

Anne Lamott on unflinching hope in dark days

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The author Anne Lamott talks about life, forgiveness, online church, and spiritual truths to *Sarah Meyrick*



Anne Lamott

ANNE LAMOTT takes some tracking down. Her books tend to be *New York Times* bestsellers, and the publication of *Dusk Night Dawn: On revival and courage* comes with similar expectations, and entails a promotional tour in the United States.

She has been published since 1980, and is the author of seven novels, including *All New People* and *Crooked Little Heart*.

Since the 1990s, she has written several candid non-fiction titles, including *Operating Instructions*, an account of life as a single mother during her now-adult son's first year, and *Some Assembly Required: A journal of my son's first son*, about her first experiences of grandparenting after her son learns, aged 19, that he's going to be a father.

Her classic book on writing, *Bird by Bird: Some reflections on writing and life* is packed with frank advice and observations, reflected in her 2017 TED talk: "If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better."

Throw into the mix her collections of autobiographical essays on faith, which include [*Help, Thanks, Wow: The three essential prayers*](#), and [*Stitches: A handbook on meaning, hope and despair*](#), a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a listing in the California Hall of Fame, and you begin to get the picture.

Dust Night Dawn falls into the latter category, where she mines stories from her own life to offer reflection on universal human insecurities and fears. She writes with acute observation and ruthless precision.

Her trademark is an unflinching honesty leavened with a large helping of compassion, self-deprecation, and warmth; my editor likens her to the American humorist David Sedaris.

Her years of alcoholism, her failures, and her struggles are all out there. ("I really believe that earth is forgiveness school — I really believe that's why they brought us here, and then left us without any owner's manual.") She is eminently relatable.

The new book is all about finding hope in the darkness. How can we cope as the bad news piles up? Where do we find joy when our feet are sore and our hearts are broken? She started writing it two years ago, triggered by the climate crisis and using her recent marriage — her first, at 64 — as a jumping-off point for her ruminations. The mix of the domestic and the global is typical Lamott.

The opening provides a flavour. "Here we are, older, scared, numb on some days, enraged on others, with even less trust than we had a year ago. The devastating pandemic, and the federal government's confused and

deadly response, was simply the final straw to a few years of crushing developments.

“A UN report on climate catastrophe was published months before my wedding in 2019, the report of the extinction of one million species three weeks after. A major buzzkill. Our poor country has been torn asunder. I await the rain of frogs.

“And I’ve gotten so much less young. I got Medicare three days before I got hitched, which sounds like something an old person might do, which does not describe adorably ageless me.”

WHEN we finally connect, her new book is number four on the *Washington Post* bestseller list, and number seven in the *LA Times*’s. I ask her whether she still finds herself nervous of the critical response when she releases a new title.

“Of course,” she says, with a sigh. “This is my 19th book, and I get just as worried every time, holding my breath till the *Publishers Weekly* review comes out — even though hardly anyone reads *Publishers Weekly* any more.

“I check the Amazon sales ranks constantly. It is me at my most competitive, materialistic, and opportunistic.”

I wonder whether she sets out with a clear purpose for each book. “I did, this time,” she says. “The last book [was] on hope, but everywhere I went on book tour, the people in my audiences felt defeated — by Trump, the UN climate-change reports, and scary things that were happening at their own dining tables. And this was before Covid.

“They wanted to know where we even start to get our faith in life back after all that we’ve been through; so I wrote this book in response to that. And, midway through my writing these stories, the pandemic struck.

“I hope readers come away with hope and faith in people’s goodness, and that life really does support us, and that laughter really is carbonated holiness.”

The manuscript was finished before the results of the US election were known. Has the outcome changed her perspective? “I feel more optimistic on every level of existence since the election,” she says.

“I feel that there is hope again in the land; for the poor, for climate science to help turn things around. Literally, any realm you could ask me about is one in which I feel so much more hopeful — and, in some cases, exuberant.”

If the idea for the book was conceived long before the pandemic, Lamott has added a coda (a chapter called “Covid College”) on the past year. She believes that some useful lessons have been learned.

“I do think we are more compassionate, having spent a year seeing the deep suffering of other people both in our country and around the world. In America, we had three- and four-mile lines of cars at food pantries, of people waiting to get a box of food for their children.

“That is really too much. Everyone around the country and the world rushed to lend support to the people of Texas during the deep freeze a few months ago.

“I love what [the US TV children’s host] Mr Rogers’ mother told him when he was little, and scared about a recent tragedy. She said: ‘Look to the helpers.’ And the helpers during Covid — the nurses, [paramedics], food-pantry workers — just broke your heart with their compassionate service.”

LAMOTT writes with great affection about St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Marin City, where she teaches in the Sunday school. Her church community is “literally water and bread for me”, she says. “It’s like my spiritual gas station.”

Worship has moved online during the pandemic. How has she found that?

“We’ve been Zooming since March 2020, and, while I deeply miss hugging and kissing everyone during the Passing of the Peace, I do love the feeling of a living Advent calendar every Sunday, with 30 beloved faces on the screen,” she says.

Being able to go to church and to recovery meetings (she is an alcoholic) almost daily during Covid has been a lifeline over the past year. “I’ve felt incredibly blessed and lucky and nourished in terms of my precious communities,” she says.

“The main difference is that I could no longer race around doing things that just seemed so important, but aren’t. I wasted so much less time

(although I watched all nine episodes of [the American reality shows] *Below Deck* and *Below Deck Mediterranean*.)

“My life got so much quieter, as there were so few safe places to go, and quiet is the bedrock of spiritual understanding.”

Most of her early writing life was devoted to fiction, but there has been a move in recent years towards non-fiction. She admits that this is partly because she finds non-fiction much easier. “I can finish a [non-fiction] book in a year and a half,” she says.

“A novel takes at least three years, and, the entire time, I’m in the dark about what happens next, and are the characters consistent, and would they *really* have done that in chapter three?”

So will there be any more novels? “I’m secretly thinking of writing a novel again, after a ten-year hiatus. Don’t tell anyone. . .”

I ask her about married life. (This is a joke: the prologue of *Dusk, Night, Dawn* is peppered with people asking: “How’s married life?” at the very moment that she fears he may be suffering from buyer’s remorse).

She laughs. “So I got married . . . to an amazing, brilliant, kind guy, but what I didn’t know was that I was going to spend the second year of my marriage in lockdown.

“We’d been living together for a couple of years before we got married; so it wasn’t like I suddenly found out about all his annoying little habits and character defects — I already knew about them all.

“We do pretty well almost all the time. Some days are just too lifey, and we might quibble, but then things pass and turn into an ever-deepening friendship.”

Lamott is perhaps best-known for her 1994 title, *Bird by Bird: Some instructions on writing and life* — by far the best book on the craft of writing I’ve ever read.

I ask her whether there is a title that she’s particularly proud of. “I love the book my son, Sam, and I wrote together, a follow-up to *Operating Instructions* called *Some Assembly Required*.

“It’s ostensibly about my first year as a grandparent, but it’s really every single thing I know about spiritual truth, and being a [parent](#), and trying to let go of my tiny, *tiny* little control issues. I’ve always said that everything I’ve let go of has claw marks on it.

“It’s the book I would bring to a desert island if I wanted to remember what I am pretty sure is true about God and life.”