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The Obituary Writer

Ann Hood, 2013

W.W. Norton & Co.

304 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780393081428

Summary

A sophisticated and suspenseful novel about the poignant lives of two women living in different eras.

On the day John F. Kennedy is inaugurated, Claire, an uncompromising young wife and mother obsessed with the glamour of Jackie O, struggles over the decision of whether to stay in a loveless marriage or follow the man she loves and whose baby she may be carrying.

Decades earlier, in 1919, Vivien Lowe, an obituary writer, is searching for her lover who disappeared in the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. By telling the stories of the dead, Vivien not only helps others cope with their grief but also begins to understand the devastation of her own terrible loss. The surprising connection between Claire and Vivien will change the life of one of them in unexpected and extraordinary ways.

Part literary mystery and part love story, *The Obituary Writer* examines expectations of marriage and love, the roles of wives and mothers, and the emotions of grief, regret, and hope. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1956
- Where—West Warwick, Rhode Island, USA
- Education—B.A., University of Rhode Island; graduate studies, New York University
- Awards—Pushcart Prize (twice); Best American Spiritual Writing Award; Paul Bowles Prize for Short Fiction
- Currently—lives in Providence, Rhode Island

Ann Hood is an American novelist and short story writer; she has also written nonfiction. The author of thirteen books, her essays and short stories have appeared

in many journals and magazines, including the *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Tin House*. Hood is a regular contributor to the *New York Times* "Home Economics" column.

Hood is the winner of a number of awards: Paul Bowles Prize for Short Fiction, two Pushcart Prizes, and a Best American Spiritual Writing Award. She is a faculty member in the MFA in Creative Writing program at The New School in New York City. She lives in Providence with her husband and their children.

Early Years

Hood was born in West Warwick, Rhode Island and earned her BA in English from the University of Rhode Island. After college she worked for the now-defunct airlines TWA as a flight attendant, living in Boston and Saint Louis and later moving to New York City. She attended graduate school at New York University, studying American Literature.

Hood began writing her first novel *Somewhere Off The Coast Of Maine* in 1983 while working as a flight attendant—and while attending graduate school—writing whenever she could during train rides to JFK airport or in the galleys of the airplane while passengers slept. During a furlough from the airline, she worked at the Spring Street Bookstore in Soho and Tony Roma's while writing *Somewhere Off The Coast Of Maine*.

Like much of her work, the novel draws upon her own life. Hood says the book began as a series of short stories about three women who went to college together in the 1960s. A year earlier, her older brother, Skip, died in a freak accident and Hood was struggling with how to cope with the loss. At a writer's conference, Hood was convinced by the writer Nicholas Delbanco that she was really writing a novel, and from there she began to connect the stories. The book was published in 1987.

Hood's flight attendant career ended in 1986 when TWA went on strike and the flight attendants found themselves soon "replaced." With more time to devote to writing, her stories and essays began to appear in *Mademoiselle*, *Redbook*, *Story*, *Self*, *Glamour*, *New Woman*, among others.

Personal life

Hood lives with her husband, businessman Lorne Adrain, her teenage son Sam and her daughter Annabelle in Providence, Rhode Island.

On April 18, 2002, Hood's five-year-old daughter, Grace, died from a virulent form of strep. For two years Hood found herself unable to write or even read. She took solace in learning to knit and in knitting groups. She gradually made her way back to her craft, writing short essays about Grace and grief.

To make sense of her own grief, in fall of 2004 Hood began to write her novel *The Knitting Circle*, about a woman whose five-year-old daughter dies from meningitis. The woman joins a knitting group of others also struggling to heal from loss. Hood's best-selling memoir *Comfort: A Journey Through Grief* chronicles her own struggle after her daughter's sudden death. That memoir was named one of the top ten non-fiction books of 2008 by *Entertainment Weekly* and was a *New York Times* Editor's Choice.

The summer after Grace died, Hood and Adrain decided to adopt a child and in 2005 traveled to China, where they adopted Annabelle. Hood's experience adopting in China became the inspiration for her 2010 novel *The Red Thread*, which follows a woman struggling with the accidental death of her young daughter. The woman, Maya Lange, begins an adoption agency for Chinese babies.

