

Something upon which to rejoice

James Runcie has written a tender and funny memoir in response to his wife's terminal illness. Interview by **Sarah Meyrick**



Marilyn Imrie, James Runcie's late wife, taken on their honeymoon in Venice in November 1985

JAMES RUNCIE's new book *Tell Me Good Things: On love, death and marriage* is a departure for the novelist, playwright, and film-maker. It is a memoir, and deeply personal. It tells the story of his love for his late wife, Marilyn Imrie, a drama director, singer, and artist, who died of motor neurone disease (MND) in August 2020, just five months after her diagnosis.

"It's about grief, and love. And I hope it's also about gratitude and thankfulness," Runcie says. They were together for 35 years and "im-

mensely happy". Her illness was all the more terrible because the diagnosis came as the pandemic began.

"It was very hard to deal with, both on a practical level in terms of nursing and the availability of staff, and also in terms of coping with her accelerated decline," he says.

The speed that the disease rattled through her body was a mercy and a blow at the same time. The book is his "revenge" against the cruelties of MND, he says with a smile. He has attempted to "reclaim her" from the terrible last few months.



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my father [when he was dying], and I read some to Marilyn," he says. "And a lot of music. I had to be careful, because it's so emotional and so rich. To play Bach or to play Mozart had to be limited because it would make us cry."

IT IS now a little more than two years since Marilyn died. He has a new partner, Lucinda. How is he doing? "Kindness is always a problem. If you ask me nicely: 'How are you feeling today?' obviously, that makes me want to cry," he says.

It is some time since he wrote the book. "I finished it a year ago, and those [experiences in the book] are very much the experiences of a year ago," he says. "I suppose I turned grief into a story in order to find some way of dealing with all the things that have happened, as a way of defining my relationship and my grief."

He says that he has tried to be honest in what he wrote, but "you have to leave stuff out and you have to keep stuff for yourself." There are also "certain no-go areas" in order not to distress his daughter and step-daughter. Otherwise, "you live as best you can," he says. "You do all these things and then suddenly something happens, or you're reminded of something."

The day before we met, his publisher gave him a pair of espresso cups to celebrate the book's publication. They happened to be by Susie Cooper, Marilyn's favourite china designer. "It was the most ridiculously appropriate, accidentally appropriate present... far more loving, far more generous, and far more thoughtful than she'd ever anticipated it being. And obviously, as a result, it was upsetting, even though it was really kind."

He could, he reflects, have written a book just for family and friends. "But it is meant to be of some benefit to other people who are bereaved, and is meant to be entertaining as well," he says. "Because I am a writer, and that is sort of my job."

He expands on this in the preface to the book, writing: "There are countless tributes, biographies and laments written by the recently bereaved. In the best of them the writing reaches out beyond therapy and recollection to share what Dr Johnson called 'moral instruction' in the art of bearing calamities."

"This is not only my way of reclaiming [Marilyn] from the last months of terminal illness but an attempt to provide my own version of Johnson's 'moral instruction' and to offer both the consolation of sorrow and the possibility of hope in the face of despair."

It's not that dissimilar to the *Grantchester* series. "You could argue, of course, that every episode of *Grantchester* is a sermon." As an aside, he believes that crime fiction has a part to play in helping people safely confront the reality of death, because we are so removed from it.

"Death becomes this kind of awful thing that you're trying to pretend doesn't exist," he says. "What strikes me is that crime fiction forces you to do that. And also, it provides resolution, because obviously somebody's guilty. But it gives people the opportunity to have imaginative thoughts about the nature of life, death, and moral responsibility, and what a life means and what loss means. It's another bit of anticipatory bereavement."

As he writes in this book: "I cannot avoid writing about faith, love

The memoir is unusual for two reasons: "One is Marilyn. She was very different and very vivacious and joyous, and had enormous velocity of character. And the second is, I thought I would try and make it funny. I thought I would have jokes in it and celebrate her life." The resulting book is a comedy "in the broadest sense, the way you could argue that the Bible is a comedy, because it ends with hope".

The book is tender, heart-breaking, and funny by turns. Marilyn's vibrant character leaps off the page. The reader is drawn into the heady orbit of a profound love story, played out against a backdrop that sweeps from the East Neuk of Fife to Venice and back, and performed to the strains of Bach and Mozart.

The supporting cast is stuffed with household names: the actors Pip Torrens, Siobhan Redmond, and Bill Paterson are among the couple's dearest friends. (Runcie refers to the 18th-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, writing: "These were our values. It's what Marilyn and I believed in. Hospitality, Elegance, Literature and Friendship.")

Marilyn was, Runcie says, a consummate director, at home as well as at work. "She would sometimes make a play out of a situation or a family lunch... She would direct absolutely everything, including my behaviour."

Her approaching death was absorbed into this drama. "Given our background, the only way the family knew how to approach it was as some kind of weird and unexpected

new production," he writes. "We were working towards a last night, at an unspecified date, for one performance only." The trouble was, there was no script, no budget — and no schedule, of course. Nor was there an audience, because of the pandemic. "Nobody came — which was, in a way, a good thing, because she didn't want to be seen in decline. She wanted to be remembered at her best," he says now. "So she was grateful, actually, for that."

They tried to plan for the end, inspired in part by the example of Runcie's father, a former Archbishop of Canterbury. "My father did it when he had prostate cancer, writing his own memorial service and putting the script into a brown envelope called 'The Event'," he writes. "He took great care over it, and gave the script to me a few months before he died, saying: 'I'm rather looking forward to this.'"

Runcie found himself drawn to familiar phrases from the Book of Common Prayer, the psalms, and poetry, as he tried to find comfort in his desperation. "I read the psalms to

I cannot avoid writing about faith, love and death. They are my only subjects

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