



EXTRA BOOKS

Home is where a heart grieves

Virginia Lloyd's memoir is a nuanced story of love and loss, writes **CATHERINE KEENAN**.

Virginia Lloyd was single at 32, married at 33 and widowed at 34. These are the bald facts as stated on the inside cover of her new memoir, *The Young Widow's Book Of Home Improvement*. Yet the story that unfolds within its oddly serene-looking cover is more nuanced than this suggests, both more painful and more joyous. For Lloyd knew John Gallagher had cancer from the moment she met him. By the time they married, she knew it was terminal. But the heart goes on hoping, and they both firmly believed they'd still have years together. Neither dreamt it would be just 11 months.

Lloyd had heard about John long before she met him. She was living in the inner west, having finished a PhD in English at the University of Sydney. She had worked as a copy editor at Picador, before switching to the duller safety of corporate publishing. Her friends, Paul and Anne, often talked about John and the progress of his disease. Lloyd finally met him at a dinner, and a while later he invited her to a barbecue at his house.

"[A] this barbecue, I could feel something momentous happening,"

she writes. "During the course of the evening I was unable to take my eyes off John. Every time he moved, my eyes moved with him. I remember feeling as though a curtain made of the finest material, transparent and perhaps invisible to this moment, was being lifted from my eyes, and I was seeing John in full for the very first time."

To say she fell in love doesn't quite cover it. She plunged. Within three

days of their first kiss, he presented her with the keys to his house. By the end of the week, she'd virtually moved in.

He looked healthy enough. He was older, in his mid-40s, a systems engineer who loved Sydney with the singular passion of someone used to the low skies of London. He had thick brown hair and when his cancer came up in conversation it was casual. As she writes: "Aromatherapy, psychotherapy, chemotherapy, it's no big deal, I thought."

Even having read the book, it's a shock to meet Lloyd and think: "This is a widow." She's a tidy, compact person who sits with her back straight, her hands folded in her lap. She looks so fresh. So young.

She says in the book that the

unconscious mantra in her life is "organise or perish" and this has

been in full force in the 3½ years since John died. She has moved to New York and back, written her book, studied in the philanthropic sector, and works now in communications and fund-raising.

But her first project, the one that helped her through the leaden days immediately after John's death, was to fix up the home they had shared.

Lloyd loved this old, heavy, jasmine-covered house in the inner west. This was where she nursed

John, whose very rare tumour of the coccyx had already spread to his sacrum, pelvic region and thighs. She went back to work less than three weeks after it claimed him – "What was I thinking? That was just ludicrous," she says now – and in the evenings the house was her refuge.

"Just getting through the front door and shutting it and that palpable sense of relief at being able to just relax. But then there was always a very long night ahead."

So she wrote lists, cleaned, and methodically went through each room, throwing out everything that wasn't absolutely essential. In the process, she realised what would have been obvious long ago to anyone whose husband hadn't been dying of cancer: the house was

rotting. The paint was blistered and peeling, and there were flowers of



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mould – sure signs of rising damp. The house, like Lloyd herself, was weeping.

So she set about fixing that too. A large, reassuring Irishman named Jim told her that the boards and skirtings would have to be ripped up, and hundreds of bricks individually drilled and injected with silicon so the house could dry from the inside out.

Lloyd had already begun writing snippets about her life with John. She'd even written a short play, which was longlisted in the Short And Sweet festival. But it dawned on her that perhaps it would be better to write a memoir. "It was recognising

that there were all these parallels between what the house was having to go through, in terms of drying out because of its chronic rising damp problem, and what I was having to go through in terms of adjusting to this catastrophic loss. In my mind, that's when I started to imagine the possibility of a book."

She didn't start writing *The Young Widow's Book Of Home Improvement* until the house was dry, rendered, painted, cleared of every last piece of clutter and rented out. By then, Lloyd had begun to feel renovated too. She had moved to New York and got a part-time job as an assistant to a woman consulting in the area of disability rights.

The next 18 months were not easy. "In order to create the sort of impact in the reader that I wanted to communicate, I had to relive both great love and great sadness. Having to relive experiences in great detail was quite distressing, but equally, that had its moments of joy, when I would write something that made me laugh."

The finished book is both uplifting and devastating. Most harrowing are the details of John's terrible pain, and their losing battle to control it. Awful, too, is the realisation, strangely sudden given the circumstances, that they will not have anywhere near as much time together as they hoped. Yet all this is leavened by their

defiant, gentle love, and the way they face their situation together. "It's only in retrospect that you can look at the experience and think, 'How on Earth did I survive that, get through it?'" says Lloyd. "I was always someone who used to think about the long term, or five years' time. This experience totally made me focus on each day. It's a cliché, but it made life a lot easier. Even though what we were going through was incredibly difficult in lots of ways, it actually made life easier in that respect."

One of the striking absences in the book is the lack of deliberation when Lloyd fell in love with John. There are no well-meaning friends or family who take her aside and ask: are you

sure about this? She doesn't seem even to entertain the prospect of pulling back in the interests of self-preservation. Was it really so simple?

"In retrospect, I can see that it was a monumental decision, or it could be seen as a monumental decision to make. But for me it was very simple. That's what love will do to you, I guess. But I had no idea how devastating the fall-out would be. No idea."

If she could, would she do it differently? "No," she says sharply. Immediately. "No, I wouldn't. It was worth it."

The Young Widow's Book Of Home Improvement is published by UQP, \$32.95.



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