Work

Hood's short story "Total Cave Darkness," about an alcoholic woman who runs away with a Protestant minister nine years younger than she is, appeared in the *Paris Review* in 2000. It is also the opening story in her collection of stories *An Ornithologist's Guide To Life*. The title story of that collection appeared in *Glimmer Train* in 2004 and revolves around a young girl who slowly discovers her mother is having an affair with their neighbor. Her stories have also appeared in *Tin House*, *Ploughshares*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Story*, *Five Points*, and others.

In addition to *Somewhere Off The Coast of Maine*, *The Knitting Circle*, and *The Red Thread*, Hood has written seven other novels: *The Obituary Writer* (2013) *Waiting To Vanish* (1988), *Three-Legged Horse* (1989), *Something Blue* (1991), *Places To Stay* *The Night* (1993), *The Properties of Water* (Doubleday), and *Ruby* (1998).

Hood, in addition to her memoir, has written an addition work of nonfiction: *Do Not Go Gentle: My Search For Miracles in a Cynical Time* (1999) follows Hood's travels to Chimayo, New Mexico in search of a miracle cure for her father's lung cancer. The dirt at El Santuario de Chimayo, a Roman Catholic church, is believed to have healing properties and thousands flock to the site each year. Her father's tumor did disappear, but he later died from complications from chemotherapy. Hood initially wrote about this experience in an essay for *Doubletake* magazine. That essay went on to win a Pushcart Prize. Hood's editor at Picador urged her to turn it into a book. (Adapted from Wikipedia.)

Book Reviews

Pushcart Prize winner Hood (*Red Thread*) artfully blends two stories that converge in an emotional, poignant ending. Vivien Lowe is an obituary writer in San Francisco obsessed with finding her lover, lost in the 1906 earthquake.... Meanwhile, decades into the future, privileged housewife Claire is bored with her marriage to Peter.... Claire attends the 80th birthday party of her formidable mother-in-law, Birdie. Birdie's illness at the party unites the lives of Vivien and Claire, and their astonishing connection is revealed. *Verdict*: A well-constructed story.... —Donna Bettencourt, *Mesa County Libs., Grand Junction, CO*

Library Journal

Connections between an unhappy wife in the Kennedy era and an independent obituarist in early-20th-century California are artfully if predictably spliced in the latest from Hood (*The Red Thread*, 2010, etc.).... As President John F. Kennedy is inaugurated, [Claire] is both preoccupied with the color of Jackie's outfit and skeptical about her marriage.... In a parallel narrative set on the West Coast in 1919, we meet Vivien Lowe, who, as an obituary writer, has learned to "speak the language of grief" and is in love with a ghost.... A crisis involving Peter's 80-year-old mother, Birdy, leads to the settlement of all the women's fates. Hood's fluent storytelling and empathy will ensure popularity, but her heroines' destinies are

devoid of surprises.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. *The Obituary Writer* takes place in two different eras. Describe some of the period details in the novel that help bring these two different eras to life. How has the world changed between 1919 and 1961, and how has it stayed the same? In what ways are Claire and Vivian defined by the eras in which they live?
2. Claire fixates on the inauguration of John F. Kennedy and, in particular, on the glamour of Jackie Kennedy. Why do you think Claire is so interested in Jackie? What does the myth of the Kennedys represent to Claire?
3. What is it about the disappearance of Dougie Daniels that causes Claire to reexamine her own life?
4. What do Claire and Vivian have in common as characters? Who is stronger, and who is weaker? What kind of strength does each possess?
5. Vivian loses a lover. Lotte loses a child. Peter loses his mother. Describe the different ways in which the characters in the novel experience loss.
6. Love takes both women by surprise. What does Claire's love affair with Miles have in common with Vivian's affair with David? How do they differ?
7. The "Claire" chapters of the novel all begin with epigraphs from Emily Post. What role do manners, etiquette, and the expectations of society have to play in the novel?
8. What does Vivian have to teach Claire, in the end? What has Vivian's life taught her, and what wisdom does she impart?
9. Vivian says of grief, "It never really goes away, it just changes shape." How has Vivian's grief changed shape over the course of her life?
10. In the end, Claire asks Vivian the same question that Vivian has asked so many strangers: "Tell me about your loved one." Do both women help each other to move on in the end?
11. In listening to mourners and telling the stories of their loved ones, Vivian finds a way of processing her own terrible loss. In your own life, do you find that sharing stories helps people process emotion and come to terms with grief? Does hearing the stories of others help?

