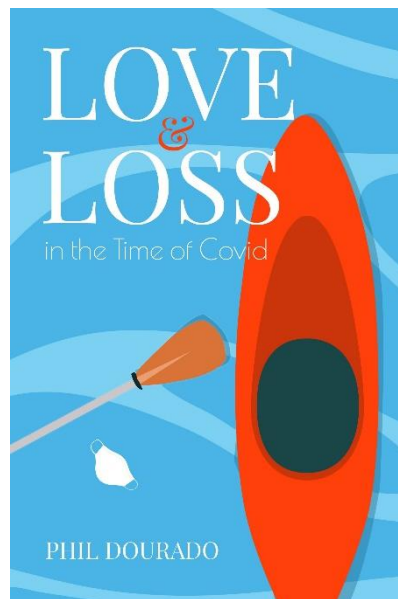


Extracts from *Love & Loss in the Time of Covid*, by Phil Dourado, published by Steelhouse Publishing, Fall/Winter 2021



"This accomplished experimental novel centers on loss, connection, and trying to heal in a pandemic. Dourado manages to balance tragedy and comedy in this intriguing debut that reimagines the novel in the context of Covid-19."

- Publishers' Weekly Book Life Supplement, November, 2021

Extract from Chapter 2

2. WHY GET UP?

When we wake each morning, we remake the world. We do this every day.

- Richard Skinner

When he woke on Monday morning, he remembered four things. First, that his wife had died. Second, that the month before his wife had died, his brother had died. Third, that the month after his wife had died, his best friend had died. And fourth, that he had decided over the weekend not to get up again. He'd just stay in bed until people stopped dying.

He felt relief. *A plan of inaction*, he thought, *is exactly what I need right now*. It seemed logical, Newtonian even – a body at rest stays at rest until a force is applied to it. He just wouldn't apply any force to his. The thought that he was following some natural law of the Universe – rather than hiding *from* the rest of the Universe – felt reassuring. Deciding not to get up was the right thing to do. He smiled, lying there, drowsy and warm.

He thought he should cozy up to the Universe a little more, since it seemed to have turned its back on him in recent months. He wanted to placate it. Or rejoin it. Maybe rub its back soothingly until it turns around, then give it the cow eyes, look contrite, sheepish even. Though the mixing of farm animals might offend its universal laws

and cast him out further. He rolled onto his back, looked upward for inspiration. Shadows of leaves dancing on spectral branches in the wind, cast on the ceiling through the bedroom window, that was what he needed to help connect him with nature and the infinite. Only, there weren't any. All he could see up there was a brown mark next to the ceiling rose. *Even a brown mark on the ceiling is part of the Universe*, he thought, surprising himself with his positivity. He squinted to see if he could imagine the stain into becoming a passing cloud. Or a dancing leaf.

How did that mark get up there, anyway?

Don't get distracted. There's a more important question than that. He frowned, wagging a mental finger at himself and at the little brown stain. He noticed he was waving an actual disapproving finger at the ceiling, as if he were a teacher and the brown stain had just failed to complete its twelve times table successfully and would need to go back to the beginning. This kind of thing happened a lot lately, this slippage in his awareness of the separation between inner and outer. He'd become porous: his thoughts seeped out into actions, and the outside seeped in. He had to do some repairs, plug the holes, to stop a repeat of yesterday's incident on his daily walk. Thinking the person walking past you is as ugly as the dog they are walking is OK. Saying it, without realizing you're speaking out loud, is not. This was one of the reasons he had decided to stay in bed; he was too unpredictable to be allowed out there.

The more important question that needed resolving came back to him. He wasn't going to get up today. That was decided. But he had to work out reasons for getting up *one* day. Yes, one day was vague enough for the moment.

He'd tried Googling the question – the getting up question, not the brown stain on the ceiling question – at the start of the weekend, from under the covers. Google took him to the lyrics of a Fabulous Thunderbirds song. He studied the chorus for insight.

Why get up?

Why get up?

How can I get up?

Why should I get up?

This whole world's gone crazy.

Think I've seen enough.

I'm gonna sleep forever.

Why get up?

It was a compelling argument. He adopted it as his new manifesto, stuck to it over the weekend – which was an unusual thing for him to do with any commitment lately – and here he was, still committedly in bed on Monday.

