



Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide

By Lisa Lieberman

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Lieberman looks at the cultural meaning of suicide and how it has gone from being seen as subversive to self-destructive.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Society sees suicide as a symptom of insanity and helplessness, the last desperate resort of the mentally or terminally ill. This intellectually rich meditation seeks to reclaim suicide as a "meaningful gesture," both an expression of personal autonomy and a "subversive" critique of society. Cultural historian Lieberman develops this theme in five essays on the shifting meaning of suicide, focusing on 18th- and 19th-century Europe. She explores how older moralistic conceptions of suicide as either an assertion of personal integrity or a sinful privileging of self over God and community gave way to the modern medical and sociological view of suicides as victims of psychiatric illness or social anomie. She also shows how suicide figured as an irresponsible and impulsive affront to liberal democracy in the works of Rousseau and Tocqueville; examines the patriarchal fear of women's "power to disrupt the established order" evident in the literary suicides of Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina; and follows the Romantic cult of suicide as it spread from Goethe's novels into real-life suicide notes. These engaging, erudite but somewhat detached and critical essays are capped by a final, more personal piece on the suicides of artists like Diane Arbus and Sylvia Plath and Holocaust survivors like Jean Améry, whose defiant suicide ("I die," he wrote, "therefore I am") was a "heroic declaiming of dignity" and a bleakly fitting commentary on the irrecoverable loss of his humanity in the camps. Lieberman seems to be searching for a truly justifiable excuse for suicide, and if she cannot quite find it, her provocative and sometimes heartfelt arguments will make readers reexamine the issue.

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From The New England Journal of Medicine

During the weeks and months that followed the horrific events of September 11, 2001, I could not help noticing that the op-ed pages of America's newspapers took great pains to make clear that the terrorists who steered jets into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon were not real suicides. The implication was that they had nothing in common with the troubled, depressed souls we think of, often with compassion, when we hear the profoundly unsettling word "suicide." I thought of this recently as I read Lisa Lieberman's *Leaving You*, a collection of essays that explore the history of our attitudes toward self-destruction.

Lieberman understands that for most of recorded history, suicide has primarily been seen not as a private act of desperation, but as a public statement with a larger social resonance. Suicides were often depicted not as miserable, helpless victims but as rational masters of their own fates, sacrificing themselves in the name of protest, idealism, or subversion. By the standards of antiquity, the terrorists of September 11 could well have seen themselves as modern-day versions of Samson, who knew that as he pulled down the Philistine temple, he, too, would die. The suicide of Cato, the Roman general who threw himself on his sword rather than accept defeat, was considered to be a heroic expression of man's free will. Only in the past few centuries, Lieberman points out, has suicide come to be seen as exactly the opposite: the product not of autonomy but of complex psychodynamics often rooted in depression or some other form of mental illness. Suicide has become a problem to be diagnosed, treated, and prevented -- the domain of the psychiatrist, the sociologist, and more recently, the psychopharmacologist, who have supplied us with what Lieberman calls "our most comforting assumption about self-destruction: that individuals who kill themselves are entirely passive, that they do not seriously intend to die." Those who commit suicide are seen as victims, not protagonists.

Lieberman seeks to buck this trend, to reclaim suicide from the experts and, in doing so, to restore some of its larger significance and its dignity. As she puts it, "The thread that runs through all of [these essays] is my appreciation of self-destruction as a meaningful gesture, a statement that holds more than private significance." Lieberman traces what she calls "the victim-oriented approach" and what others have called "the medicalization of suicide" to 18th-century France, when an increasing number of classically inspired suicides ("the Roman mode of death," it was called) threatened the public order. "Like Rome, France

