

JESSICA HANDLER

NOW AVAILABLE FROM ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

- *Braving the Fire: A Guide to Writing About Grief and Loss*
- Memoirist and writing teacher Jessica Handler available for interviews and workshops

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ABOUT JESSICA HANDLER *Author of **Braving the Fire** and **Invisible Sisters***

Jessica Handler is the oldest of three sisters. By the time she was 32 years old, she was the only one living. Her sister Susie died of leukemia when she was eight and Jessica was ten. Their sister Sarah died of a rare blood disorder called Kostmann's Syndrome, effectively the opposite of leukemia, when she was 27 and Jessica was 32. Their father was a Civil Rights attorney in Atlanta in the 1960s, and one of the questions each family member lived with was how to help others when they couldn't save their own family.

This story was the basis of Jessica's memoir, *Invisible Sisters*. Named the "Best Memoir of 2009" by *Atlanta Magazine* and "one of eight great southern books" by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Invisible Sisters* is now listed as one of the "25 Books All Georgians Should Read" by the Georgia Center for the Book.

When touring to promote *Invisible Sisters*, Jessica met readers who told her about who and what they grieved. They told her how they had started writing about their losses and how writing had helped them come to terms with the people they had become. Jessica wrote her next book, *Braving the Fire*, after she started teaching workshops about the challenges and rewards in writing about grief and loss. For *Braving the Fire*, Jessica contributed her own experience of writing a memoir, but went beyond to interview other memoirists about writing about grief and loss. She also talked with journalists about ethics, and with doctors and health practitioners about self-care when grieving.



Photo Credit: Beth Lilly

Jessica earned her MFA in Creative Writing from Queens University of Charlotte (N.C.) and a B.S. in communication from Emerson College in Boston. Her essays and features have appeared on NPR, in *Tin House*, *Drunken Boat*, *Full Grown People*, *Brevity*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, and *More Magazine*.

Honors for Jessica's writing include residencies at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts & Sciences, a 2010 Emerging Writer Fellowship from The Writers Center in Bethesda, Maryland, the 2009 Peter Taylor Nonfiction Fellowship at the Kenyon Review Writers Workshop, and special mention for a 2008 Pushcart Prize.

Jessica lives in Atlanta, but frequently travels to teach workshops and give readings. She is tech-savvy—tweeting [@jessicahandler](https://twitter.com/jessicahandler) and ready to Skype with book groups, bloggers and journalists. Learn more at JessicaHandler.com.

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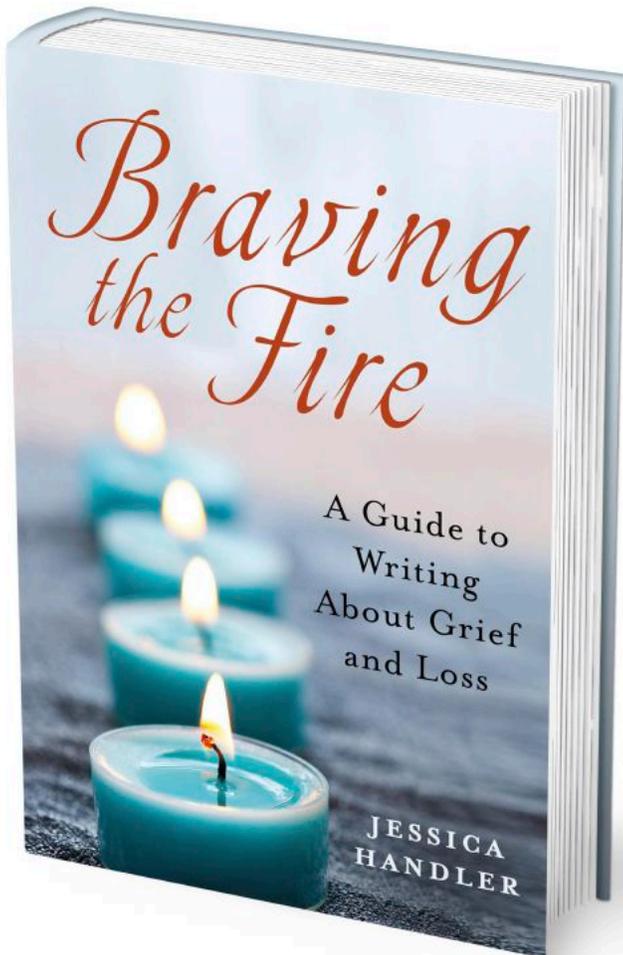
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BRAVING THE FIRE: A GUIDE TO WRITING ABOUT GRIEF AND LOSS **By Jessica Handler**

Braving the Fire (St. Martin's Griffin; December 10, 2013; Trade Paperback; \$15.99) is the first book to provide a road map for writing honestly about grief and loss. Created by and for the writer who has experienced illness, loss, or the death of a loved one. *Braving the Fire* takes the writers' perspective in exploring the challenges and rewards for the writer who has chosen to be the memory keeper. Loosely organized around the familiar Kubler-Ross "Five Stages of Grief," *Braving the Fire* helps the reader and writer through the emotional and creative tasks before them, incorporating interviews and excerpts from other treasured writers who've done the same.



