

August 13, 2021

The following article is located at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/august-web-only/weight-memory-shawn-smucker-grief-secrets-past.html>

Christianity Today, August, 2021

BOOK REVIEW

## Grief Can Weigh You Down, but It Doesn't Have to Pull You Under

Shawn Smucker's latest novel explores the burden of unresolved regret and the healing power of sacrificial love.

JONATHAN SPROWL/POSTEDAUGUST 11, 2021



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Paul Elias is dying.

The mass growing inside his head is beyond the ability of his doctor to treat, and he will be dead sometime between “anytime and three weeks.” It’s a burden he chooses to carry alone, not revealing it to anyone. In addition to his terminal diagnosis, he is faced with the unsettling fact that when he is gone, there will be no one to care for his flighty 11-year-old granddaughter, Pearl, for whom he is the sole guardian. Even more unsettling is the fact that she’s been disappearing while reporting strange visits from a silver-haired woman no one else can see, who asks for help finding something she’s lost.

Until now, Paul has successfully fled and barricaded himself from his painful past. But confronting his mortality and Pearl’s need for a guardian forces him to return with her to Nysa, the town where he grew up, and where Mary, his wife and Pearl’s grandmother, drowned in a lake 40 years prior. What will they find there? Will someone from Paul’s past be able to care for Pearl when he’s gone? Will painful memories resurface, awakened by a familiar place? And will he finally find the peace that’s eluded him since his wife died?

*The Weight of Memory* is the third novel Shawn Smucker has written for an adult audience, following *Light from Distant Stars* ([winner](#) of the 2020 CT Book Award for Fiction) and *These Nameless Things*. In these books, as well as two young adult novels, Smucker seamlessly weaves together elements of suspense and magical realism to explore the psychological baggage of his characters. The past is a prison for so many of them, a parade of Jacob Marleys burdened by chains of regret. Much of the suspense arises from the winding paths they take to release those chains. Smucker's stories are grounded in the realities of pain and healing, guilt and forgiveness, which give the light touches of fantasy their poignancy.

## Heavy secrets

As Paul and Pearl are drawn inexorably to Nysa, a shriveled, dying town that the world has long passed by, they discover that Paul's wife, Mary, was not the last one to drown in Nysa's lake. In fact, a rash of drownings had sent most of the population packing, leaving an aura of death hanging about the town. Smucker's lush descriptions bring Nysa and its world-weary characters to life. The town has a familiar, lived-in quality reminiscent of the forgotten coal communities that pepper the Appalachian corridor near where Smucker lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

The settings of the novel are almost living, breathing characters unto themselves, a testament to Smucker's gift for creating a mood. Take water, for example, in its various forms. At first it presents a placid face, both as Paul and Pearl cross the long bridge to Nysa and as they come upon the glassy surface of the lake. But then it reveals its capricious nature with threatening rain and entombing depths that become more ominous against the backdrop of the drownings.

The concept of drowning itself becomes a kind of metaphysical conceit in *The Weight of Memory*. At one point, one character cautions another, "Secrets are heavy things. They'll drag you under if you don't let them go." Like slipping deeper beneath the waves, it's the secrets we keep that pull us away from one another and deeper into isolation. As Paul tries to hide his terminal diagnosis from more and more people, including Pearl, he can feel the mass in his head growing larger and his isolation and fear of death growing deeper.

Just as there is an oppressive heaviness in keeping secrets, there is also healing in bringing things to light. A common theme in Smucker's writing is that his characters create more pain for themselves by holding things in, for fear of being found out, than they would by coming clean. When the truth comes to light, there is often, though not always, a holy grief that lifts the attendant burdens away. At one point, a character says, "Grief is hard and good. It is the disease and the medicine, all at once." Whether that grief will heal or consume is a pivotal matter in many of Smucker's novels.

Throughout *The Weight of Memory*, interspersed flashbacks show the events that led to Mary's drowning. They ebb and flow within the unfolding story like tides coming in and out, slowly uncovering essential elements of backstory. In addition to lifting unresolved weights from characters' shoulders, they also offer the reader a kind of unburdening, slowly relieving the delicious tension of being held in suspense.

## Rays of hope

Though heavy themes of psychological and spiritual distress run through Smucker's novels, there is always a

ray of hope that pierces the darkness. In *The Weight of Memory*, that ray of hope is Paul's granddaughter, Pearl. At the risk of being too on the nose, her character is evocative of her mollusk-born namesake—a thing of beauty forged from past sorrow and adversity. She is a complex character, in some ways emotionally regressing, with a wild and vivid imagination that has not yet been corralled by the weight of reality that burdens Paul. In other ways she is wise beyond her years and aware of things she has no reason to know.

The power of the bond between Paul and Pearl drives the story forward. Dynamics between the two are constantly shifting, and Paul is sometimes exasperated and at other times mystified by her. The intimacy of the setting heightens the unexplored tensions in their relationship. In some ways, Pearl is still the same little girl that Paul has been raising, but in other ways she is metamorphosing into someone Paul doesn't fully recognize. He is not sure how worried he should be about her visions of the silver-haired lady and her tendency to disappear at the drop of a hat.

But there is also no question about the depth of their love and care for one another. They are both willing to make sacrifices for one another, and Pearl is often the only thing keeping Paul from spiraling into despair. As the story unfolds, they both make difficult decisions about how far they are willing to go to heal the wounds of the past.

At its heart, *The Weight of Memory* is a story about the power of sacrificial love to overcome even the deepest fissures in the human soul and the heaviest psychological burdens we carry. There is a vein of lightness and whimsy that runs through the narrative, carrying the reader through the heavier themes of loss and regret. This sets it apart from rank-and-file suspense novels, which often mistake dour heaviness for emotional and spiritual depth. The book has a slow-release poignancy that sneaks up on you in a quiet, unhurried sort of way. The intrigue of unlocking the various mysteries will bring you to the table, but the heart will make you stay.

*Jonathan Sprowl is a writer and editor based in Colorado Springs.*