appeared to be crumbling from within, adrift intellectually, ridden with vice, and plagued with political instability," writes Lieberman. "In this setting, self-destruction seemed less an affirmation of personal freedom than a manifestation of national despair." Something had to be done. Just as Saint Augustine had stemmed the tide of early Christian suicides by redefining suicide as a sin, not a path to martyrdom, French alienists and moral statisticians (the forerunners of psychiatrists and sociologists) sought to reduce the incidence of self-destruction by interpreting suicide as neither heroic nor sinful but, rather, the desperate act of unhappy people. (The influential alienist Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol went so far as to describe suicide as a symptom of insanity.) "The consequence of removing morality from the equation was that it also removed volition," writes Lieberman. "Presuming that no one in his or her right mind wanted to die, psychiatrists felt no qualms about disregarding the stated motivations of potential suicides in order to rid them of their delusions." In essence, the professionals had taken suicide away from the suicidal. Lieberman, who teaches modern European cultural history at Dickinson College, in Pennsylvania, is a spirited and, at times, lyrical writer who makes insightful connections. She compares, for instance, the suicide of Holocaust survivor Jean Amery to that of Socrates and contrasts the terminally ill who contemplate self-destruction with the 19th-century Native Americans who killed themselves rather than be absorbed by a nation that denied them any meaningful future. Her attempt to restore a measure of dignity to "the so-called victim" is, I think, a brave and important counterweight to the prevailing and often patronizing medical model. She stacks the deck, however, by relying heavily on examples from antiquity (Cato, Socrates, Seneca) and literature (Werther, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary). I would have liked to see her parse the cultural meaning of less celebrated suicides: that of the depressed man who took a fatal overdose and left a note saying, "I can't win," for instance, or, for that matter, Lieberman's own grandfather, who killed himself during the Great Depression and whom she mentions only briefly. (I wondered, too, about implications for prevention. Would Lieberman, who has worked at a suicide hotline, have us accept at face value the teenage boy who says he wants to kill himself "like Kurt Cobain"?) Certainly, every suicide has a cultural meaning that we must listen to and learn from, but though it can provide clues to the cause of the act, it rarely tells the whole story. For that, we need the psychological, sociological, and biologic nuances as well. Indeed, in the case of the September 11 terrorists, a more complex picture has emerged over time. Now the terrorists seem to have been neither martyrs nor cowards, but troubled, vulnerable young men ripe to be swept away by a cause -- more akin, perhaps, to those cultists who swallowed poisoned Kool-Aid and followed Jim Jones to their deaths in the Guyana jungle than to clear-eyed Cato. *George Howe Colt, M.A.*

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Review

Wonderfully lucid and nervy meditation...provides an illuminating sketch of suicide over the centuries...enlightening...absorbing. (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*)

An intellectually courageous book, Lieberman's arguments challenge conventional views on suicide and deserve serious consideration. (Howard I. Kushner, Ph.D., Professor, Rollins School of Public Health and Graduate Institute for Liberal Arts, Emory University)

Intellectually rich meditation...engaging, erudite...provocative and sometimes heartfelt arguments will make readers reexamine the issue. (*Publishers Weekly*)

In this pithy book Lisa Lieberman explores the underlying influence that literature has had on individual human self-destruction throughout history. (Derek Humphry)

Slender and elegantly written.... The asperity of Lieberman's wit is particularly welcome in this territory...Lieberman sets the bar pretty high. (Laura Miller, Loyola University Chicago *Salon.Com*)

Leaving You...asks provocative questions about how we in the 21st century respond to suicidal violence. (Death Studies)

Lieberman...is a spirited...writer.... Her attempt to restore...dignity to "the so-called victim" is...brave and important... (George Howe Colt, M.A. *New England Journal Of Medicine*)

[Lieberman's] enterprise is a noble one: ...to disabuse us of the notion that suicide is meaningless. (Hampshire Gazette)

Lieberman offers a thought-provoking contrast to George Rosen's classic work on the history of suicide. Highly recommended. (CHOICE)

Offers a richly textured historical narrative. Displays a great facility at synthesizing disparate sources...into a compelling explanation... (*Metapsychology Online Reviews*)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Arthur Elsberry:

In this time globalization it is important to someone to find information. The information will make someone to understand the condition of the world. The health of the world makes the information quicker to share. You can find a lot of references to get information example: internet, magazine, book, and soon. You can see that now, a lot of publisher which print many kinds of book. The book that recommended for you is *Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide* this reserve consist a lot of the information in the condition of this world now. This particular book was represented just how can the world has grown up. The dialect styles that writer use to explain it is easy to understand. The actual writer made some study when he makes this book. That is why this book suited all of you.

Adam Sea:

As we know that book is very important thing to add our information for everything. By a publication we can know everything we would like. A book is a pair of written, printed, illustrated or perhaps blank sheet. Every year had been exactly added. This book *Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide* was filled regarding science. Spend your free time to add your knowledge about your scientific research competence. Some people has distinct feel when they reading a new book. If you know how big benefit of a book, you can really feel enjoy to read a guide. In the modern era like now, many ways to get book you wanted.

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