

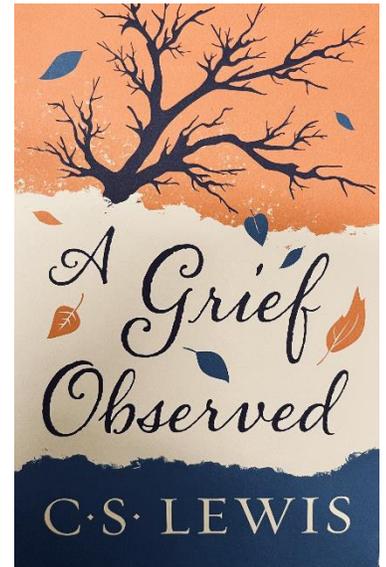
OSLC Library Book Review:

C.S. Lewis (1898-1963)

*A Grief Observed* (1961)

*Audience:* Recommended for 18 years and older, people supporting others who are grieving, and spousal loss survivors.

C.S. Lewis was an academic, writer and Christian apologist, best known now for his children's book series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. This slim (76 page), volume gives readers insight into a more complex, private, and tormented Lewis than any of his other work. It is best seen as an almost-accidental memoir made up of entries from Lewis' private journals following the loss of his wife, poet Joy Davidman, who died of cancer on July 13, 1960. Comprising four chapters, the book recounts Lewis' progression through the stages of grief as he struggles to come to terms with his wife's death. Each chapter explores a new phase of mourning as he openly and honestly sets out his deeply personal feelings that involve shock, anger, despair and ultimately acceptance.



“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.”

---

At the time, CS Lewis described his marriage in 1956 to the American poet Helen ("H") Joy Davidman as “a pure matter of friendship and expediency”, primarily intended to keep her and her two sons in the country; a confirmed bachelor, he later wrote: “I never expected to have, in my 60s, the happiness that passed me by in my 20s.” But Joy was already ill, and their relationship was conducted in the shadow of cancer: for Lewis the four years following their wedding brought intensely personal experiences both of the miraculous, and of despair.

First published in 1961 under the pseudonym NW Clerk, Lewis's account of his mourning for Joy is in many ways the trial by fire of the faith he urbanely expounded in *The Problem of Pain*: an intimate, anguished account of a man grappling with the mysteries of faith and love. The ferocious and uncanting intellect that thrived in love denies Lewis the traditional consolations of mourning: he is tormented by the thought that suffering in life offers no guarantee of peace in death; that the mere act of remembering is one of overwriting – his own selective memories falling “like the small flakes that come when it is going to snow all night”.

“Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness,” Lewis reflects. Wary of this aimless potential, his only concession to form is a limitation to the length of the four notebooks he found around his house, refusing to indulge himself by buying more. By turns elegant and raw, *A Grief Observed* is a powerful record of thought and emotion experienced in real time, and as much the biography of a love as it is an exploration of grief and faith.

The above review was written by Lettie Ransley for the English newspaper, *The Guardian*, August 11, 2013.