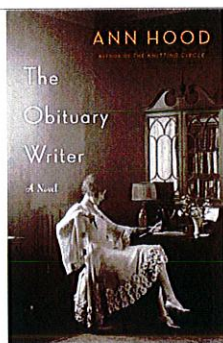
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The Obituary Writer (Hood, Ann) (2013)

Ann Hood (Author)

Best-selling author Ann Hood tells a story of unexpected connections between women of different generations. In the early 1960s, Claire, a young wife and mother, contemplates leaving her lackluster marriage for her lover, the man who might be the father of the baby she's carrying. In a parallel narrative set in 1919, Vivien Lowe is still searching for the married lover she lost 13 years earlier in the Great San Francisco Earthquake. An obituary writer, Vivien has learned how to articulate death, loss, and the grief that follows. As the author reveals Vivien's surprising connection to Claire, she examines the expectations of love, marriage, and motherhood as well as the timeless experiences of loss, grief, and hope.

MAIN CHARACTERS : Vivien Lowe, Journalist (obituary writer), Lover (of missing man), Claire, Lover, Mother, Woman

GENRE : Historical fiction

SUB GENRE : Contemporary

SETTING(S) : California, United States

SUBJECT : Women, Marriage, Mothers, Death, Journalism, Interpersonal relations, Intergenerational relations, Grief, Infidelity, Natural disasters

TIME PERIOD : Multiple time periods AD, 20th century AD, 1960s (Decade) AD, 1950s (Decade) AD, 1940s (Decade) AD, 1930s (Decade) AD, 1920s (Decade) AD, 1910s (Decade) AD

RECOMMENDED SIMILAR TITLES

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About the Author

Full text biography:

Ann Hood

Birth Date : 1956

Place of Birth : United States,Rhode Island,West Warwick

Nationality: American

Occupation : Writer

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Awards

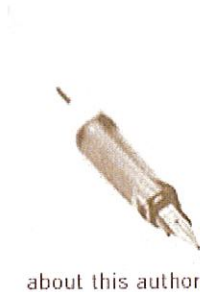
Personal Information

Career

Writings

Sidelights

Related Information



Awards:

Fellowship, Breadloaf Writer's Conference, 1987; recipient of the Paul Bowles Prize for Short Fiction, two Pushcart Prizes, two Best American Food Writing Awards, Best American Spiritual Writing and Travel Writing Awards, and a Boston Public Library Literary Light Award.

Personal Information:

Born December 9, 1956, in West Warwick, RI; daughter of Lloyd E. (an administrator) and Gloria (a tax auditor) Hood; married Bob Reiss (a writer), September 6, 1987 (divorced); married Lorne Adrain (an estate planner); children: Sam, Annabelle, Grace (died, 2002). **Education:** University of Rhode Island, B.A., 1978; attended New York University, 1983-85. **Addresses:** Home: Providence, RI. Agent: Gail Hochman, Brandt & Brandt Literary Agents Inc., 1501 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. **E-mail:** ah17@nyu.edu.

Career Information:

Writer, novelist, and educator. Trans World Airlines (TWA), New York, NY, flight attendant, 1979-86; New York University, New York, fiction writing instructor. Is a faculty member at The New School and also teaches at New York University, both in New York. Has taught at the Eckerd College Writers' Conference, Maui Writers' Conference, and Bread Load Writers' Conference.

Writings:

NOVELS

- *Somewhere off the Coast of Maine*, Bantam (New York, NY), 1987.
- *Waiting to Vanish*, Bantam (New York, NY), 1988.
- *Three-Legged Horse*, Bantam (New York, NY), 1989.
- *Something Blue*, Bantam (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Places to Stay the Night*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1993.
- *The Properties of Water*, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Ruby*, Picador (New York, NY), 1998.
- *The Knitting Circle*, W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 2007.
- *How I Saved My Father's Life (and Ruined Everything Else)*, Scholastic Press (New York, NY), 2008.

- *The Red Thread*, W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 2010.
- *The Obituary Writer*, W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 2013.
- *An Italian Wife*, W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 2014.

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

- *Angel of the Battlefield*, Grosset & Dunlap (New York, NY), 2011.
- *Little Lion*, Grosset & Dunlap (New York, NY), 2011.
- *Jewel of the East*, Grosset & Dunlap (New York, NY), 2012.
- *Prince of Air*, Grosset & Dunlap (New York, NY), 2012.
- *Queen Liliuokalani: Royal Prisoner*, Grosset & Dunlap (New York, NY), 2013.
- *Crazy Horse: Brave Warrior*, Grosset & Dunlap (New York, NY), 2013.

