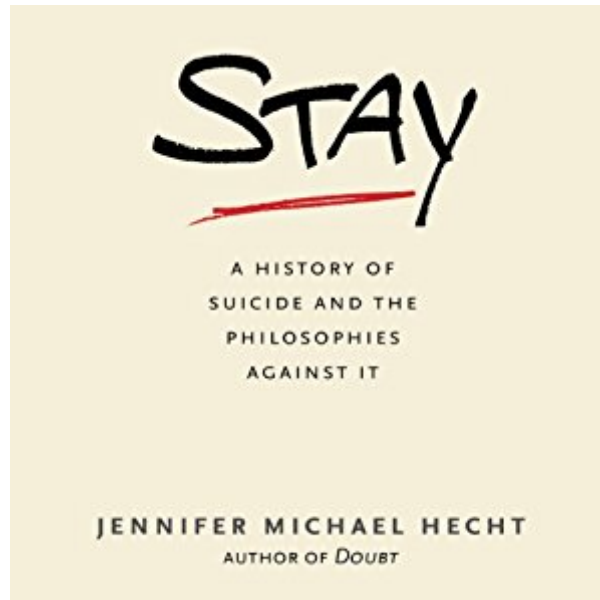


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Stay: A History Of Suicide And The Philosophies Against It



Synopsis

Worldwide, more people die by suicide than by murder, and many more are left behind to grieve. Despite distressing statistics that show suicide rates rising, the subject, long a taboo, is infrequently talked about. In this sweeping intellectual and cultural history, poet and historian Jennifer Michael Hecht channels her grief for two friends lost to suicide into a search for history's most persuasive arguments against the irretrievable act, arguments she hopes to bring back into public consciousness. From the Stoics and the Bible to Dante, Shakespeare, Wittgenstein, and such 20th-century writers as John Berryman, Hecht recasts the narrative of our "secular age" in new terms. She shows how religious prohibitions against self-killing were replaced by the Enlightenment's insistence on the rights of the individual, even when those rights had troubling applications. This transition, she movingly argues, resulted in a profound cultural and moral loss: the loss of shared, secular, logical arguments against suicide. By examining how people in other times have found powerful reasons to stay alive when suicide seems a tempting choice, she makes a persuasive intellectual and moral case against suicide.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you are interested in the history of suicide but cannot afford time to read all the major literature written about it, or don't know where to start, this book might come in handy. However, it does NOT offer a proper perspective on this delicate subject, and it stigmatizes people who attempt or die by suicide. For a better understanding of suicide, please visit suicide.org, or cross-reference the

information you've got from this book with different sources. In her preface, Hecht asserts that she ultimately aims to revivify "a secular, logical anti-suicide consensus" by first establishing a historical context for the discourse on suicide -- dated way back to the ancient world of Roman Republic, then presenting the reader an accumulation of unflinching and impassioned philosophical arguments against suicide. I'll make no comment on the historical section because I'm not knowledgeable enough on that aspect. On the other hand, I've got a lot to say about her reasoning against suicide and the way she addresses it. Before we go further, I also want to make it clear that I am not supporting suicide as problem solving, with the exception of carefully advised and monitored euthanasia for extreme cases (such as terminal illness). The book perplexes me on many levels. Why? Let's break it down! Despite her statement that she passes no judgment on those who did or contemplate the act, Hecht's arguments stigmatize suicide and the suicidal all the same. She equates suicide with delayed homicide, even alludes to it as self-murder at times; presumes that suicide is a choice made in a lucid state of mind; and worst of all, puts a partial blame on people who die by suicide for triggering chained suicides, also known as suicide clusters.

I've become interested in the topic of suicide given the many young lives lost recently to the act. I happened upon Hecht's book and knew of her work through her older book, "Doubt." Haven't had read anything by Hecht, I didn't really know what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised. "Stay" has two main goals: (i) bring to light the historic arguments against suicide, and (ii) provide two secular arguments for staying alive. On (i), Hecht does a wonderful job of detailing the historical views taken on suicide. She hits upon all the major thinkers who have talked about suicide in their writings. All have, for one reason or another, rejected suicide. Even though some ancient suicides were heralded for particular reasons, on the whole, suicide wasn't seen as a legitimate option. On (ii), Hecht provides us with two persuasive arguments against suicide. Though I'll leave the details to the reader, the first is the "Argument of Community," which essentially says we owe it to our family, friends, and society at large to remain alive. Suicide has a reverberating effect in society, with suicide clusters being a legitimate phenomena (the chapter "Modern Social Science on Community and Influence" provides some fascinating data on suicide contagion and clusters). Hecht's second argument is based on what we owe our future selves. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem, as the saying goes. Not only do we owe it to our community to stay alive, we owe it to ourselves because we never know what the future holds. Hecht traces the concept of suicide throughout the ages and has done us all a great service.

As someone who has endured the loss of two family members to suicide, I am not impartial. Hecht's work is a rational, secular rallying cry that digests 2,500 years of writing on the subject of suicide. Her thoughtful analysis constructs a buttress to counteract the downward force set in motion by the catastrophic loss of a loved one to suicide. She seeks to engage the minds of those who may be contemplating suicide out of despair and encourage them to stay among the living, for the sake of others and most especially, for the sake of their future selves. Hecht does not want anyone to give up for lack of a cogent reason to stay and brings the weight of the world's great thinkers to bear on the side of affirming life. Rather than be blindsided by the despair that almost inevitably afflicts every one of us, she asks us to consider where we stand on suicide in advance, before the turmoil and trance come upon us, while we can use the considerable power of our rational minds. This mental preparation may prevent some impulsive suicides. Interviews with those who survive attempts show many conceive of the idea and act to end their lives in less than one hour. For centuries, religions have added to the suffering of those left behind by painting the lost loved one as a sinner who cannot be redeemed. Enlightenment thinkers lifted the burden of shame and made suicide morally neutral, a medical condition and even an individual right. Hecht finds it an oversimplification that religions are against suicide while rational thinkers are not. Hecht believes a personal and cultural stance against the act of suicide helps protect many who might otherwise be seduced into escaping this life prematurely.

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