



Lifesaving for Beginners

A MEMOIR BY

Anne Edelstein

“Loss, grief, and ‘the proof of love’ are at stake in this poignant and penetrating memoir of a daughter’s quest to understand her elusive mother, the suicide of her beloved brother, and the mystery at the heart of the will to live.”—**Jill Bialosky**, author of *History of a Suicide: My Sister’s Unfinished Life*

When Anne Edelstein was forty-two, her mother, an experienced swimmer in good health, drowned while snorkeling in Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. Caring for two small children of her own, Anne suddenly found herself grieving not only for her emotionally distant mother but also for her beloved younger brother Danny, who had killed himself violently over a decade before. To find peace in the future, she must wrestle not only with the past and her family’s long history of mental illness, but also with the present and the growing emotional needs of her children. Part memoir and part meditation on joy, grief, and the other extreme emotions that make families so impossible and so indispensable, the book will resonate with anyone who has ever struggled to come to terms with their siblings, their parents, their children, and their place in the larger familial constellation.

ADVANCE PRAISE

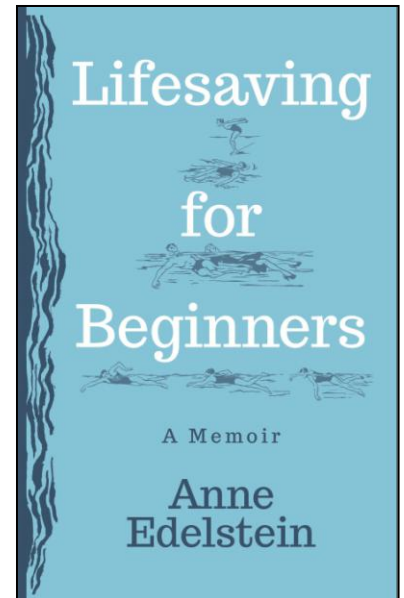
“Anne Edelstein maps the tragic legacy of her brother’s suicide and her mother’s accidental death with grace and fortitude, shedding light on the darkest of secrets. In the quotidian domain of family life, she finds the simple poetry of love and forgiveness. *Lifesaving for Beginners* is a soaring tribute to the ties that bind us, what makes us whole as human beings.”—**Anne Landsman**, author of *The Devil’s Chimney* and *The Rowing Lesson*

“As if in the eye of a hurricane, Anne Edelstein writes courageously about the deaths that swirl about her. Calm, clear, moving and oh-so poignant, *Lifesaving for Beginners* is a breathtaking portrait of our fruitless efforts to shield each other from the most painful aspects of life. Her book points in another direction and it is indeed a lifesaver.”—**Mark Epstein**, author of *The Trauma of Everyday Life* and *Going to Pieces without Falling Apart*

“While dramatic events set this memoir in motion, the triumph of *Lifesaving for Beginners* is that its heart lies not in the large ruptures of life but in the reconciliations that arrive quietly and routinely. I admire—and envy—the writing in this book. Its smooth surface belies its depths, much like the open waters Edelstein swims in as she seeks her own calmness and consolation.” —**Kathleen Finneran**, author of *The Tender Land*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For twenty-five years, **Anne Edelstein** has helped writers tell their stories, first as an editor at a publishing house and later as a literary agent. Anne lives in New York with her husband, and spends part of each year in Barcelona. She enjoys drawing, reading, writing, and traveling, and is an avid swimmer.



PUB DATE: November 7, 2017

ISBN: 978-1-59709-605-8

SIZE: 5 in x 8 in

FORMAT: Tradepaper

EXTENT: 240pp

PRICE: \$14.95

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REDHEN PRESS

DISTRIBUTED BY

Ingram Publisher Services
an exclusive distribution entity

ORDERING INFORMATION

Tel: 800-252-7012

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FROM LIFESAVING FOR BEGINNERS

I wonder about whether to call my uncle Nate to tell him right away, or if I should wait until morning. The news about my mother is strange, but my family is used to death. Unbelievably, Nate is now the only one of my mother's siblings who is still alive. My aunt Cecile died only a year and a half ago from a quick-spreading cancer, my uncle Jack eight years before that when he committed suicide, and now my mother in this mysterious drowning. They've all died younger than they were supposed to, my mother the oldest in life and in death at age sixty-eight. And then there's the death that has always been the hardest, my brother Danny who was only twenty-two when he died. Shocked as I am about my mother, I see no need to act rashly. It's 2:00 a.m. so I decide I might as well give Nate the rest of the night's sleep before calling him to say what's happened.

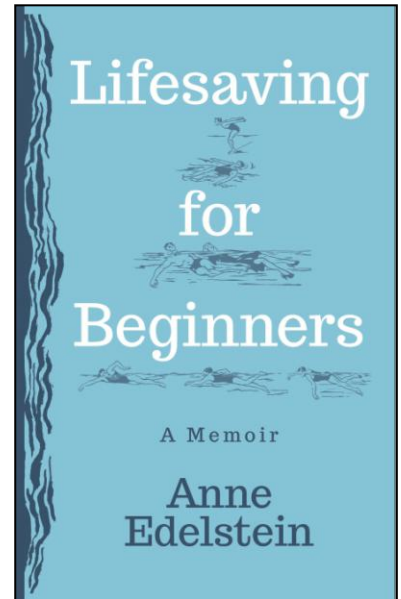
I just lie there flat on my back, solitary, Roy have drifted back to sleep. I stare up at the ceiling, trying as hard as I can to imagine it—the figure of my mother in the beautiful blue sea under a big bright sky.

At 5:30 a.m. when I hear Eva's cry, I take her to the other side of the apartment where we can be quiet and alone. Together on the living room couch, her body falls back to sleep on top of me. The early sun begins to light up the room. I look out at the Hudson River, wide and gray and almost stagnant this morning. My mother is now dead, I tell myself.

Eva, very much alive, sleeps peacefully on my chest, her warm breathing delicious. For a few moments it makes sense, there's an order to this picture. My mother with her plush body that once gave birth to me is on one end. Eva, a year-and-a-half-old perfect bundle of life, is at the other. And I'm in between. But then the logic is lost. My mother, whose life has forever been entangled with mine, has just drowned on the other side of the world.

Danny, the closest touch I've had to death until now, was six years younger than me. He committed suicide when he was only 22 in what still 15 years later seems like an impossibly painful way, with a knife. There have been other suicides in the family, too. It was five years after Danny died when my uncle Jack sealed off the windows and doors in his apartment and turned on the gas in the oven. Way before that my grandfather took a lot of pills and died in the men's baths on the Lower East Side, but that happened before I could remember when I was only a newborn baby, and I didn't even know about it until I was 25. My uncle Jack used to say that our family had a 'history of violence.' But even after living through Danny's death, I didn't really understand what he meant. Maybe I was just used to it, so I didn't see the point of giving it a label.

It's already clear that my mother's death is completely different from Danny's, and it's not only because she's my mother. For one thing, my mother never would have chosen to die. She hated suicide. When Danny died, she refused to talk about it, for fear that people would pity her, she said. Even outside the family when the husband of one of her closest friends attempted suicide a few years ago, she was angry, not sympathetic in the least. With Danny's death there had been the intense pain of it, not only what must have been his own unbearable pain but the pain we all had to live with afterwards. And there had been the ongoing spookiness behind his decision, the unyielding quest for answers that could never be known. My mother died in the ocean, with fish all around her. Maybe that's what makes it seem so impossible, that it might have been peaceful and that it happened halfway around the world.



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