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LIFE & WORKBOOKSHELF:

# Martha Hodes

on catastrophe and mourning



Ms. Hodes, a professor of history at New York University, is the author, most recently, of 'Mourning Lincoln.'

PHOTO: BRUCE DORSEY

March 6, 2015 3:22 pm ET

## **This Republic of Suffering**

By Drew Gilpin Faust (2008)

**1**The Civil War's death toll was catastrophic: At about 2% of the population, the equivalent today would be something like seven million gone. Ms. Faust guides us from 19th-century visions of ideal ways to die to foul-smelling bodies dumped in unmarked battlefield graves and from the home-front "work of mourning" to the nation's newfound responsibilities toward the families of the fallen—before the Civil War, the federal government held no such obligations. For the bereaved, convictions about God's will and heavenly reunion helped, but even the war's noblest causes could not extinguish personal anguish. "Slavery gave the war's killing and dying a special meaning for black Americans," Ms. Faust writes, yet the endurance of bondage had been more than enough sacrifice. If the achievements of union and freedom soothed the grief of the victors, soon the "Lost Cause" myth would comfort defeated Confederates. Ms. Faust tells a vivid and intimate history in which, as she writes, "a world lay behind every name."

## The Lost

By Daniel Mendelsohn (2006)

**2**When the author was a boy, his elderly relatives would glance his way and cry, for the youngster keenly resembled his maternal grandfather's brother, who, along with his wife and four daughters, had perished in the Holocaust. Mr. Mendelsohn heard "scraps of whispers" about the victims—his grandfather, for example, said they had hidden in a castle. Wanting to know more, he contacted distant relatives, unearthed documents and traveled: to Brooklyn, to the now-Ukrainian town of Bolechow, to Australia, Israel, Sweden, Denmark and back to Bolechow. Longing to know "the tiny details" that "could bring the dead back to life," he soon understood that mere facts were unsatisfying ("He was deaf, she had pretty legs") and the stories contradictory ("*It was in September. It was in August. . . . she was with Zimmerman and no one saw her again. No, she was with Halpern*"). Mr. Mendelsohn's quest is mesmerizing: the mystery (there was no castle anywhere near Bolechow), the leads and dead ends, the chance encounters and fragile memories, and, eventually, the revelations. When, in the end, he finds that castle, he castigates himself for missing the obvious, but the book is utterly brilliant.

## Letters to Jackie

By Ellen Fitzpatrick (2010)

**3**In the two years following the assassination of John F. Kennedy, more than 1.5 million mourners wrote letters of condolence to his widow. Rich and poor, young and old, Democratic and Republican, they compared the slain president to Moses, Jesus, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Strangers claimed him as a friend and a brother (a “twin brother,” wrote a woman who asked to serve as Caroline’s “Negro Godmother”). They wrote to console Jackie—a Long Island housewife included her telephone number, “if you ever want to talk”—but also to participate in history. They talked politics, and they told Jackie about personal losses: loved ones who had died of cancer, or drowned, or perished in a steel-mill accident. Throughout Ms. Fitzpatrick’s elegant selection and her accompanying narrative runs the mourner’s anguished call for an answer, as captured by a Chicago woman in a letter written three days after the assassination: “We meet friends and everywhere the question is the same. Why, Why, Why?”

## The Emperor’s Children

By Claire Messud (2006)

**4**Spun in glittering prose, this novel opens in March 2001, which means that its New York City characters are oblivious to the impending autumn terrorism, while we readers know they are moving inexorably toward what we now call 9/11. The collection of protagonists centers on three Ivy League graduates about to turn 30. Another character is set to launch a revolutionary magazine on Thursday, Sept. 13 (“It’s going to be unlike anything else. It’s going to be great”), while a misfit cousin will be starting a job “with some downtown financial company the day after Labor Day.” After the planes hit the towers, it’s the trajectory of that loner-cousin that transforms a scintillating novel about entitlement and self-delusion into a profound, indeed haunting and surprising, story. The prose shimmers to the very end, as Ms. Messud forces us to think about how the intrusion of catastrophe can alter different lives to astonishingly different degrees, thereby illuminating one of the most bitter realizations of those in mourning: that the world does not, in fact, come to a halt.

## Wave

By Sonali Deraniyagala (2013)

**5**This memoir opens on the day after Christmas on the southern coast of Sri Lanka, where the author is vacationing with her husband, Steve, and two young sons. The couple had met while studying economics at Oxford, she from Sri Lanka, he from East London. But something seemed wrong on that December day. “The sea never came this far in,” Ms. Deraniyagala writes. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami would claim more than a quarter of a million lives, and

Ms. Deraniyagala saved herself by clinging to a tree branch, “terrified,” she writes, that “I’d be told that Steve or the boys or my parents were dead.” Change the two *or*’s to *and*’s and you have her story. Memories of her husband, children and parents at first only intensified Ms. Deraniyagala’s suicidal grief, but slowly (very slowly) she found respite in thinking over their lives. Nearly five years on, she was “rediscovering them, almost”; two more years and she could “only recover myself when I keep them near.” The pages of this compact volume illuminate unfathomable catastrophe on an entirely human scale.