

He is right. Normally, I think, I am loathe to use too many quotes from a review book, as I want you to read it (or not) and taking things out of context isn't necessarily likely to encourage you to do so (or not), but my experience of this form of 'jazz' demands something more of me than most books have before. Not better, not worse, but different. My sense reading this work is that creativity is something experienced, that reading this is a creative endeavour rather than an intellectual pursuit, and as such it is what it is talking about. I'm conscious I'm selling my dear book review editor short in terms of my word count, but I feel moved in a way akin to seeing a work of art or listening to poetry; too much analysis removes the very experience that was had and tries to reduce the whole to its parts but it's the whole which is necessary.

This resonates with my experience of my work, now with some clients really long-term as I realise I'm quickly approaching my tenth anniversary of sitting with people as a therapist, and to look at some interventions is utterly pointless without an appreciation of the whole of our relationship together. This dialogue gives an insight into the authors relationship with each other, but also this thing we all call existential therapy that we experience differently the world over, and to see it as a creative endeavour is necessary; this book helps with that. I would recommend this to all; it's accessible, provocative, striving to want to foreground the experience between two people and joyous to read. I would recommend a sunny Sunday morning with a coffee with these two friends to all. Read it.

Ben Scanlan

Facing Down the Furies: Suicide, the Ancient Greeks and me

2024. Edith Hall. New Haven: Yale University Press.

The tragedies that hurt the most are those that sufferers have chosen for themselves.

(Sophocles' *Oedipus the Tyrant*)

A messenger arrives to report that Jocasta, queen of Thebes, has killed herself. To prepare listeners for the terrible news, he begins with this announcement.

This deeply personal memoir by Edith Hall, professor in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at Durham University, is about how her own life and psyche have been shaped by suicides in her family – her mother's grandfather, mother and first cousin, and how the Ancient Greeks have enabled her to come to terms with this inheritance.

Her inspiration for this book was to help herself and others understand

and recognise the psychological damage that suicide inflicts on those left behind which, especially when hidden, can continue down generations. Bereavement by suicide is not like any other, it mostly can't be talked about and close family survivors feel silenced and shamed. Many countries still punish suicide attempts. Hall claims the only similar bereavement to self-killing is murder. I think she is right in saying it leaves greater scars on the bereaved and prejudice increases the burden on those already suffering.

Hall only recently started to acknowledge her own experience and to break free from the taboo of silence. She hopes this will help others who have also suffered from bereavement by "this saddest way of dying" (p2). She draws parallels between her own family history and characters from Greek tragedy, relating the impact of suicide to the Ancient Greek idea of a family curse and the myth of the Furies, who sought bloody revenge on those who committed murder or harm to kin. She also hopes to contribute to a secular philosophical case against suicide which she traces back to Aristotle.

She says she was saved from her own suicidal impulses by studying Classics at university, in particular Euripides' play *Heracles Mad*, about a suicidal crisis where Heracles is persuaded out of taking the irrevocable step by a close friend, Theseus, who comes without judgement to "participate in his agony" (p185) and help him bear the calamities sent by the gods and to go on living rather than compound misery with misery.

In her chapter on the Greek tragedians, Hall shows how their plays explored a range of moral dilemmas, including suicide, and are remarkably non-judgmental about it while voicing different reasons for those choosing it and the feelings of the bereaved through many deeply affecting speeches. These playwrights were free within limits to alter the traditional myths in order to continue exploration of issues. For example, Euripides wrote an alternative ending to Jocasta's story in *Phoenician Women* where she lives to an advanced age with her blinded son/husband Oedipus. In his *Antigone* she does not kill herself. Hall thinks Euripides wanted to show suicidal impulses are a temporary phenomenon and where there's life there's hope.

She draws parallels between characters from Greek tragedy and her own relatives, including her great-grandfather, whose death bore similar motivations to Sophocles' Ajax; both men probably overwhelmed by shame and humiliation. Ajax died at his own hand after a manic episode, attacking livestock in mistake for enemy soldiers. The Greeks recognised mental illness and attributed it to the gods, as punishment for an insult, jealousy or some other petty motive.

She discusses how her studies of these timeless plays have helped her work through the loss of her grandmother and namesake Edith and understand her relationship with her own mother. The wisdom and solace found in the ancient tragedies, she argues, can help someone choose survival over painful

adversity and offer comfort to those who are tragically bereaved.

