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**Review of *The Loss of a Life Partner: Narratives of the Bereaved*.  
Carolyn Ambler Walter. Reviewed by Amanda Smith Barusch.**

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## Book Reviews

Carolyn Ambler Walter, *The Loss of a Life Partner: Narratives of the Bereaved*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. \$52.50 hardcover, \$26.50 papercover.

Carolyn Walters is a professor at Widener University's Center for Social Work Education. She was widowed at a relatively young age and found that her experiences of grief and loss were not reflected in what she had been taught about these life processes. Specifically, she felt that it was important, not to "let go" of a deceased loved one, but to find a way to hold onto—and relocate—the memories while moving on with life. This insight permeates the volume and (perhaps not surprisingly) is reflected in the narratives. It is also reflected in Walters' experience. She reports having successfully transformed the relationship with her deceased spouse and being newly re-married.

The idea for this book took root when Walters realized, while giving a workshop on loss of a young spouse, that there were no support groups for domestic partners. This led to an exploration of disenfranchised loss that focused on the work of Ken Doka. Many of the narratives reported here confirm Doka's observation that acceptance of the relationship by friends and family can facilitate the grief process and reduce the experience of disenfranchisement.

*The Loss of a Life Partner* is a pleasant and interesting read, and as Walters predicts, ". . . the narratives provide riveting examples of the loss of a partner" (p. xvii). The book's organization is satisfying, beginning with a review of classic and postmodern paradigms for understanding grief (Chapter 1) and a summary of research literature on loss of a partner (Chapter 2). These introductory chapters are followed by four chapters: Loss of Spouse (Chapter 3), Loss of an Opposite-Sex Partner (Chapter 4), Loss of a Gay Partner (Chapter 5) and Loss of a Lesbian Partner (Chapter 6). The book closes with a discussion of Similar and Diverse Themes (Chapter 7), examination of grief interventions (Chapter 8) and an exploration of clinical implications (Chapter 9).

The twenty four respondents whose narratives make up the body of this work were recruited through announcements in

newsletters of organizations such as the Association for Death Education and Counseling and from hospice organizations, augmented by a snowball technique. As a result, the majority are therapists and counselors, all are white-collar professionals, most are middle-aged, and it seems the vast majority are white. These respondents are articulate and insightful. Many of them sought therapy to cope with their losses. Those who mentioned hospice organizations were glowing in their praise. All of this is not surprising given the recruiting strategy. While one might wish for greater diversity of class and race, Walters is not attempting a comprehensive examination of grief and loss. Her intent is to build on insights that have stemmed from her personal and professional experiences and provide practical clinical insights for practitioners who work with this population; and in this regard the book is an unqualified success.

Disenfranchised grief is a central theme of this work. Walters suggests that lesbians in particular benefit from telling trusted others the nature of their relationships. And, for opposite-sex and for gay and lesbian partners, she suggests that the presence of knowledgeable, supportive friends and family members reduces the extent to which the bereaved experience disenfranchisement. Walters notes the presence of homophobia in the lives of her gay and lesbian respondents, but seems to neglect the role of the broader community in disenfranchising non-traditional relationships. Indeed, disenfranchisement is treated here more as an interpersonal process, than as the result of social norms and public policies. This view is common in the grief literature, probably because of its focus on reducing the immediate suffering of the bereaved. Yet those who view disenfranchisement as depriving a person of privileges or legal rights may find it disconcerting.

Walters offered two especially touching examples of disenfranchisement in relation to legal rights. In these cases, lesbian women had medical power of attorney, but their views were ignored by medical authorities. Treatment decisions that were carefully crafted by a dying woman and her partner were overruled, despite the legal authority of the power of attorney. Walter notes that this did not happen to gay men in her sample, but does not draw the natural conclusion that this may be yet another example of the subjugation of women by the medical establishment.

Another poignant theme in the book is the transformative aspect of grief. Time and again respondents reported that the loss of their loved one had made them different—better—people. As one respondent put it, “What doesn’t kill you makes you strong.” In a truly post-modern interpretation, Walters describes this as the process of “making meaning from the experience.” Thus she deftly sidesteps the question of whether profound loss “really” does make us stronger, more patient, more in tune with life’s priorities, more spiritually aware . . . or whether we just need to believe this to justify our massive suffering.

The reader will not find this book an outstanding example of in-depth qualitative research. The sample is small and homogenous along dimensions of race and class. Results tend to confirm the author’s expectations, and causal assumptions are not subjected to careful critical analysis. This does not detract from the clinical and practical significance of Walter’s contribution. The book offers a strong, clear theoretical framework, thoughtful integration of the relevant literature, and unusually perceptive insights into the clinical implications of the cases considered. *The Loss of a Life Partner* will be a valuation addition to professional libraries and a useful tool for instruction.

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Andrea Cornwall and Alice Welbourn (Eds.), *Realizing Rights: Transforming Approaches to Sexual & Reproductive Well-being*. New York: Zed Books, 2003. \$49.95 hardcover, \$16.95 paper-cover.

Each morning I have a cup of coffee as I expect many of you do. What I noticed recently was that my morning coffee had been grown and harvested in Zimbabwe. Until reading Cornwall and Welbourn’s book I took my coffee for granted, never really thinking about the people who grew and harvested the beans and the hardships they endure. *Realizing Rights* is an exploration by 37 authors from across the globe that presents evaluative data related to a variety of programs targeted at HIV-AIDS, environmental issues affecting breast cancer, sexual, reproductive health, teenage