After the deaths, the world outside the bed – that Universe he no longer felt one with – stopped making sense. He wasn't sure how to deal with people he met out there. He'd get to the head of a queue in a shop and forget what he was there for. When people on the river passed the time of day with him, he'd blurt out that his wife or his brother or his friend – whoever was on his mind in that instant – was dead. It felt uncontainable, like Tourette's.

All the things you normally do outside without thinking had become problematic. Walking in a straight line, smiling or scowling (according to your inclination) at people coming the other way, knowing your keys are in your jacket pocket and your wallet in your trouser pocket, remembering where you are going, even who you are – none of these things could be taken for granted anymore.

Covid didn't help. It used to be you only had to worry about not bumping into people. The worst that could happen was that little awkward dance where you both move to the same side to avoid each other, then both hop back the other way. Now the worst that can happen is you get too close and kill them. Or vice versa.

So, now he was staying in. Not just indoors, but in bed.

He'd been reading Richard Skinner on writing a novel, before all this death started raining down, and remembered a phrase of his.

When we wake each morning, we remake the world.

That's a tall order. Especially when some of the parts have gone missing. Relearn how it works, maybe. That seemed less daunting. He thought he would find a torch and some old comics and read them under the bed cover, like he used to when he was little. He'd learned how the world worked that way. Some of how it worked, at least. From a *Superman* comic, he'd learned that light travels at 186,000 miles a second and, from a *Metal Men* comic, that osmium is twice as dense as lead. He still remembered these things. Maybe he could start all over and learn the world anew – or remake it, as Skinner put it – and then come out when he understood it again.

Gotta start small when building a world, he thought. He'd begin with shaping an enclosed safe space in which to do the construction work: under the duvet (let there be warmth), with a torch (let there be light), knees up (let there be knees), reading comics (let there be a distraction).

There was the oxygen problem, of course. He'd have to lift the duvet a crack somewhere, preferably near the nose, and breathe in deeply. But, without letting the crazy outside world come flooding in. Then there were the other necessities beyond air: food, drink, peeing and so on; the ins and outs of life. You could limit their impact, he supposed, by removing food and drink; he'd got no appetite anyway and nothing in equals nothing out. There

was a limited life span to that, though. It was more a short-term tactic than a long-term strategy. So, he'd allow himself forays to the kitchen and the bathroom. And he'd order food deliveries, using an app, from the bed.

He was making progress, had some foundations in place, he felt. Maybe he needed something deeper than comics as a source for worldbuilding, though. That had worked when he was ten. He really needed to enlist some adult help this time. Yet, he wasn't ready to talk to people, didn't want to bother friends with, '*I don't see why I should get up anymore.*' Or scare them.

His gaze rested on the landing, through the open door of his bedroom. He wasn't on his own. There were people out there who could help him make sense of things, people with far more insight and wisdom than he'd ever have. There they were, leaning companionably against each other or lying one atop the other, just waiting to show him the way.

He crept out of bed as if entering dangerous territory, tiptoed to the shelves on the landing, knelt down, began pulling the books out and piling them on the floor. He picked those where he half-remembered there was something about loss and grieving within the pages – insights, discoveries, balm, pathways for him to follow – and made messy piles of those on one side, while chucking the books that contained (from memory) nothing useful to the other side.

He gazed at the pile of candidates. He would try each of them for size, like trying on other people's coats to find one that fit best. Then he'd be able to leave the bed behind and, Covid restrictions permitting, venture out in his new clothing ...

* * *

Extract from Chapter 4

4. MY NAME IS MARVIN

Hello. My name is Marvin. I'm a grief counsellor. I would guess that you are reading this because you are looking for a therapist

Good deduction, Sherlock. Sounds like the kind of insightfulness I'm looking for. Though, come to think of it, *I am* reading your profile in the list of therapists on my local counselling centre's website. So, I suppose you had a bit of a clue. You're missing a stop at the end there, sport. Just thought I should mention it.

And you are thinking could Marvin be that therapist?

Not really. Unless I want a *state the obvious* therapist. Also, I prefer 'counselling' to 'therapy'. 'Therapy' seems to pathologize me, says I'm ill and in need of fixing. Maybe I am ...

You're wondering if Marvin can help, you look at his photo and think 'does he look as though he could help?'

