

[BOOKS]

THE WORK OF HEALING

BEAUTIFUL UNBROKEN: ONE NURSE'S LIFE

by Mary Jane Nealon

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Review by Kathryn Rhett

EUDORA WELTY WROTE: “THE events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily—perhaps not possibly—chronological. The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation.”

Mary Jane Nealon’s gorgeous memoir works along that revelatory thread, examining the physical and metaphysical life of a person who became both a nurse and a writer.

“As far back as I can remember,” Nealon begins, “I wanted to be a nurse or a saint. I wanted to be heroic.” The fact that nurses and saints were her two models for heroism bespeaks her upbringing in a modest Catholic household in Jersey City, as well as her youthful hagiographic reading about Kateri Tekakwitha (an Indian healer), Clara Barton (founder of the American Red Cross), and Molly Pitcher (comforter of Revolutionary War soldiers). Nealon, a middle child born to a policeman and a homemaker, dreamed of college but acceded to a less expensive education at the nursing school four blocks from home. The loss of her younger brother to cancer made her a fellow sufferer as well as a healer:

The year after my brother died I tried to stay in the sphere of the living, but at the cancer hospital, young boys kept lining up in the hall. And I was so good with them. I could help them talk about their fears and I was such a comfort to the mothers, and even when I watched the fathers go back down the hall to the bar or their office I understood and made a bubble of understanding and forgiveness around my host families of death. Outside the hospital I dove into extravagance. I took poetry workshops at the Ninety-second Street Y, where I met strong women in their thirties and a handsome man I slept with and a tall black dancer who would become my first gay friend. I took private Latin disco lessons and wore wild floral dresses, and went dancing at Cachaça, a Brazilian club, and met men from the Brazilian bank. When I wasn't at the bedside of a dying boy I was exploding barefoot in the samba club with gray velvet couches. I called my parents once a week, on Sundays, and made excuses for staying in the city. One night the man from my poetry class called me in the middle of the night to talk about feeding me asparagus and making love in a Pakistani wedding tent. Language was a cave I was dancing

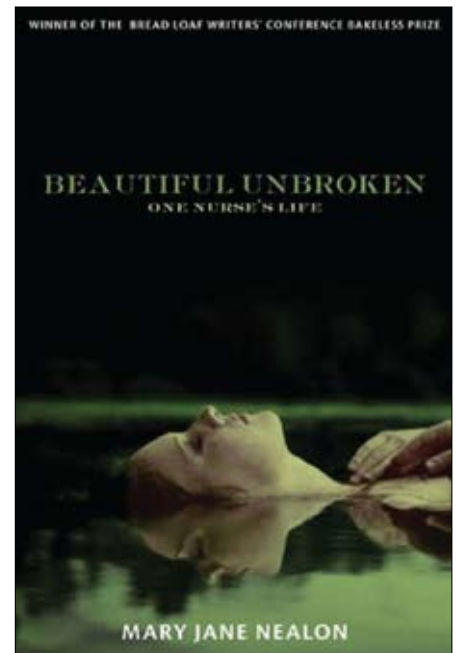
into, a small light and arch of happiness. The boys who were dying hung all around me like bats.

Nealon brings a passionate poetic sensibility to her story of loss and becoming. Her startling metaphors bring light, insight, and transcendence to a narrative grounded in the gritty real.

Never sanctimonious, the memoir is rich with humor and earthbound experience. A traveling nurse for a time, who took temporary assignments in Hawaii, New Mexico, and Savannah, Nealon remarks: “There were always men who wanted to date the traveling nurses. Formula for love: be leaving town in three months.” A coming-of-age memoir, too, the narrative thrums with youthful restlessness and the joy of discovery. The body is present for this narrator in every way; the memoir includes and embraces all of the messy and sacred physicality of being human.

