



# Bricks-and-mortality memoir of a lost beloved

## The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement: A True Story of Love and Renovation

By Virginia Lloyd  
UQP, \$32.95

NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD be a wife," writes Virginia Lloyd towards the end of this poignant memoir. "Yet here I was, suddenly a widow. An editor without a text." Lloyd met her future husband John when she was 32 and within a year the couple had married. A year later John, 47, died from secondary bone cancer.

*The Young Widow's Book of Home Improvement*, reminiscent of Kate Jennings' *Moral Hazard* and Myfanwy Horne's more recent account in *Dying: A Memoir*, is bold and uncompromising. Eschewing wretchedness and sentimentality, this work is a requiem for Lloyd's beloved husband and a testimony to her own survival. It is valiant, compelling writing.

The home improvement of the title relates to the rising damp that had infiltrated the couple's grand old Victorian house in western Sydney. Improvements to the semi-detached double-brick home — "the Helen Mirren of houses" — were never a

priority, as Lloyd puts it, when "we were too busy trying to stave off my husband's death".

For the widowed Lloyd, curing the damp will become a process in her own recovery: "Drying from the inside out was exactly what I needed." A damp expert is called in to survey the rooms. He relates, anatomically, the extent of the damage, where "almost every internal wall was home to mould spores: tiny black dots cluttered in ones and twos like tumours". Such problems are miserably comparable to John's illness — more so as it is something that can be cured, unlike his cancer.

Early into the relationship, John's cancer, which he had been battling for years, returns aggressively. "As normal as possible, for as long as possible" becomes the couple's mantra, and it is one by which they are initially able to live. The re-imagining of the relationship — from their prolonged first kiss to John's dying breath — are exquisite vignettes. There is a romance of brevity, intensity and profundity.

It is not just longevity that is snatched away. Lloyd painfully recalls her awareness of no longer being able to share a bed with John. When his "paroxysms of pain" prevent explicit physical intimacy, they are devastated.

The diminution in John's mobility (he is eventually wheelchair-bound)

is well drawn. Lloyd describes with sad sobriety how "the two-inch-high tiled ceramic step that kept shower water from travelling outside the shower recess now kept John from entering the shower at all". The quotidian toll of the cancer — the levels of pain, frustration, sheer terror — is shocking. The description of John's bedsores will turn anyone's stomach, while the easy fracturing of his limbs, cheerfully detailed in John's self-deprecating "Cancer-Boy" email updates, is surreal.

It is hard to imagine the difficulty Lloyd must have faced in recounting her husband's suffering in the final stages of his illness. While she provides riveting clarity to her emotions, to her acute, visceral pain, she remains admirably measured and controlled in her narration.

Lloyd is also courageously frank about particulars of the ordeal: accidentally sending an email announcing John's passing in Comic sans-serif font, for example; or her unsettling memory of the incredible sexual energy she felt in the days following John's death. In these passages, the self-consciousness that characterises other sections disappears and Lloyd is at her best: candid, gritty and raw.

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Virginia Lloyd.

