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She loved Lucy

Writer Ann Patchett gives her friend life again

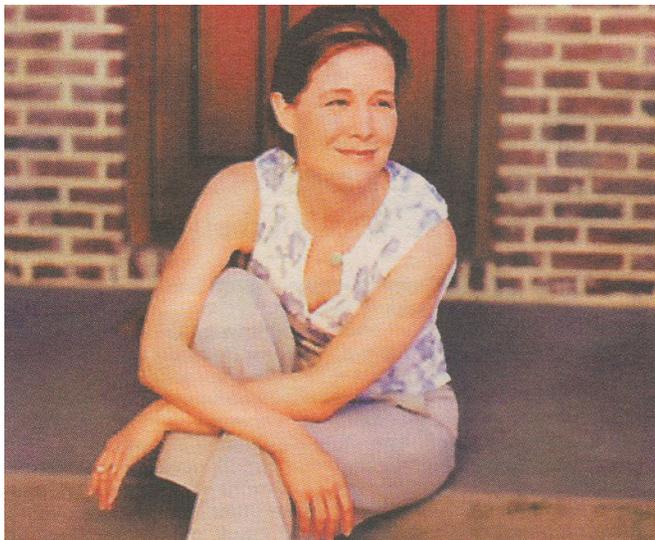
DAWN RAE DOWNTON

Poets die young, the studies say; younger than other writers, at least. Sylvia Plath turned on the gas at 30. Hart Crane was just 32 when he jumped his own ship, the steamer *Orizaba*, somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico. Dylan Thomas, by comparison, was a grand old man when he died of drink in a New York hotel room at 39; and Anne Sexton, author of *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, was virtually a dowager at 46.

The Irish-American writer Lucy Grealy made it to 39, finally self-destructing a couple years ago in a friend's cramped bedsit in New York. It's amazing that she made it that far.

Grealy, who is elegized heartbreakingly in *Truth & Beauty* by her close friend, the Tennessee novelist Ann Patchett, had a poet's darkness and urgency, a hunger for words. But she wasn't known for her poetry; rather, for her face, ravaged by a childhood cancer and 38 restorative surgeries through adulthood, all unsuccessful. All this she wrote about in her breathtakingly lucid 1994 memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*. An excerpt won a National Magazine Award, and the book made her a *cause célèbre*.

It didn't save her, didn't make her happy. Promiscuous to a fault, Grealy thought she was too ugly ever to find love. She wrote about cancer and looks in a specious world that dreads the one and slavers after the other. But she didn't want to be known as a cancer survivor.



Her readings were stuffed with cancer survivors who didn't get that. "All those conversations, details you remember," one asked. "Were you worried you might get something wrong?"

"I didn't remember it," she said, impatient. "I wrote it. I'm a writer."

More than anything else about Grealy, Patchett gets that. Her friend's shortcomings and her inscrutability she may not get -- and neither should she. The best memoirists -- the best writers -- avoid decoding and solving character. Patchett observes acutely instead, without analysis, and it all makes compelling reading.

Grealy was an odd duck, capricious, spendthrift, self-absorbed, drug-addicted, grievously conflicted. Despite all her cosmetic jaw surgeries, for example, she had her breasts augmented, and she carped at Jane Fonda, who might have had some ribs thinned. Patchett herself is first the writer, second the friend, and she knows that's how it has to be.

She also knows this, as Grealy did: a book is not its content, but its construction. In *Truth & Beauty* she gives us Grealy the writer, who was too troubled, in the end, to keep writing and stay alive. Patchett has infused the book with Grealy's own imminently readable letters to her, especially from dreadful Aberdeen, Scotland, where a surgeon did her jaw operations 20 to 25.

Patchett also knows the writer's distinction between beauty and truth. It hasn't got to do with verisimilitude, whether memory obscures or whether an anecdote is fiction, fact, or something else. A memoir, says the British writer Geoff Dyer, who has written his share, is "very close to what actually happened. It's about an inch from life, but the art is all going on in that inch."

He might have been writing about Patchett, who's turned out four accomplished novels. The last, *Bel Canto*, won the prestigious Orange Prize. Patchett brings her novelist's pell mell and flair for drama to Lucy Grealy's rather anticlimactic finish. She knows how to tell a story as well as her subject did, and has cited *The Poseidon Adventure*, of all things, as her biggest artistic influence. "Oh, that's what plot is," she says she realized, watching it. "You're going along, it's fine, then everything turns upside down, people band together, sacrifices are made, there's passion, there's loss, there's a journey, and at the end you cut a hole in the boat and you come out into the light. That's what this book is, in a sense, except for the part about coming out into the light."

Still, it may not be Patchett's fiction fans who love *Truth & Beauty* most. It may well be other writers, who wonder how to memorialize? why? what is served, when the pettest of my pets, as Patchett calls Grealy, is gone?

Canadian writers in particular will find *Truth & Beauty* an eye-opener. Stateside, a book advance -- anyone's -- seems always to buy a house or a red Saab, and there are so many writers' colonies and retreats like Yaddo and the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Centre, so many fellowships like the Bunting and the Whiting and the NEA, that new writers' doors are thrown open for them by the force of the names they can drop.

There's also a volume of readers stateside that Canada lacks. Patchett once said she'd be happy if each new book brought her 2,000 more readers. In Canada, writing can mean shocking loneliness. The numbers are smaller; they're tiny; and the lessons meaner. In Canada, wanting to write, even getting published, may be the worst thing that happens to you. Lucy Grealy didn't have that to contend with, and still she died.

In *Truth & Beauty*, she lives again. "This fabulous shadow only the sea keeps," the poet Hart Crane wrote, as if he already saw himself under his Caribbean waves. He had no Ann Patchett to memorialize him, to make him count again so intimately, and to make us miss him so much.

Dawn Rae Downton, a finalist for this year's Journey Prize, is a fiction writer who has also written two memoirs. The latest, Diamond, is about the death of her best friend.