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TITLE INFORMATION

THE SWING

A Muse's Memoir About Keeping The Artist Alive

Susan Dennis

Atmosphere Press (282 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A debut memoir of a caregiver and muse that looks at how these two roles can conflict.

Dennis, who owns the North Carolina–based management consultancy firm Susan Charles Prints, presents a story about supporting her husband’s artistic dreams while helping him as he struggled with highly aggressive rheumatoid arthritis. She takes a no-holds-barred approach to recounting the challenges that she and her spouse, Charlie, faced. She clearly lays out the difficulties of being a supportive caregiver when Charlie did things to undermine his own well-being. She sometimes agonized over decisions regarding his care, and readers may find some moments upsetting, as when she harshly talked her husband down as he threatened to end his own life. She also tells of her spouse’s talent, showing how he had a gift and passion for photography, sometimes risking his fragile health to get a great picture. A strong theme is Dennis’ conflicted emotions about her husband’s love of his art: “Perhaps the camera was the real mistress and one I could no longer co-exist with, especially if she lured Charlie into places of imminent danger.” She writes that Charlie, whose illness was compounded by medications’ side effects, also suffered from a feeling of being unappreciated by his family, including his father, who employed him in the family print business. Therefore, another key aspect of the story is a declaration of boundaries, which Dennis helped Charlie finally achieve during a fateful visit from his parents. Indeed, the book as a whole serves as an important call to readers to recognize the humanity of the chronically ill. Near the end, this book affectingly tells of their urgent effort to get Charlie’s best work printed and preserved as the world of photography was transitioning to digital. Charlie’s photos went on public display, thanks to a grant from the Durham Arts Council, to much appreciation—but only after his 2005 death. Over the course of this book, Dennis makes a convincing case that her husband’s passion for his work may well have helped to keep him alive, just as her own caregiving did.

An emotional story of a life of illness and creativity.

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