PRAISE FOR BRAVING THE FIRE

"*Braving the Fire* is a necessary companion for any writer who wishes to write about grief. Handler gently and honestly states the difficulty and rewards of recording our most haunting stories. There is a silver bullet of hope in this guide: the remembrances of our lost loves may very well be the key to living vivid lives, healing in Technicolor."

– Christa Parravani, author of *Her*

"*Braving the Fire* is the best book about memoir writing I've read. Jessica Handler provides a brilliant, empathic, and sturdy guide to help us begin, develop, and complete a work of art dealing with those difficult subjects we might fear exploring but which will become the wellspring of our most profound work."

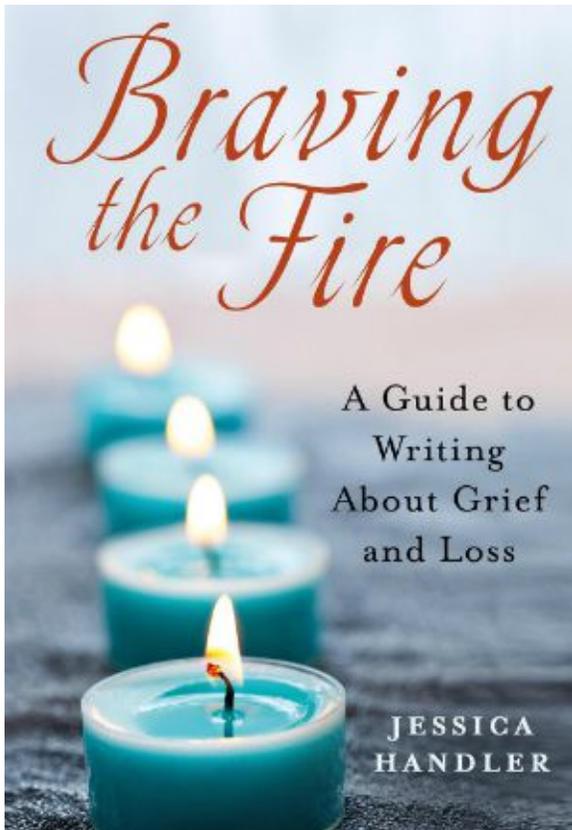
– Louise DeSalvo, author of *Writing as a Way*

of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives

"Read this book! *Braving the Fire* is brilliant, profound, thorough, and a delight. Through writing, it takes you to the core of your loss, honoring the uniqueness of your voice and ultimately revealing the beauty and power of your story, whatever it may be." – Susan Zimmerman, author of *Keeping Katherine* and *Writing to Heal the Soul*

"Jessica Handler beautifully illustrates how the power of our stories —well captured and conveyed— can heal our deepest sorrows. *Braving the Fire* is much more than a book by an eloquent writer for other writers. It is a must read for those who wish to live a life of transparency and to write with honesty about the journey." – River Jordan, author of *Praying for Strangers: An Adventure of the Human Spirit*

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Braving the Fire: ***A Guide to Writing About Grief and Loss***

On Sale Date: December 10, 2013
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ISBN 10: 1250014638
Ebook: 9781250014559
\$15.99 US / \$18.50 CA

"Braving the Fire is the best book about memoir writing I've read. Jessica Handler provides a brilliant, empathic, and sturdy guide to help us begin, develop, and complete a work of art dealing with those difficult subjects we might fear exploring but which will become the wellspring of our most profound work." - Louise DeSalvo, author of *Writing as a Way of Healing*