OTHER

- *Creating Character Emotions*, Story Press (Cincinnati, OH), 1998.
- *Do Not Go Gentle: My Search for Miracles in a Cynical Time* (memoir), Picador USA (New York, NY), 2000.
- *An Ornithologist's Guide to Life* (short stories), W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Comfort: A Journey through Grief* (memoir), W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 2007.
- (Editor) *Knitting Yarns: Writers on Knitting*, W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 2013.

Sections of *Do Not Go Gentle* have appeared in numerous anthologies, including *The Best American Spiritual Writing* and *The Pushcart Prize* collections.

Contributor to periodicals, including *McCall's*, *Washington Post*, *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, *Self*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Fiction Network*, *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*, *New York Times*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Tin House*, *More*, *Ploughshares*, *Paris Review*, *Bon Appetit*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Real Simple*, and *Story*.

Author of columns for *Self*, *Glamour*, *New Woman*, and *Parenting*. Author of a blog.

Sidelights:

A former flight attendant, Ann Hood is the author of several popular and critically acclaimed novels. "Hood," wrote Donna Seaman in *Booklist*, "is one of those quietly wonderful, straight-ahead novelists you can always depend on."

To be a writer was her childhood ambition; Hood once told CA: "Since I was a child, I wrote--stories, poems, even a 'novel' when I was eleven! Writing is like breathing to me; I don't have a choice--I just do it and love doing it. As a flight attendant, I carried a notebook with me and wrote on the subway out to the airport, on the plane, and in hotels on layovers. In fact, that's where I wrote *Somewhere off the Coast of Maine*."

Somewhere off the Coast of Maine, Hood's first published novel, revolves around the lives of three college friends. The story moves between the 1960s and 1980s, examining the Vietnam War generation of Suzanne, Elizabeth, and Claudia against the generation of their children. Claudia, a free spirit during her college days, attempts to come to terms with the tragic drowning death of her oldest son. Suzanne has become a yuppie, complete with a successful career and a waterfront penthouse. She wants to forget her involvement in antiwar protests and marijuana smoking; her daughter, Sparrow, wants to learn about those days, especially about her father, whom Suzanne never married. Elizabeth and Howard, on the other hand, have remained hippies, making pottery and eating health food. Living in this environment causes anxiety for their daughter, Rebekah, who desperately wants to be like her peers. Believing that her looks are to blame for her lack of popularity, Rebekah steals money from her parents to get a nose job.

Toronto *Globe and Mail* contributor Douglas Hill noted that although the plot of *Somewhere off the Coast of Maine* has a soap-opera-like quality, "Hood has imagined a complex world of affection and disaffection that can surprise the reader and force involvement." Hood was especially praised for her portrayal of Rebekah and Sparrow and her ability to evoke the angst of adolescence. *New York Times Book Review* contributor Mary-Ann Tirone Smith concluded her review of *Somewhere off the Coast of Maine* by calling it an "accomplished novel."

Like *Somewhere off the Coast of Maine*, Hood's next novel to receive widespread critical attention, *Something Blue*, examines the lives of three friends. Katherine is preppy and conventional, but craving more passion in her life, she abandons her fiancé on their wedding day. Lucy, who struggles as an illustrator while supporting herself as a tour guide, reluctantly agrees to take in Katherine, her former sorority sister. Julia, a professional house sitter, has a penchant for foreign men and avoids her past by creating new personas for herself. Generally considered to be both humorous and insightful, *Something Blue* focuses on the friendship between the three women as well as on each woman's search for happiness and identity.

Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Elaine Kendall remarked that the author "manages a brisk, witty new take on the standard theme of college ex-roommates on their own in New York." *New York Times Book Review* contributor Elinor Lipman praised Hood's "ability to capture characters in a matter of syllables and to conjure vividly and economically how they live, what they eat, whom they disdain." Kendall also hailed Hood's lighthearted approach: "Never solemn, *Something Blue* is crisp contemporary fun, putting the dilemmas of the thirty-something generation into proper perspective."