No, I'm wondering why you chose a comma instead of a full stop after that first *help*. And then I look at your photo and wonder a number of things about you, Marvin. Is all the wild, white hair you've grown on the lower half of your face there to compensate for the absence of any hair on top? I've always wondered that about bald men who grow massive beards. I also wonder if you and your baldy, bearded brethren realize how the compensatory hair makes you look as if your head is on upside down? Then I wonder whether you should have trimmed that wild, straggly beard just a bit? To inspire confidence, you know. Then a part of my head wonders whether you have little birds nesting in there, living off the crumbs that accumulate during your lunches? At Christmas, do you supplement your counselling income with a Santa suit in the local shopping centre? Why are you scowling in your photo? Do you specialize in grumpy Santas? I do wonder all those things, Marvin. But, 'does he look as though he could help?' ... No, that never entered my head as a possibility.

Finding the right therapist is important but am I the right one for you?

I think we've covered that, old chap. Move on.

I'd like to think I can help but the truth is I don't know and we'll never know unless we meet and have a conversation about what brings you to therapy, I'd love to meet you for an initial discussion.

I admire the honesty. Though, there's that full stop versus comma decision we'd disagree about. It kind of undermines my trust in you. You know, like they say if you are in a plane and fold down the meal table and there is a coffee ring stain on there from the previous flight, you think, 'If they can't even clean that right, have they serviced the engines properly?' Call me picky. Also, *I'd love to meet you*, said on a website to strangers? Sounds a wee bit needy if you ask me, Marvin. More like a dating agency bio. Not that I'd know what they look like. And you use the word 'I' four times in that sentence. Bit 'me, me, me,' or even 'me, me, me, me,' for what's supposed to be an other-centred discipline, no? So, from what I've seen and read so far, it's just not going to happen.

What's it about anyway?

What's what about, Marvin?

For me it's about being listened to but also truly heard

Oh, you mean, 'What's counselling about?' Shouldn't you have started with that? 'Why counselling?' as the first question and then 'Why Marvin as your counsellor?' as the second one? I feel we're jumping about a bit.

however it is not a 'one way street', it's interactive, I may challenge the way you see things, the way you think, to help you find your strengths, your values and what has meaning for you.

Marvin! It's all coming out now! We've abandoned upper case, gone full on with an army of commas, like little oars, powering the reader downstream to an irresistible cascade of a conclusion: we must choose *you*, Marvin. I hope you don't charge by the comma. That sentence is a piece of questionable abstract art, now I look at it again; little blobs of possible meaning hidden in a blur of breathless exuberance. Pollockesque, possibly, but without having established credibility first. Cards on table time: you've lost me now, with your lack of full stops and capital letters, just when you should be reeling me in with a closing argument, like the other twenty-four (I counted 'em) therapy counsellors in this long and increasingly tedious list. You're competing as if you were contestants in a beauty contest, by the way. Did you not notice that? That's the way you each come across: 'Choose me, not them.' Don't you find that a little, I don't know, inappropriate? And where do you stand on world peace, Marvin? The audience would love to know.

It is about me understanding your pain and helping you gain new perspectives.

That's it. We're done. That 'me understanding your pain' has completely lost me, Marvin. I don't know you from Adam. Or from a grim-looking Father Christmas impersonator. You're just coming across as inappropriately intimate. And indiscriminate. I could be anyone. You don't seem to care. Even if I admitted to having pain, I'm definitely not sharing it with you.

I am available at the Portchester Wellness Counselling Centre on Tuesdays from 9 am – 5 pm. My fee for a fifty-minute session is ...

And there's the money shot. I thought I saw your eye stray down to my wallet there, Bad Santa. Thanks for presenting me with your on-screen bio or sales pitch or whatever you think that was, Marvin. I'll try somewhere else. Or maybe I'll do it myself.

* * *

Extract from Chapter 9

9. SIGNS (1)

'You know Mrs. Kerns has trouble with water on her legs ...'

Pause for confirmation. I hear her waiting at the other end of the phonenumber for me to reply. She's putting the kettle on, making Dad's breakfast.

'No. But, carry on.'

'Well, she does. And she had this big blister thing, like a water balloon, on the bottom of her foot.'

'Do I really need to hear this story?'

'Yes. So, she woke up last Thursday and all her plugs had been taken out of their sockets.' Pause for reaction.

'Had been taken out of their sockets,' I echo in a flat voice.

'Yes, and she'd bought a foot spa and left it in its box on the table and guess where it was in the morning.'

