The Companion is about the suicide of my friend Joel, who carried out a methodical plan to take his own life—a shock of bright light in a room where my eyes had grown accustomed to dimness. In a moment, much of what I knew about myself and about him was shrunken, was transfigured, was gone.

Shortly before his death, Joel gave me many of his personal items, drawing me into his plan while hiding his intent. One thread through the Companion is my care for, and my resistance to, these items, how I hold onto them and how they hold onto me. His life and death was a terrible gift too, a part of our exchange.

In the Companion I try to forgive his deceptions and my own blindness, to lay him peacefully to rest. Suicide has a glare that washes out details, and I try to resist a story that overwrites all other stories of our past. I look ahead to a future, but do not turn away from the facts. I try to come back inside the fatal circle that Joel drew around himself.

Patti Smith recently explained her motivation in taking photographs of odd items belonging to the dead, such as Arthur Rimbaud's spoon and fork. “I think it’s less about grief than remembrance,” she said. “Grief starts to become indulgent . . . but if you transform it into remembrance, then you’re magnifying the person you lost and also giving something of that person to other people, so they can experience something of that person.”

I hope that the spoon of the Companion brings something of Joel to the reader's lips.

FROM THE PRESS CATALOG

When Marcia Aldrich's friend took his own life at the age of forty-six, they had known each other many years. As part of his preparations for death, he gave

(continued on page 2)
Reactions

• “Exquisitely sad but painstaking in its clarity, Companion to an Untold Story is an effort to understand a friend’s decision to commit suicide. The author lays out the facts and emotions using the structure of an abecedary, as if the simplicity of a child’s alphabet book could bring logic to the terrible puzzle of loss. There is no suspense in the outcome, but reading the book draws you in so intimately that you, too, feel an urgent need to understand why an intelligent, likeable man would choose, with great deliberateness, to kill himself. This is a difficult subject, written extraordinarily well: a winner.”
—Susan Orlean, author of Rin Tin Tin

• “A wise reflection, both sympathetic and unflinching, on the life and death by suicide of the author's friend. The book poses questions about suicide and the processes leading up to it and provides answers too . . . when they exist. Perhaps just as importantly, the book leaves unanswerable questions as such, accurately and creatively distilling the experiences of those bereaved by suicide.”
—Thomas Joiner, author of Why People Die by Suicide

• “Marcia Aldrich takes on a project that seems impossible—restoring the life of a friend who gave away all his possessions and killed himself in an empty apartment—and succeeds brilliantly. She pieces together a portrait of the man and her friendship with him from multiple small definitions, each of them precise, lyrical, and daring. The resulting book is an ultimate companion—a friend, a guide, a moral compass—to the man's memory and to us all.”
—Kyoko Mori, author of Yarn: Remembering the Way Home

• “[The Companion] derives its power not just from the author's unflinching honesty but from the unique form she has chosen to shape this tale. A fascinating, absorbing story.”
—Dinty W. Moore, author of Between Panic and Desire

Companion to an Untold Story

(continued from page 1)

her many of his possessions, concealing his purposes in doing so, and when he committed his long-contemplated act, he was alone in a bare apartment.

In Companion to an Untold Story, Aldrich struggles with her own failure to act on her suspicions about her friend's intentions. She pieces together the rough outline of his plan to die and the details of its execution. Yet she acknowledges that she cannot provide a complete narrative of why he killed himself. The story remains private to her friend, and out of that difficulty is born another story—the aftershocks of his suicide and the author's responses to what it set in motion.

This book, modeled on the type of reference book called a "companion," attempts to find a form adequate to the way these two stories criss-cross, tangle, knot, and break. Organized alphabetically, the entries introduce, document, and reflect upon how suicide is so resistant to acceptance that it swallows up other aspects of a person's life. Aldrich finds an indirect approach to her friend's death, assembling letters, objects, and memories to archive an ungrievable loss and create a memorial to a life that does not easily make a claim on public attention. Intimate and austere, clear eyed and tender, this innovative work creates a new form in which to experience grief, remembrance, and reconciliation.

A NOTE TO TEACHERS

Companion to an Untold Story lends itself to writing courses that focus on formal innovation, portraits of people, the enlivening use of research, or memoirs of grief, death, and illness. I would be happy to participate in classes that adopt the Companion as a text.

FOR REVIEW COPIES AND INFORMATION

Amanda E. Sharp
Publicity Manager
University of Georgia Press
330 Research Drive, Oakbrook B-100
Athens GA 30602
Ph. 706-369-6160
Fax 706-369-6162
asharp@ugapress.uga.edu