Hood's fifth novel, *Places to Stay the Night*, was published in 1992. The main character of the novel, Libby Harper, is disappointed with small-town life in Holly, Massachusetts, and leaves her husband and children to pursue her dreams in Los Angeles, California. At the same time, Libby's high school classmate, Renata Handy, who moved to Manhattan with equally big dreams, returns home to Holly when her eight-year-old daughter Millie is diagnosed with a brain tumor. Hood's next novel, *The Properties of Water*, is set in a small polluted factory town in Rhode Island, and tells the story of Josie Jericho Hunter, a woman nearing midlife who has let her looks go, has two feuding daughters, a husband who is cheating on her with a coworker, and a father with Alzheimer's. After she is brutally attacked during a carjacking, her long-absent sister, Michaela, suddenly decides to come home and face her painful past; meanwhile, the river in town begins to flood for the first time in many years. "As emotions and waters rise, the characters find their own high ground, relationships sort themselves out accordingly," remarked Donna Seaman, who reviewed the novel for *Booklist*.

Ruby is the story of a young wife whose husband was accidentally killed by a car while jogging near their summer home in Rhode Island. Still not able to come to terms with her loss, Olivia is in the midst of selling the summer home a year later when she comes upon a pregnant fifteen-year-old, Ruby, who needs her help. Their relationship, noted a *Publishers Weekly* contributor, is "first wary, then needy, finally loving," and forms "the substance of this rich and well-imagined story." According to Jo Manning in *Library Journal*: "Hood's deft characterizations and insight into tangled motivations make for brisk, realistic story-telling." Hood told *Publishers Weekly* contributor Mallay Charters that she based Ruby on recollections of her own adolescence. "It's from remembering so clearly that time in my own life," she stated. "I experienced myself as more dramatically troubled than I was, but I just remember how I felt."

Hood turns from fiction to memoir for her book *Do Not Go Gentle: My Search for Miracles in a Cynical Time*. The book focuses primarily on the author's efforts to find a cure for her father when they learn he is dying from lung cancer. Told that the tumor is inoperable and incurable with modern medicine, the author decides to focus on finding a "miraculous" remedy, leading her to investigate various avenues, including a mud cure used by the Tewa Indians in New Mexico. During her search, the author also ruminates on her loving relationship with her father and recounts her spiritual growth. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor called the book "as breathtaking as the poem after which it is named."

An Ornithologist's Guide to Life is a collection of the author's short stories focusing on love, family, death, depression, and the ability to accept people for who they are. "Hood is a seductive storyteller," wrote Donna Seaman in *Booklist*. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor called the author "a polished writer and a careful observer," adding that "she walks the popular funny-sad line very well." Amy Ford, writing in the *Library Journal*, noted: "These stories have bite."

Hood's novel *The Knitting Circle* returns to themes of grief and recovery, underpinned by the tragedy of real-life loss. Protagonist Mary Baxter has recently suffered a parent's nightmare, the unexpected death of her daughter, Stella, from a virulent disease. Locked in the abrasive grip of her mourning and grief, Stella struggles to keep her marriage intact, finds that she is unable to concentrate on her job as a writer for a local independent newspaper, and fends off resentment against her own mother, who lives far away in Mexico. With her life rapidly crumbling around her, Mary finally takes her mother's advice and joins a local knitting club, hoping that the experience will help her overcome her

emotional troubles. The meditative concentration required to successfully knit does help, but as she becomes more familiar with her fellow stitchers, she finds that their own stories of tragedy and recovery are the source of real healing. The themes of the novel become more resonant in light of the fact that it is based partially on Hood's own experiences when her young daughter died after contracting a virulent strain of strep, and she turned to knitting as a way to cope and heal.

The novel is "definitely gloomy, but the beautiful language and convincing characters make it a worthwhile read," remarked Amy Ford in a *Library Journal* review. "The strength of the writing is in the painfully realistic portrayal of the stages of mourning," observed a *Publishers Weekly* critic. A *Washington Post Book World* contributor called the book a "wondrously simple book about something complicated: the nearly unendurable process of enduring after a great loss."

Hood again returns to themes of grief and recovery in her own life in her second memoir, *Comfort: A Journey through Grief*, which focuses on Hood's experiences coping with the sudden death of her healthy five-year-old daughter, Grace, who died in 2002 from a virulent strep infection only thirty-six hours after she became sick.