'In its box on the table?'

'No.'

'I thought not somehow.'

'It had been taken out of its box and was on the floor. And plugged in.'

'It had been taken out of its box ... presumably by Mrs. Kerns.'

'No, that's the thing. She didn't take it out of the box. She didn't take all the other plugs out of the wall either.'

Pause for reaction.

'Go on.'

'So, she puts her feet in the spa and turns it on. And the water balloon thing in her foot bursts ...'

'Seriously? Do we have to discuss this? I haven't even had coffee yet.'

'...and her legs and feet are all better.' Long pause.

How do you like them apples? the pause seems to say. It drags on. I finally give in and, Poirot-like, declare whodunnit.

'So, *she* must have done it.'

'No, that's what I thought, that it was all the heavy drugs she's on. But she says she didn't do it. It must have been Bertie.'

'Bertie?'

'Her dead husband. I mean they had a difficult relationship at the end. He was always telling her to *eff off*; it was the dementia, you know. But he must have really loved her to do that.'

'Do what?'

'I just told you what.'

'But *she* did that and the thing you said about the drugs ... they made her forget she did it. No amount of passive voice - *the plugs were taken out and the spa was taken from its box* - can remove the fact that she is the only person in the house now.'

'I knew you'd come up with something like that.'

'Me? *I'd* come up with something like that?'

The phone is on speaker. Sara, on the other side of the kitchen, waves to attract my attention, then slides a finger across her own neck. *Calm down and shut up*, says the finger across the neck.

'It comforts her to believe this stuff. So, just leave it,' Sara's said to me, countless times.

'I'll leave it if she stops ambushing me and trying to persuade me of it all hours of the day,' I've replied, countless times.

I look away from Sara cutting her own throat and stick a small cup under the coffee machine spout. *Save me*, I say silently, pressing the button. I listen to the motor whir. The coffee sputters out and begins to froth its way up the cup. There is a waiting silence at the other end. I can't stop myself.

'From my point of view and every other reasonable person, it's *you* who's *come up with something like that*.'

'I'm just telling you the facts, what happened.'

'No, you're not. You're interpreting what happened. You're telling me a story. A story in which the laws of physics don't apply.'

Sara is now throttling herself. *Stop the arguing right now*, says the throttling. *Kill it. Deader than Bertie*.

'Ah, but what you're missing is quantum physics,' says my 81-year-old mother, springing the trap she's calmly walked me into. 'Your physics just explains the everyday, the mundane. Quantum physics explains the rest. You should read more.'

'It ... what ...? Quantum physics doesn't say *anything* is possible. Well, OK, it does, but it isn't there to explain the supernatural.'

'And Viagra wasn't invented for ... you know what ... but it does. Look, I've got a vegetable curry to be getting on with for when you and the girls come over later. You're still coming over to help with your brother's ashes? Or don't you believe in that either?'

'Viag ... Ashes? You can't not believe in ashes. Yes, yes, I'll be there.'

'Good. Your dad needs an arm to lean on while I scatter. Don't be late.'

She hangs up. I turn to Sara. I'm sputtering like the coffee machine. She holds her hands up, shakes her head, walks over and takes the coffee from my hand.

'You don't deserve that. Make yourself another,' she says, sipping it as she walks out of the kitchen.

* * *

Snippets and snapshots from *Love & Loss in the Time of Covid*, by Phil Dourado

On the death of a spouse

"When her husband looked at her, he saw the young woman she had been, whom he had first met and fell in love with, as well as the woman of seventy she had become and whom he still loved. She was, to him, a culmination of all the earlier versions, just as she was to herself. He saw all of her. He saw her through time. She was a Russian Matryoshka doll, packed with younger versions of herself. And he was the same to her - long-known and therefore deeply-known."

"The shared experience was the life lived. The shared memories, the retelling of stories, is the life remembered. When the life partner is gone, it is no wonder that what's left feels initially like a half-life. Because it is."

*

On using nature to heal

“He glided along the river, sliding silently through the mist, past the still-sleeping mute swans – floating white pillows on which head and neck lay stretched out luxuriously. He slid past the coots, moorhens and geese, all watchful of their chicks as they breakfasted on river weed and the bread he threw to them. He slid past the cormorants and their smaller, punk-headed cousins, the grebes, watching them dive for their breakfast fish and emerge, eventually, bedraggled but belly-full, on the other side of the river from where they started. He slid past the unseen robin singing its disarmingly sweet early morning territorial challenge across the river from the plane trees on the other bank. And he slid past the solitary grey heron, statue-still in the shallows of a bend it used as its breakfast hunting spot, its long bill pointing down, hairlike feathers at neck and chest ruffling in the breeze.”