Each part of the book's triptych structure illuminates the others. The memoir begins in one particular family's house and neighborhood and then widens as it goes, the narrator becoming a seeker in the world. “Everyone's clotheslines criss-crossed,” Nealon writes in the first part. “Mr. Cleary's roses were big white and yellow bombs on the fence.” Her brother Johnny became ill as a teenager, and, as with so many family tragedies, the misfortune was attended by guilt: Johnny hid his early symptoms and no one noticed. During what would be his last months, Nealon left home for Virginia to begin her life as a nurse. (By contrast, her father took early retirement from police work, her mother cried every morning, and her sister stuck around to help.) Nealon's guilt over leaving affected her profoundly, growing rather than lessening with time, propelling her a continent away from her family.

The middle of the book traces Nealon's attempted escape from grief into faraway nursing jobs, sensory pleasure and oblivion, and poetry. As an insider's guide to the life of a nurse, the memoir brings the reader along with Nealon as she learns that “many times



there was nothing to say, that sometimes just not turning away from people was the best way to care for them.” Her riveting stories of patients' illnesses and injuries give the memoir an atmosphere of frailty in which *carpe diem* would be the only logical attitude. The nursing stories also act as testimony, honoring the suffering of patients and recording that someone saw, noticed, and admired them. “I loved the gift of being with someone as she transcended suffering,” Nealon writes. “Of helping her in small ways: turning her in the bed, or placing a blanket over her legs.” After death, after “the release of the person's hold on the body,” she writes, “The room to me then is as blessed as any church.”

In its third part, the memoir undergoes a beautiful transformation, from one kind of story about a lost boy to another kind of story about lost boys.

Unlike many memoirs whose beginnings and middles are stronger than their ends, *Beautiful Unbroken* grows progressively richer and more profound as Nealon recounts her work in the early years of the AIDS crisis. The scale and context of loss grow, and Nealon brings us the story of men who were dying of a mystifying disease without a cure. The memoir made me remember those years when AIDS was a definite and often

rapid death sentence, and I thought of the “last suppers” I attended in San Francisco for men who were sharing their last meal out with friends before succumbing to home or hospice. Nursing has changed along with medicine in the centuries since Molly Pitcher mopped soldiers’ brows, but in this particular circumstance, Nealon’s most important gift was her intuitive, empathetic touch. The heroic nurses she had admired as a child were ultimately the perfect role models, people who expressed compassion rather than fear when faced with suffering.

What matters in this memoir, what is urgent and fierce, is the intense examination of how one grieves and changes. The memoir is a record of the world working a change in Nealon and forming her into who she would become. Patients teach her the importance of family. Artists teach her how to become obsessed with a subject and how to start over when something fails.

It’s an ennobling portrait of a nurse. And I say that from the perspective of someone inculcated with the socioeconomically snobbish view that doctor, not nurse, would be the profession to aim for. Or maybe I say that from the gender-biased view that as a woman coming of age in the 1970s, one aimed for doctor over nurse, the apparent equivalent to boss instead of secretary, lawyer instead of paralegal. But this memoir casts nurses as the people closest to those they care for, who not only give relief and dignity to patients, but learn from patients and are privileged to share an intimate connection with them. Describing the day she met a young man dying of AIDS, Nealon writes, “So I sat in the rocker, and I instinctively took his hand, and in the way it always is with the dying, he expressed no hesitation or shyness and he gave his own hand over to me.”

While the memoir is a confession and expression of repentance, it is also a quest for a new religion after the one she was raised with, Catholicism, failed her. The new religion is alleviating suffering in her role as a nurse, especially the

very human part of nursing that is one person’s relationship to another. Poetry also becomes the new religion; language acts as solace for both narrator and reader, leavening through illumination. “I lived in medicine and poetry, and they were not enemies at all,” Nealon writes. “They celebrated the synchronicity of discovery and hope, of desire and knowledge. I knew there were people all over the world who lived without poetry, but I didn’t know how.”

From a graceful riff on the month of September (“Month of apples and hurricanes”) to surprising knowledge (in a dying person, “It is the hands and feet and eyes that go last”), the memoir gives readers much to savor and contemplate. *Beautiful Unbroken* is compelling, inventive, and whole, its language and connections resonating long after the book is done. ■

Kathryn Rhett is the author of the memoir Near Breathing and editor of Survival Stories: Memoirs of Crisis. She teaches writing at Gettysburg College and in an MFA program at Queens University of Charlotte. Her work is forthcoming in Harvard Review.