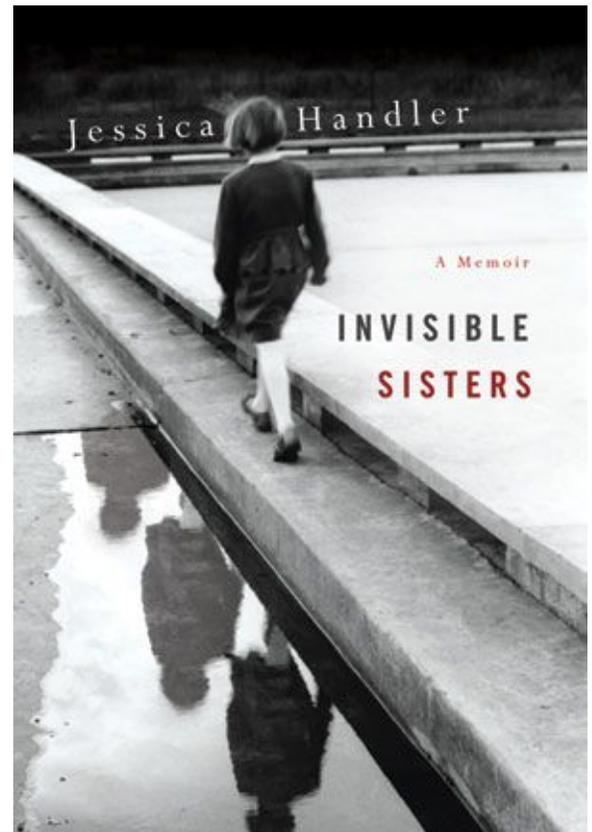
"Braving the Fire is a necessary companion for any writer who wishes to write about grief." – Christa Parravani, author of *Her*

Invisible Sisters

On Sale Date: April 13, 2009
Publisher: PublicAffairs
Hardcover - 272 pages
ISBN 13: 978-1-58648-648-8
ISBN 10: 1586486489
Ebook: 1586486489
\$24.95 US / \$29.00 CA

"With a sure grasp of revelatory detail, the author recalls homely verities from a vanished life. Her memory piece is an elegy for her dead sisters, who are not quite lost as long as they live in her thoughts. A heartfelt, painful family saga, skillfully told by a survivor." - *Kirkus*

"Handler tells this story with the lyrical elegance and cool remove of Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*—the highest praise possible for any memoir of loss.... There is an undeniable burden in being 'the only one left,' but there is true grace in the act—and art—of first remembering, then surviving." - *Atlanta Magazine*



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WORKSHOPS By Jessica Handler

“Jessica Handler is one of the only authors we know who can make you laugh and cry with the same sentence.” - Charis Books & More, the nation’s oldest independent feminist bookstore, Atlanta, GA

Jessica Handler is the author of *Braving the Fire: A Guide to Writing About Grief and Loss* and *Invisible Sisters: A Memoir*. With an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Queens University (Charlotte, NC) and a B.S. in Communication from Emerson College (Boston, MA), Jessica has served in faculty and guest instructor roles at a number of colleges and universities in the Atlanta area.

Jessica has been invited to teach workshops all across the country, including the Oxford Nonfiction Conference, the Iowa Summer Writing Program and Grub Street Writers’ Conference.

Jessica teaches relaxed, friendly workshops focused on the craft of writing well about grief and trauma. Beginners encouraged! Jessica can customize each workshop to the group’s needs. What follows are some of the workshops she can facilitate:

Writing the Tough Stuff

Everyone experiences personal difficulty at some point in their lives. We may find that we want to write about loss, grief, or trauma with the notion that getting it down on paper will be cathartic. This lecture will present strategies for strong literary writing, and discuss cross-disciplinary research in creating trauma narratives. Participants will leave with take-home generative writing exercises.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

A well-written memoir about grief or loss demonstrates that the writer has moved forward enough to look back. But how does a writer’s “back” shape his or her “forward?” If we intend to write well about our loss, ‘looking back’ on positive and negative experiences involves more than just capturing slippery memory on the page. Looking back creates forward motion in the story. In this workshop, participants will discuss examples from classic memoir, and generate new material from writing prompts generated by the workshop. Participants will receive a reading list for further exploration and take-home prompts.

There’s More Than “Me” in Memoir

A good memoir tells your story, but in order to capture your reader’s heart and imagination, the very best memoirs place the author’s personal story within the beauty and tragedy of the larger world. In this workshop, you will learn ways to develop your memoir so that it resonates not only with you and yours, but with readers everywhere. Open to writers of all levels.

WORKSHOPS, CONT'D

Creating Powerful Prose After Grief or Trauma

Robert Frost wrote “no tears for the writer, no tears for the reader,” but what are a prose writers’ tools for bringing emotionally difficult material to the page and moving through trauma to create powerful work? In the first half of this day-long workshop, we will examine leading examples of grief writing and undertake writing exercises to learn ways to confront tears, find joy, and meet on the page the little known continuation of Frost’s quote: “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”

In the second half, we will convene for a facilitated, craft-focused discussion of our writing. Participants will gain strategies for writing about trauma in pursuit of insight, a sense of wholeness, and connection to readers. Open to writers at all levels, in all genres. (Please submit three to five pages of fiction or nonfiction prose in advance of the group meeting.)