*

Sleeplessness and grief

“He drowsed now, more awake than he wanted to be, but still managing to lurk near the border, looking for a gap, a way back in. For a while he drifted back and forth. But wakefulness was winning. *Try counting things - sheep, that kind of thing*, he thought. He began counting the things he no longer was:

I was a brother.

I was a husband.

I was a best friend.

I was a grandfather (albeit unusually young and handsome for a grandfather).

I was a father’s son.

He knew as soon as he’d started the list that sheep would have been a safer bet.”

*

Seeing dead people

“They don’t tell you about persistence of vision when someone dies.

I see my brother Bill waiting at bus stops.

I see my friend Ben striding along the road as if he owns it, pausing to light a cigarette or kneeling to tie a daughter’s shoelace.

It’s only when I snap my head back to look again that I see they are familiars, types, not the real thing. When I peer more closely, they don’t even look much like the originals. I do find the second gaze lingers though, willing that mistaken moment of recognition to be right, for its correction to be wrong.”

“The paradox of an all-consuming absence – as heavy and consequential as their presence – is something the brain and heart just can’t come to terms with.”

*

“When you’re trying to get your life on track after the death of a loved one or loved ones, you are, in effect, trying to recreate yourself. You want to carry the lost people with you, of course. But you’re trying to rebuild yourself to accommodate them, to carry as much of them with you as you can now that the actuality of them is no longer around on the outside to reinforce the connection every day.”

*

Some people carry the sadness of grief with them

“The longer we live, the more deaths we experience. Granddad seemed to carry all his around with him. He was a haunted character, like an old man from a Chekov play. He preferred to stay in his room to escape the madhouse – as he put it – of four little kids charging all over the place. Come Christmas, he would leave his room to join us for a few hours, with a fixed smile on his face (he did try), the deaths and sadnesses that had attached themselves to him through the years hanging off him like grim baubles on a Christmas tree. He carried them all with him, in addition to his sadness for the lost, the lonely, the poor and the distressed he sometimes

encountered on the way to, from, or at the pub, as if he were a camera film and they were imprinted on him, one layer of sadness on top of another.”

*

Looking for signs that they are still somewhere

“The last attempt to visit their mum in this way that I can remember saw the five of us seated in a row of seats in a Spiritualist church, among dozens of other people, while a middle-aged man pointed at us, shouting out what, even to my six-year-old ears, seemed like random names. The whole thing had a pantomime feel to it.

‘Auntie Doris. Uncle Andrew. Or is it Arnold? They’re behind you.’

They were always behind us, over our shoulder, just out of reach. We leant forward at the pronouncement of each name, to give the invisible people room. We all perked up a little at ‘Andrew’ as Andy was their biological dad, until we remembered he wasn’t dead. He’d just left when they were tiny.”

*

Telling close friends that a loved one is gone

“‘Hello, Matt. It’s Dolores,’ came the deep, breathy voice. Dolores spoke like Marilyn Monroe if Marilyn Monroe had survived to eighty-five. ‘So, my dear, I have a funny story for you. Did you hear what Hillary said? Was it on your news? I simply must tell you ...’

Dolores phoned whenever she had a story to tell that she thought would amuse me. She liked edgy exchanges in which she could wield her Dorothy Parker-like wit. Having spent forty well-behaved years as a schoolteacher, she relished being deliciously naughty as a retiree. After she’d finished her anecdote and we’d duly laughed together at what Hillary had said, I waited for the question, the other reason she used to call every month or so.

‘And how’s Sandy?’

I was ready. Came back at her too fast, in fact.

‘I’m sorry Dolores. I have bad news. We lost her a few months back. In the Spring.’

In the pause that followed, I imagined, ‘Well, that was careless of you, dear.’

Something twanged, appeared to snap, down the trans-Atlantic line. A trawler snagging the cable thousands of feet down. Or a piece of space dust ping-ponging into the satellite thousands of feet up. Or a heartstring breaking somewhere off Solano Avenue.”