Her memoir opens in 2021, five years after her mother's death, when she began her exploration into the lives of her suicidal ancestors about whom she knew very little; as so often the case, photos and other mementos of the deceased having been destroyed. The following year she made a tour to their homes in Scotland to see where they lived and to leave flowers at the sites where they died. This brought her "overwhelming relief" (p3) and in the process brought to light all their considerable achievements, happy moments and good deeds.

In her chapter 'Who is damaged by suicide' she explores the philosophical arguments on suicide, from Plato and Aristotle to Hume, Sartre and Camus, among others. She makes an interesting point about Socrates, that he did have a choice, that he could have been allowed exile. Instead his suicide and the manner of going about it makes him seem callous. He rebuked his friends for their tears and sent away the women and children to avoid being disturbed by them. This contrasts sharply with Aristotle who, when charged with impiety, chose exile rather than death and when he died of natural causes left a will planned for the care of his wife and children and his slaves who were given their freedom.

In Aristotle's time, suicide was neither proscribed nor sanctioned by law, but his own deliberations led him to conclude that when we exercise a right to kill ourselves it almost invariably violates the rights of those to whom we owe moral duties. Hall's point about insufficient concern and empathy for those left behind is an important contribution to existential thinking, which mostly focuses on discussion around individual freedom rather than Aristotle's 'role responsibilities' argument.

Then Hall's book becomes more autobiographical with chapters on her great-grandfather's tale, her grandmother's tale, her mother's and cousin's tales and, finally, her own. Her great-grandfather came from an impoverished background and through hard work raised himself through society, becoming highly esteemed for his contribution so that when he drowned himself in 1912 the presiding (and unusually enlightened) Reverend gave a full account of his good deeds and loss to the community and enjoined the congregation not to judge his 'sad and serious limitations' (p94). Hall thinks he may have been alcoholic and killed himself from shame after a very public episode.

Her grandmother, a highly intelligent and educated achiever, suffered depression all her life and was often bedridden. Hall discusses research on the typical effects of a father's premature death on his daughter, made worse if the mother is emotionally inexpressive as Edith's mother was. Daughters often blame themselves for their father's decision to die, are susceptible to bouts of grief and depression, and are more likely to have difficulties with romantic relationships. Edith was in an unhappy marriage,

had lost a child and was overly dependent on her daughter. She killed herself by jumping from a hotel window.

Hall's mother was an only child who suffered from an unavailable and sometimes unkind mother until World War II provided an escape from her "suburban genteel captivity" (p149). Universities were encouraging teenage girls to apply to fill their empty lecture halls, which she did. Her cousin, to whom she had been very close, who had survived service in the war and resumed his veterinary practice, shot himself in 1959. She, however, made a happy marriage and died a natural death in old age, having bravely "stared the Furies in the face: (p203) and not given into them.

Hall has experienced suicide ideation since teenage and suggests controversially this may not always be harmful, that paradoxically life becomes more bearable when escape is a possibility. She is encouraged in this view by examples such as Churchill, who told his doctor he didn't like to stand near the edge of a platform with an express train due. However, research from Glasgow University and elsewhere suggest ideation can lead to actual suicide. Instead, we need to eliminate stigma so people feel able to talk about it openly and not be silenced and ashamed. Hall's book is an important step along the way.

Overall I enjoyed this book and think it can be helpful to our readers in contributing to the conversation about suicide and in achieving another of Hall's hopes for her book – that these plays to find a place in our discussions. She ends her book on a positive note with this exhortation to lament but believe the future may be better, as it has been for her:

Sing the song of sorrow, but let good prevail.

The Chorus, Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*

Diana Pringle

On the Calculation of Volume Vol I & II.

2024. Solvej Balle. Trans. Barbara J. Haveland. London: Faber & Faber.

It is always with some trepidation that I read a contemporary novel, or in this case novels (of which more later) being heavily promoted as the next REALLY 'Big Thing'. Disappointment is usually just around the corner. Solvej Balle's cycle of novels will emerge from the creative processes over the forthcoming years, but the first two volumes are available in English (they were originally written in Danish) and are under review here. There will apparently be seven in all. The third will be published in English later this year, a fourth is in the translation process, a fifth already exists and the last two are yet to appear. As far as the business