

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

**Rev. of Debby Mayer, *Riptides & Solaces Unforeseen* (Rhinebeck: Epigraph Publishing, 2013). Paper; 245 pp. \$14.95.**

*review by George Held*

### Dying

With ever more Americans caring for ailing parents, spouses, and partners, and even more requiring medical care at spiraling costs, Debby Mayer has written a book that will grip its readers by the shoulders and compel their attention from beginning to end. In *Riptides & Solaces Unforeseen* she tells the sobering story of the decline of her partner, Dan Zinkus, from diagnosis to death from brain cancer, from early May to late August 2002.

This is difficult material for a writer to handle without self-pity, undue self-consciousness, or even turning maudlin, but Mayer, a novelist and journalist, is as fit for the task as Albert Camus for telling his catastrophe story *The Plague*. In fact, Mayer's tautly controlled style and spare use of modifiers brings Camus to mind, and her book has all the understated tension and suspense that enhance his novel. Thus when explaining why she doesn't "feel singled out" by misfortune, she recalls two high-school friends who died in accidents and says of their funerals, her first, "I can still see the faces of their mothers. One could keep her chin up. The other had to be helped from the church." These three masterful sentences have no more than nine words apiece, and only "faces," "mothers," and "other" contain more than one syllable. These sentences have no qualifiers other than "the" and the personal pronouns "their" and "her"; the middle sentence consists of only six monosyllables. This sort of terse, measured writing allows readers to draw their own conclusions, invoke their own emotions about facing death.

That is, Mayer tells how she faced the death of her life partner and gives insight into how Dan, 56, faced his own death, when he was clear-headed enough to do so in the course of his debilitating illness and the battery of medications he took to allay its symptoms. Once a physically fit, good-humored, exacting man, he fights the good fight against an inexorable killer, and Mayer touchingly but unflinchingly shows him deteriorating, "his symptoms get[ting] worse every day." Facing surgery, he must struggle to sign the consent form: "Dan takes the pen, stares at the paper another couple of minutes, and then begins to sign his name. This takes an additional minute as his traditionally tight dollop of a signature wanders, wavering, across the entire sheet of paper." The strain in performing this normally simple act signals decline but completing it also represents a small victory, maybe one of the "unforeseen solaces" of the book's title.

But all victories in the battle against terminal cancer are pyrrhic, and however resourceful Mayer proves in getting Dan the best treatment available in the Hudson River Valley, where they live, she can never be sure that it is the best treatment, and she offers a number of vignettes of medical incompetence that might have goaded Goya into illustrating them in

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a series of ironic drawings. In the race between caregiver and death, there is only one winner, Mayer learns, and she teaches us how she ran the race even though, she tells a concerned friend after Dan dies, "I've been alone since May 30 [when he was hospitalized], it'll be the same, only different." As a close friend puts it, "*the transition's been going on all summer.*"

In fact, *Riptides* is a narrative about and a meditation on dying, that which everyone, sooner or later, experiences oneself or in the loss, sudden or slow, of a dear one. In Mayer's case, she loses the love of her life in four months. Fast or slow?—you be the judge. Mayer will let you be. She takes 245 pages to tell her tale of loss. Too short or too long?—you be the judge. I'd say it's just right: short enough to avoid melodrama or obscurity, long enough to flesh out Dan's and her stories to most readers' satisfaction. "Satisfaction" might be a strange word to use in this case, but because Mayer is an artist and has written personal nonfiction that reads like a novel, she leaves readers with that elusive sense of catharsis only art can provide.