Research Materials You Didn’t Know You Had

Some of the most powerful, effective research tools for fiction and nonfiction aren’t found in libraries, historical societies, or on the Web, but in our daily lives. This workshop will lead writers of all levels and genres through techniques for building scene and characters using informal research material we can find in our attics and junk drawers, including yearbooks, family recipes, and casual hometown field trips. We will read examples from prominent memoirs, and lead a discussion about methods for organizing, understanding, and examining research you can easily find in your own lives.

WHAT WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS ARE SAYING

“This was the first course that helped me understand the components of a good memoir...Jessica is approachable, very knowledgeable, and supportive.” - Debbie S.

"I [was] looking for the scenes and stories in my life." Cherry Z.

BOOK JESSICA FOR AN UPCOMING WORKSHOP

Interested in booking Jessica for a writers’ workshop or speaking engagement? She’s available for in-person visits as well as by Skype. [Email jessicahandler@comcast.net](mailto:jessicahandler@comcast.net).

“On the Pain Scale” by Jessica Handler

First published on September 15, 2013 by *Full Grown People*

I have become, at fifty-three, a full-grown person. Two years ago, I stepped into the role of midwife to my mother’s death. I chose it. She was with me when I began. I would be with her when she ended.

Lung cancer had colonized her brain, her spine, her right hip and shoulder. Where did this begin? My father smoked, a lot. My mother smoked, very little. My parents and little sister lived fewer than ten miles from the Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station on the morning that the reactor experienced a meltdown in March, 1979; I was away at college. Mom refinished furniture for a hobby, breathed the fumes, handled the toxins. After my father was gone from her life, her late-in-life boyfriend smoked. Where did this begin? Everywhere and nowhere.

“So this is what happens when you have six kinds of cancer,” Mom said the first time she fell. She said it again the first time she couldn’t stand unaided, and the day she threw up the crème brûlée.

“It’s just three kinds of cancer,” I said, bringing her ginger tea to the table. We laughed, a little. We are dark-humored, and fluent in the language of terminal illness.

My mother had three daughters, of whom I am first and last. Susie has been dead for forty-four years, Sarah for twenty-one. Susie developed leukemia when she was six. I was eight. She lived less than two years. Our little sister Sarah lived with a rare blood disorder and died as a young woman. Mom and I spoke of them often. Often we spoke of them without words.

I told my sisters’ names to Y., our favorite nurse’s aide. “In case she’s looking for them,” I said. For dying people, past and present run together like chalk drawings in the rain. “She was calling for Susie yesterday,” Y. told me. I wondered aloud if Mom was troubled or frightened. “Not at all,” Y. said, relieved to know who my mother had been trying to find. “She was looking out the door, like she was calling in a child from playing.”

My heart broke.

Some mornings I woke in my mother’s bed. Others I woke with my husband in my own bed, ninety-four miles from hers. There was a moment every morning when I didn’t know where I was.

Mom’s pain was usually a two or three. On the Wong-Baker FACES™ pain scale chart, that’s somewhere between a smiley-face with barely knit brows and a smiley-face that appears to have something serious on its mind. The zero quantity of pain-free is represented by an untroubled smiley face with a touch of crazy-eyes. Neither Mom nor I reached a ten, the greatest level of pain. Ten is a crumpled, desperate face shedding drops that could be sweat or tears. Or blood. Her oncologist told us we were lucky.

My pain would hover at five, if pain scales measured the heart. I dreamed that it was me on the blue plastic draw sheet the nurses used to lift her. At the grocery store, I got lost. Which aisle has the cranberry juice? Does Mom have English muffins? This grocery store is in my city, not hers. I’m stocking my kitchen one week, hers another. I don’t want English muffins. I don’t want juice. I have lost fourteen pounds in the last two months. My always-slender mother wasted away. She weighed so

little that I could lift her like a toddler. From the bed to the portable toilet, to the wheelchair, to the piano, to the bed.

When I was a little girl, I drew pictures of birds and of girls. I couldn't draw faces, so I put bird heads on girl bodies and made bird girls. I concentrated while I drew, singing a two-note song to myself, sustaining what I've come to understand as a meditative state. What am I focused on now, watching my mother's face and seeing my own in hers? The bird-girls of my childhood drawings never flew. They went to work and ate and played and smiled their giddy smiles with beaks. They had expressive eyes.

