A Review on *Making Toast*

Roger Rosenblatt’s memoir on his family tragedy reads like fiction. It was short and to the point; I flew through the pages illuminated on the images he centered on and completely connected with the text. However, I started the novel not entirely sure of what I was reading. Was it a short story? Was it poetry? No, this was not fiction. This was something real. I flipped through the straightforward pages and then went back to read and reread the words on the inside flap of the book: “Roger Rosenblatt peels back the layers on this most personal of losses to create both a tribute to his late daughter and a testament to familial love.” I made this connection halfway in: Rosenblatt is the grandfather who is telling this tale of loss, and this grandfather is the author. It was not a work of strained emotional fiction. It was the truth, the universal truth of loss.

Once I made this connection I tore through the remainder of the book’s pages. Every matter-of-fact word, every blunt sentence, every simple image worked towards a true pain and tangible grief. On the surface, this was the story of a mother who suddenly dropped dead due to a preexisting heart condition, leaving behind her husband and three small children to cope. But within the pages and within the words, Rosenblatt transforms this story of loss as he and his wife, the parents of the deceased, move into their son-in-law’s house and pick up where their daughter Amy left off. Rosenblatt dealt with such a sensitive and emotionally loaded subject ultimately in a successful manner because the tone of the text was barren. It was devoid of outright dramatizing and milked sadness and woe. The sadness was there, but it was tucked under the human will to survive and this human survival is the ability to cope with
grief. To cope with grief in *Making Toast* is just that, to make toast. To perform those everyday simple, barren, undramatized activities: waking up, organizing daily materials, and making toast.

I use the word universal in my description of Rosenblatt’s book because I feel that the tale of making toast in its connection with loss is in fact universal. At one point in the novel Rosenblatt reminisces, “…the students and I were getting into ‘The Truth the Dead Know,’ and I liked the poem better than I’d remembered. ‘This line, ‘In another country people die.’ What does it mean?’ I asked the class. A young man said, ‘It means that death happens to other people.’ (112). Death is stated simply and it is dealt with simply throughout the entirety of this novel. The readers are never given scenes of wretched sadness over Amy’s death; Rosenblatt instead presents it factually, with the description of her body only when the children discovered it, and even has follow up scenes where one of the children reenacts his mothers lifeless posture. Although these blunt images seem strange, the simplicity placed on the dealing with death creates a universal acknowledgment of loss and the life lived afterwards. Death does happen to everyone and everyone must cope. To make toast is to continue on with life, as we know it after loss. This is something that everyone universally must do, and does do, in order to cope, whether it is through making toast or other daily rituals. It seems strange to read about loss in this matter-of-fact way when we, as fiction lovers, yearn for drama and sadness. But the truth of the matter is, drama and sadness do not atone grief; normalcy and habit do. Rosenblatt and his wife Ginny are exemplars of this necessity for normalcy and habit. Throughout the entirety of this novel, they wake up, ready the children for school, make toast, and take the children to where they need to be. They help with homework, with household chores, they continue on with their own work lives, personal meetings, and family outings. Rosenblatt, through making toast daily for the children who have lost their mother is, in turn, teaching them a coping skill. Go on; make toast.
When loss occurs and spaces are left empty in people’s lives, others step up to fill in those empty places. Rosenblatt and his wife Ginny (i.e. Mimi) step in to assume the space their daughter, Amy, left empty after her death. They fill the empty space in their grandchildren’s lives, beautifully and universally through their natural practice of small daily rituals. “Would you like banana this morning? I ask him. ‘Toast,’ he says. ‘Real toast.’ ‘Real toast it is.’” (166). The ending scene of this novel in which Rosenblatt makes breakfast with his young grandson James (also known as Bubbies) centers on the heart of Making Toast. Throughout this story we are gently reminded that Boppo’s (i.e. Rosenblatt’s) job in the morning is to wake up before everyone else and make the toast, to each family member’s special preference. Rosenblatt ends his story with the image of real toast. Making toast has been a symbol of life continuing on after death, a coping mechanism that carried the readers through the story alongside the grieving family. But now we finally end on this image of real toast. We have journeyed past ritual for the sake of coping and into the realm of real life. Time and habit ease pain, and through that real life is given the opportunity to begin again and sustain.