the 2014 Story Prize and long-listed for the National Book Award), and *THE GIANT'S HOUSE* (a National Book Award finalist). Her stories have appeared in *Best American Short Stories*, won three Pushcart Prizes, a National Magazine Award, and an O. Henry Prize. She has served on the faculty at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and currently holds the James Michener Chair for Fiction at the University of Texas at Austin.

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