"What makes this book so different from other such memoirs is that it seems to be taking place in real time," noted *Los Angeles Times* contributor Susan Salter Reynolds in her review of *Comfort*. "Hood doesn't cut us any slack. Even Joan Didion, grieving the loss of her husband and her daughter's illness in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, held back from the brink, [and] retreated into her vast intellect. Hood will not retreat," added Reynolds. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor felt that "the story of how she 'slowly, slowly' began to find her place in this new world is as compelling as the ghastly account of Grace's tragic end." The author's "sometimes-too-painful-to-read memoir bares all the raw emotions, from denial to despair to anger, that she experienced," remarked Donna Chavez in a review of *Comfort* for *Booklist*.

Published in 2010, *The Red Thread* deals with the subject of adoption. The novel, which is personally connected to Hood's own experience adopting her daughter Annabelle from China, looks at the adoption of Chinese girls by five couples in Providence, Rhode Island, brought together by Maya and her Red Thread Adoption Agency. Hood weaves in the stories of these diverse couples with the stories of the mothers who are putting their babies up for adoption. These "Chinese stories are threaded through the book sparingly, in italicized segments, told in a quiet tone that has the familiarity of a folk tale. They give another dimension to the theme of knittings and unravelings within families and societies, of connecting and letting go," wrote *Washington Post* reviewer Reeve Lindbergh. Lindbergh concluded: "This is a subtle and unusual adoption story, many-layered, exquisitely told." In *Women's Review of Books*, Martha Nichols noted: "Hood's portraits of the Chinese birthmothers aren't one-dimensional. They are full of telling details. Her American plot also has its pleasures, even though there's no suspense about which parents will end up with which Chinese baby." The reviewer added: "The problem with a narrative approach that focuses on the adoptive families, though, is that the birthmothers' stories always end the same way: each woman is suspended in the moment when she gives up her child, while the American characters progress through a story arc." *Booklist* contributor Donna Seaman felt that *The Red Thread* is "part soap opera, part enlightening look at contemporary adoptions, and an altogether entertaining read." "Hood's sensitive depiction of her characters' hopes and fears makes for a moving story of dedication, forgiveness, and love," stated a *Publishers Weekly* contributor.

"While *The Red Thread* is based on her experiences, Hood expanded her knowledge of China and adoption by reading the books *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck, *The Last Daughters of China*, and *Wanting a Daughter, Needing a Son*. She also learned from a Chinese exchange student who lived with her family, and she continues to build ties with China. In February, [Hood's] family visited Annabelle's orphanage and met the people who cared for her," wrote Jody Feinberg in an article about the novel in the *Patriot Ledger*.

Published in 2008, *How I Saved My Father's Life (and Ruined Everything Else)*, is a fiction piece by Hood for young adults. It tells the story of twelve-year-old Madeline Vandermeer of Rhode Island who is determined to perform a miracle that will reunite her recently separated parents. Madeline becomes increasingly determined to achieve sainthood, and, even though she is not Catholic, begins attending church and even writes the pope. While she initially blames her Mother for what happened, Madeline slowly begins to realize that maybe she is blaming the wrong person. "Madeline's voice is always funny, furious, and heartbreaking," noted *Booklist* contributor Hazel Rochman.

In her 2013 novel, *The Obituary Writer*, Hood artfully arranges and then guides two seemingly disconnected parallel narratives to a subtly moving conclusion. The novel focuses on the lives of two women from different eras: Claire, an unhappy captive of suburbia who becomes tragically transfixed by the 1960 presidential election and the youthful vitality of John F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline, and Vivien, an obituary writer in San Francisco who is obsessed with finding her lover, a man who vanished in the devastating 1906 earthquake that leveled much of the city. Claire's narrative centers on her efforts to enliven her dull marriage to Peter, a reliable provider but a dreary partner. Her dissatisfaction with her circumstances impels her to initiate a rash affair, which is quickly discovered. The conventions of her straitlaced, conservative era force her to remain in a marriage that is slowly corroding her. Vivien's equally tragic story is driven by the loss of her beloved and by her growing awareness of her gifts. Though Vivien's suffering is great, it gives her a perspective and inner acuity and empathy possessed by no other obituary writer. She uses language to heal those who, like her, have suffered irreplaceable losses. The narratives of the two dissimilar women eventually meet when Claire attends the eightieth birthday party of her mother-in-law. Hood shows that hidden threads have bound the two women together and makes clear that, despite the specificities of historical context, women have long been connected through their shared travails.

