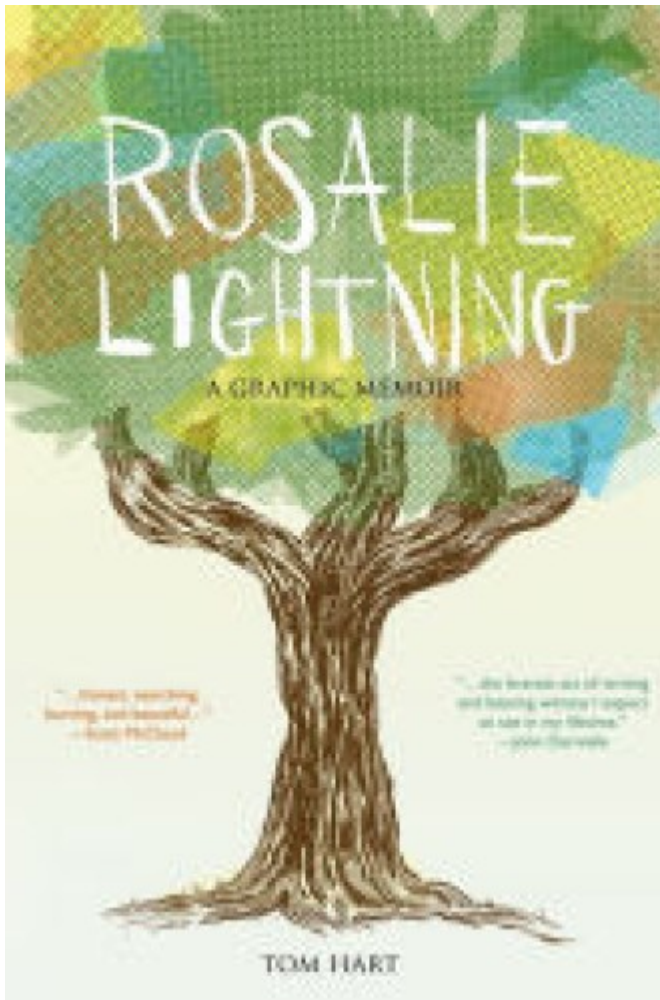


Graphic grief

by [Kristel Clayville](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue

In Review



Rosalie Lightning

By Tom Hart

St. Martin's Press

Midway through his graphic memoir, cartoonist Tom Hart comes to an abrupt and pointed question: “What do you do when your child dies?” In the next frame, he answers the question: “You fall into a hole.” Hart’s meditation on grief gives the

graphic details of how he and his wife, Leela, crawled out of that hole following the unexpected death of their toddler Rosalie.

The phenomenon of grief is hard to understand fully while experiencing it, in part because it is not a linear process that moves toward healing. Hart acknowledges this aspect of grief through his story structure, and through the combination of words and pictures, which allows him to depict multiple stages of grief at once. He structures his story around two dominant forms of thought in the West: Aristotle's metaphysics and the literary genre of epic. Both of these features deepen Hart's exploration of grief and allow him to give a fuller account of the process.

While no mention is made of Aristotle in the text, Hart begins and ends his story with oak trees and acorns, the same example that Aristotle famously used to illustrate the difference between actuality and potentiality. Hart's use of this framing device does not feel like a philosophy lesson, for it comes from his daughter's interest in gathering acorns and being in nature. At the beginning of the story, Hart and his wife collect acorns and remember Rosalie. At the end, Rosalie's memory is depicted as an acorn transforming over several frames into a full-grown tree with its own acorns to drop.

This nod to Aristotelian metaphysics, because it is rooted in Rosalie's personality and her parents' grief, helps Hart understand the depth of his suffering and communicate it. The loss of a child upends one's sense of temporality: don't the old die before the young? Hart and Leela are left with a Rosalie-sized hole of potential that will never be actualized except through the process of grieving and remembering.

The story unfolds in 12 books much like the epic accounts of the journeys of Odysseus and Aeneas. He and Leela travel with Rosalie from New York City to Gainesville, Florida; after Rosalie's death, they move in with a friend; next they travel to a grief retreat in New Mexico, to Hawaii, and to visit a couple of other friends; and finally they land back in Gainesville in a new house. These trips are marked by plane travel and a series of borrowed cars that keep breaking down or getting stuck in the terrain. Each time, a group of people comes out to help Hart and Leela forge ahead in their journey, sometimes literally pushing them on to the next encounter with their own grief.

Along the way, the travels are joined to Hart and Leela's emotional journey, depicted in cartoon characters in a raft. The raft that initially carried them out of New York with Rosalie continues with just the two of them. At the same time, various modes of transportation put Hart and Leela into new contexts, where they inadvertently begin collecting the grief stories of those they encounter. Their own raw grief creates the necessary vulnerability for their friends, new and old, to open up about their own losses of children, siblings, and friends. Though these stories add to their burden, they also help to create a community that can travel with them.

About three-quarters of the way through the book, Leela suggests to Hart that they do "more ritualistic things." He asks if that means going to church, and she answers that it could mean sitting in groves. Hart replies, "What is a church but a stone version of a grove?" The two articulate what many people feel in their times of deepest need—that the help they seek can come from many places and communities, and there is something sacred about it that cannot be confined to a particular place or religion.

Throughout the story, Hart and Leela spend time in nature as a way of coping with their grief. From gathering acorns to taking long walks to lying in the grass, they experience nature as an anchor to the world even as they feel emotionally adrift. At the end of the story, when they are the most whole that we ever see them, they are sitting by a lake "groving," as they have come to name their time spent in nature. Nature's repetitions—and particularly its cycles of life followed by death that leads to new life—help Hart and Leela remember Rosalie's short time with them with a sense of gratitude that accompanies their profound loss.

Hart breathes new life into the grieving process, not only by depicting it in all of its minutiae and disorienting capacities, but also by yoking it to his own background and thought processes. In the hospital setting I work in, I rarely have occasion to invoke Aristotle or Odysseus. But I see how people use all the tools that they have to grieve and interpret the new and suddenly diminished world around them. Hart profoundly acknowledges this aspect of coping.

Hart's memoir reduces religion to a place of contemplation and silence that fosters healing but has no direct role in the grieving process. And yet, Hart and Leela's journey allows for deeper religious possibilities. While they are alone in their grief, they also create a community by collecting the stories of others. Paradoxically, we grieve always alone while at the same time needing community. Surely there is a role for the church in this paradox. In focusing on community and story, Hart

indirectly reveals where spaces for the church might exist within even the worst of our grief.