Before my mother flew, before she closed her eyes and dreamed morphine dreams, our eyes locked over the commotion; so much to say, and nothing to say. We spoke without opening our mouths. We spoke without words.

Mom died in her bed at home. She was seventy-eight. Hers was what hospice will tell me is a good death. A great death, the social worker will call it.

Several weeks earlier, to a nurse, a visiting friend, a relative—I no longer knew, everyone seemed interchangeable but my mother and me—I spoke for Mom on her behalf, even though she was right there in the living room with us, in a wing chair reading about Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell. I spoke as if she weren't there. "I don't think Mom will want that," I'd said, about a sandwich or a painkiller or someone's insistence that she go outdoors in the wheelchair she loathed. Mom looked up from her reading.

"I can speak for myself." She was smiling, but I'd hurt her feelings.

Drawing her out, I toyed with grammar, a subject that entertained us both.

"I've made you object and subject," I said, "so what's the verb?"

"Am," my mother told me. "The verb is 'I am.'"

On what would be the last night of her life, I fell asleep just after midnight, curled up beside her. When the nurse woke me, I was surprised by my calm. But that night, we were doing nothing but waiting, my mother and I. She had been on morphine for two days, bitter pills the nurse slipped under her tongue. Mom winced when she tasted them. She hadn't spoken for two days, and then only a whisper: "I love you," to Y., who had been part of her life for nearly a year, who climbed into the bed with her that morning to hold her and weep. When I stood beside the bed and asked Mom to rest, to take it easy, she mouthed, "I will." I told her she's my favorite mother. She smiled. I've told her that for years. Two nurses rolled her like a log and changed the draw sheet. We had a hard night. The oxygen she never used, never needed, became urgent for the first time the night before when Mom suddenly couldn't catch her breath. I rolled the blue O₂ machine from where she'd secreted it behind a nightstand. The evening assistant helped her with the cannula. "Do you want me to call hospice?" I asked Mom. She nodded, taking in the canned air.

At one in the morning, I sat cross-legged on her bed, holding her cool hand. I thought about how death is the exact opposite of birth. An obvious cycle and a thought not original to me, but I've never had a child and never witnessed a human birth. There was no sweat, no blood, no sound but Mom's subtle breathing, arrhythmic and gentle. Her bedroom smelled of lavender from the bushy plant on the patio and from her hand cream. I held one of her lavender sachets to her nose. She grimaced, then relaxed. "Tell her what you're holding so she doesn't startle," the night nurse told me. I did, then held the sachet to Mom's face again. This time, she was calm.

The night nurse had woken me, saying barely audibly, “It’s time.” Time for what, I wondered, thick with sleep, then saw where I was, that my mother’s hand was entwined with mine. I was neither anxious nor weeping, not begging Mom to try and live one more day. There’s a falsehood in that statement: I was anxious. I lived with a low frequency of anxious for two years. I didn’t want her to ever die, to leave me. There was not one thing that I could do to change our course.

I asked the nurse to tell my husband, dozing in the den. She vanished, returned with him, tucked a chair behind him. We focused only on Mom. Her breathing slowed; her apnea grew longer and longer. She stopped. I looked up, gestured to the nurse. I remembered her name: M., from the compassionate care team, the end-of-life, round-the-clock team. She held her stethoscope to my mother’s chest, my mother skinny and sleeping in her white waffle-knit long sleeved t-shirt. M. shook her head, told me she’s still with us. Mom took another short breath, shallow, a surprise to me, and then she was empty. As empty as an overturned glass. M. flicked her penlight on and leaned into Mom, lifting an eyelid. She shone the light, closed Mom’s eye, and said, “She’s gone.”

We took from Mom’s pinky finger the silver and jade ring that my grandfather made, and I put it on my own.

Full grown comes and goes with me. I don’t feel grown, and then I do. There is no choice. I wear the ring, and I feel my mother holding my hand. I hear her voice, flying just outside the scrim of my world. “I am,” she says. You are.

JESSICA HANDLER is the author of *Braving the Fire: A Guide to Writing About Grief* (St. Martin’s Griffin, December 2013.) Her first book, *Invisible Sisters: A Memoir* (Public Affairs, 2009) is one of the “25 Books All Georgians Should Read.” Her nonfiction has appeared on NPR, in *Tin House*, *Drunken Boat*, *Brevity*, *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post* and *More Magazine*. Honors include residencies at the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, a 2010 Emerging Writer Fellowship from The Writers Center, the 2009 Peter Taylor Nonfiction Fellowship, and special mention for a 2008 Pushcart Prize.