*

“Then came the blurting: ‘Dolores, I’m sorry I didn’t answer your calls. I had this weird thought that as long as I don’t tell you, then she’s still alive. Telling people she’s gone is killing her again, every time I do it. Killing her for them, I mean.’

I hadn’t fully realized this. I became almost excited, sat forward a little on the sofa.

‘I mean there’s the physical us and then there’s the us that exists in other people, in their thoughts. I liked that there was some corner of northern California where she was still alive, still pottering around with you – feeding the cats, watering the garden in the dead of night like you do – that she was alive in your head, with you, while you did those things. Because she loved your house, loved Berkeley.’

I was too excited to stop now. I had become an evangelist for Doug Hofstadter and wanted to share my excitement about his writings on how the dead still live on, in and through us.

‘Dolores, do you know the work of Douglas Hofstadter? He’s a kind of neuroscientist, a polymath really, specializes in consciousness, among other things. He once told Scientific American that he felt a trace of his dead wife was left behind, inside himself, that the ‘I’ of our consciousness is distributed across the people who know us, not residing in just our own body. We live at least partly in other people. And they live in us. You see, his wife died of cancer and he had this overwhelming sense of grief. And he wrote a book called *I Am A Strange Loop* in which he talked about how she lived on, in his brain, in a way. So, I wanted Sandy living on in yours, for you not to have a dead version of her in your head replacing the live one.’ ”

*

What do you do with the remnants of a life?

“There are many ways we kill again the people we love who have gone. And decisions we have to make that leave us feeling we are mopping up after the killing by removing all trace that they were here. Throwing away their diaries feels like the record of the life is following the life itself into oblivion. At your hand. Throwing away old letters written by or to the dead person – my wife had stashes of letters, hundreds of them, from friends around the world – feels like erasing what’s left of their thoughts, the words they produced and evoked from others, the feelings they described, the conversations they had, the long trail of interactions that their relationships had generated over the years and that are left behind for you to ... do what with? Store forever? Erase (if electronic) or throw in the bin (if paper)? Return to sender as the living friend’s own *aide memoir* of what they wrote to the person who has gone? If they had kept a stash of her letters, then they could retrieve them from their own boxes in the attic or cellar, match them up by date, physically recreate the relationship by interlacing the old blue aerogramme pages, relive the conversations that rambled through the years. That could bring her back to life, for them anyway. Maybe.”

*

“I have a friend called Robert Robert. I know, what were his parents thinking? He’s French, so Robair Robair at least sounds better. Every year, on the anniversary of his wife’s death, he posts a picture of her online with just a note saying how long it’s been since she died.

Six years ago today

Seven years ago today

Eight years ago today

Year after year. As persistent as his name. Here it comes again. Caught in a loop.

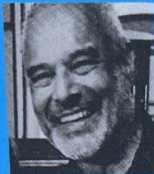
The alternative of letting go, letting memory fade in others as well as yourself, feels like some act of betrayal, allying with the less-known living over the well-loved dead. And accepting that this is where you keep company now. Which, of course, it is.”

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Phil Dourado has written for The Observer, The Independent, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail, TES, New Statesman, New Scientist, GQ, and other titles on both sides of the Atlantic. He is the author of two books published by John Wiley & Sons and co-author of one published by Jessica Kingsley Publishing. He lost his wife, his brother and his best friend in quick succession. Trying to make sense of that in the time of Covid led to the writing of this, his first novel.

A story for our time

You lose your spouse, your brother and your best friend, all shuffling off within weeks of each other. You're unhinged by grief. And then the world is turned upside down by Covid. Just as your life has changed irrevocably, so has everyone else's. What do you do?

The only answer Matthew can come up with is to take to his bed and refuse to leave until people stop dying. Or, at least, until he can make sense of it all. His retreat under the duvet becomes a microcosm of the world's retreat into a series of lockdowns.

But he is not alone under there. His bed is crowded with old companions, jostling to help him make meaning out of loss - books he has loved that are unlikely to suddenly disappear the way the people in his life have been doing lately.

As he finishes each book, he tosses it out onto the floor and moves to the next one. He plans to make stepping stones out of them, an escape route back to real life at a time when no-one is certain what real life is going to look like. It's slow going. Until his lost friend returns and sets him a mission.

Love and Loss in the Time of Covid, a novel for our time.
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