For the most part, reviewers thought Hood's *The Obituary Writer* was a spare yet affecting novel with a carefully wrought structure. Donna Seaman, a *Booklist* contributor, argued that the novel may have told "a tired tale flattened by melodrama" but also made clear that Hood's "intricate inquiry into grief, guilt, and love is haunting." *Library Journal* contributor Donna Bettencourt admired Hood's ability to lead "readers from secrets of the past toward illuminating truths of the present." While most reviewers applauded Hood for designing a narrative that allows her to meaningfully explore the interactions of the past and present, some also noted that the author's characteristically economical yet poetic writing style is used to good effect in *The Obituary Writer*. Lisa Diebel, writing in the *Toronto Star*, remarked: "It's a slim, sparsely told book, with action verbs and adherence to the motto, 'show, don't tell'--a talent fading faster among writers than polar bears on ice floes."

In her sprawling multigenerational tale of an Italian American family, Hood explores deeply personal sorrows and passions and undertakes an almost sociological investigation of the cloistered Italian immigrant community that sprang up in Providence, Rhode Island during the twentieth century. Though the novel is brimming with characters, its nucleus is Josephine Rimaldi. Josephine is married off to the boorish and uncaring Vincenzo Rimaldi when she is just fourteen and, after a brief interlude of independence, brought to America at the start of the twentieth century. Wrenched from the Campanian hills of her childhood, she tries her best to build a community in the warrens of Providence. She bears seven children: six with her husband and a daughter, Valentina, who is the result of a short-lived affair. At Valentina's birth, Josephine deceived her oafish husband, tricking him into thinking the baby died in childbirth. In reality, however, she abandoned the newborn and put her up for adoption rather than suffer the reprimands of her husband and the contempt of her prying neighbors. Josephine is wracked with guilt over this decision and spends much of *An Italian Wife* hunting for her lost progeny. Though Josephine's story is undoubtedly the thematic focal point of the novel, Hood takes time throughout to detail the complex lives of her many children, exploring their interactions with the community's rake of a priest, their attempts to regain psychological balance in the aftermath of the First World War, and their confused, ambivalent response to the rise of fascism in the old country. *An Italian Wife* is simultaneously a richly detailed character sketch and a shrewd, carefully rendered study of an urban enclave's evolution.

A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* called *An Italian Wife* "a soulful and multilayered book" and appreciated Hood's ability to present her profusion of characters as multidimensional human beings, wracked with disappointments and struggling to moor themselves in an alien and inhospitable society. A reviewer writing in *Publishers Weekly* was struck by the pathos in Hood's novel and noted a rhythmic order to its proceedings: "With heartbreaking regularity, each succeeding generation yearns for a better life but surrenders to disappointment."

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The Obituary Writer (Hood, Ann) (2013)

book detail

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about the author

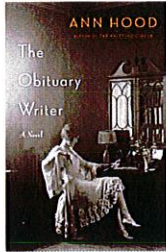
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Published Reviews:

Title : Hood, Ann: THE OBITUARY WRITER

Source : Kirkus Reviews . : pg.(1)

Document Type : Book review

Book review, bookreview1.

Hood, Ann THE OBITUARY WRITER Norton (Adult Fiction) \$26.95 3, 4 ISBN: 978-0-393-08142-8

Connections between an unhappy wife in the Kennedy era and an independent obituarist in early-20th-century California are artfully if predictably spliced in the latest from Hood (The Red Thread, 2010, etc.). Claire, mother of Kathy and wife to handsome, conventional Peter, could be a character on the set of Mad Men. As President John F. Kennedy is inaugurated, she is both preoccupied with the color of Jackie's outfit and skeptical about her marriage, which is proving to be an empty shell. In a parallel narrative set on the West Coast in 1919, we meet Vivien Lowe, who, as an obituary writer, has learned to "speak the language of grief" and is in love with a ghost. Her married lover, David, disappeared in the 1906 earthquake, but 13 years later, Vivien is still waiting for his return. Hood's engaging, detail-packed if static storylines dwell lengthily on the two women's moods of loss and uncertainty. Claire, who realizes she doesn't love Peter, found brief happiness with a lover, but Peter discovered the affair, and now, pregnant again, she feels trapped. A crisis involving Peter's 80-year-old mother, Birdy, leads to the settlement of all the women's fates. Hood's fluent storytelling and empathy will ensure popularity, but her heroines' destinies are devoid of surprises.

