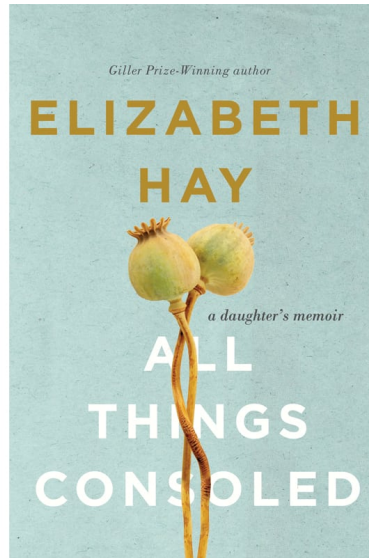


★ All Things Consoled: A Daughter's Memoir



Getting old is no fun. And caring for aging parents is no fun either. In *All Things Consoled*, Scotiabank Giller Prize–winning novelist Elizabeth Hay lays bare the last few years of her parents' lives while moving back and forth in time in an effort to better understand her mother and father and her relationships with them. Hay's honesty verges on the brutal at times.

The crisis of care is precipitated – as it often is – by a fall. Hay's mother, Jean, ends up in the hospital with a badly infected knee, and Hay's father, Gordon, decides that they will leave their home of 40 years in London, Ontario, and move to Ottawa to be close to their daughter and her husband, Mark. From the beginning, Hay's feeling about this plan is clear and understandable: "I was in dangerous personal territory, a fraught border country in which my parents were sliding into neediness and I was rising to power, yet losing my own life." While Hay and Mark (at Mark's suggestion) made the offer to care for Jean and Gordon years earlier, the reality of doing so is much more complicated. And while Hay's siblings are supportive in principle, they live in other cities, so their practical contributions are limited.

The physical struggles involved with caring for aged, infirm relatives – though considerable – are not the sum of things. Part of Hay's memoir is taken up with the author's impulse to understand her parents and the often difficult relationships she maintained with them. Jean had a pathological need to conserve food, taking frugality far beyond the limits of normalcy. Gordon had a temper that manifested in bodily harm. The anxieties and sorrow of childhood exist firmly in Hay's present as she tries to take care of her parents, whose assisted living apartment is a six-minute walk away. And reaching any kind of understanding is complicated by Jean's slide into dementia.

Regardless of the challenges of past and present, Hay continues to love her parents. She does not neglect their positive qualities: her mother's sense of humour and love of painting; her father's dedication to his profession as a history teacher, then principal, then professor of education. Both parents loved language and encouraged their children to pursue education. They also loved the outdoors and kept a family cabin in the Ottawa Valley, which was the setting for much familial joy and heartache.

What comes across most in Hay's memoir is the complexity of emotions in the context of familial relations. In a way, *All Things Consoled* repudiates Tolstoy's opening to *Anna Karenina*: what becomes abundantly clear is that different members of the same family have very different experiences of happiness or unhappiness. As a child, Hay required more attention and acceptance than her siblings, especially from her father. She marvels at her sister's ability to cope with – even defy – their father, since Hay and her mother are incapable of such reactions.

The physical world is also essential in the content and style of this book, and the imagery is wonderfully vivid. Explaining Jean's fluctuations in lucidity, for example, Hay writes: "The next day, the tent pegs of her

memory pulled out again and her mind was like Yeats's 'tattered coat upon a stick.'" A memoir is by definition grounded in memory; in this case, it is mostly Hay's memory of her mother. The author pays homage to Jean, among other things, by using her mother's words for the title. Near the end, as they are discussing Jean's dementia, the older woman tells her daughter, "I've had a good life, all things consoled."

This book is likely to break your heart, and it will definitely make you think about your own family in the context of aging.