Gale Document Number:GALE|A313325988 [Hide](#)

Title : The Obituary Writer

Source : Booklist 109.9-10 .: pg.51(1)

Document Type : Book review

Book review, bookreview2.

The Obituary Writer.

By Ann Hood.

Mar. 2013. 320p. Norton, \$26.95 (9780393081428).

Best-selling novelist Hood (The Red Thread, 2010) has fashioned a diptych of two seemingly unconnected women. Claire, an unhappy suburban housewife and mother inspired by John E. Kennedy's 1960 presidential campaign and Jackie's glamour, has a brief, ultimately tragic affair. Lovely and romantic Vivien, an English teacher in San Francisco, falls in love with a married man who disappears in the Great Earthquake of 1906. Bereft, she becomes the most sympathetic and poetic of obituary writers. Vivien is hypnotic; her vocation provides moving testimony to the healing power of language, and her wrenching story offers fascinating glimpses into the prejudices and traumas of her time. Claire's predicament anticipates the first stirrings of the second wave of feminism, but it's a tired tale flattened by melodrama, and readers will discern the connection between the women long before its disclosure. Still, Hood's language is fine and supple, the settings are lusciously rendered, the melancholy air is seductive, her use of quotes about bereavement from Emily Post's 1922 Etiquette is bittersweet, and her intricate inquiry into grief, guilt, and love is haunting.--Donna Seaman

Gale Document Number:GALE|A315918918 [Hide](#)

Title : Hood, Ann. The Obituary Writer

Source : Library Journal 138.3 .: pg.92(1)

Document Type : Book review

Book review, bookreview3.

* Hood, Ann. The Obituary Writer. Norton. Mar. 2013. 320p. ISBN 9780393081428. \$26.95; ebk. ISBN 9780393089844. F

Pushcart Prize winner Hood (Red Thread) artfully blends two stories that converge in an emotional, poignant ending. Vivien Lowe is an obituary writer in San Francisco obsessed with finding her lover, lost in the 1906 earthquake. She imagines him merely missing or suffering from amnesia because she cannot accept he might be dead; she knows that time does not heal, that grief never goes away. Meanwhile, decades into the future, privileged housewife Claire is bored with her marriage to Peter, a good provider but a demanding perfectionist, and launches an affair that Peter soon discovers. As this is 1961, she must stay in the marriage or risk losing their daughter. Despite a difficult pregnancy, Claire attends the 80th birthday party of her formidable mother-in-law, Birdie. Birdie's illness at the party unites the lives of Vivien and Claire, and their astonishing connection is revealed. VERDICT A well-constructed story leading readers from secrets of the past toward illuminating truths of the present. Highly recommended. [See Prepub Alert, 9/10/12.]--Donna Bettencourt, Mesa County Libs. Grand Junction, CO

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☐ **San Francisco Earthquake**

How to Cite This Article

On Apr. 18, 1906, at 5:12 A.M. local time, an earthquake violently shook the city of San Francisco and its environs for about 45 to 60 seconds. Ranked as one of the most significant earthquakes in history, it caused the eruption of fires in many parts of the city, and these burned out of control for three days. Some 225,000 persons (out of a population of approximately 400,000) were left homeless; 3,000 persons lost their lives either as a direct or an indirect result of the earthquake. Nearly 25,000 wooden buildings and more than 3,000 stone and brick buildings were destroyed by the quake or by fire. Total damage was estimated at \$400 million (1906 dollars), \$80 million of which resulted from the earthquake.

The disaster devastated the city, severing communications, disrupting city services, and creating food and water shortages. The federal government ordered the armed forces to support relief efforts, sending supplies and personnel. In what is considered the largest sea evacuation in history, the U.S. Navy helped evacuate 20,000 refugees fleeing from the fire.

The earthquake, registering from 7 to 9 Modified Mercalli Intensities (MMIs), erupted on the San Andreas Fault. It was felt as far north as Oregon and farther south than Los Angeles. The large displacements and ruptures of the quake puzzled contemporary geologists and were not appreciated fully until the theory of plate tectonics was introduced. The San Francisco earthquake has been one of the most studied disasters in history, providing significant modern knowledge about earthquakes. A 13-minute silent film documenting the earthquake and fire was selected for the National Film Registry in 2005.

☐ **Further Reading:**

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