

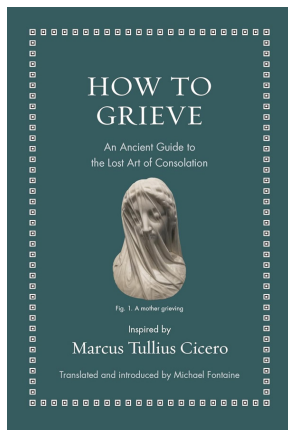
## Book Review

### Marcus Tullius Cicero: How to Grieve. An Ancient Guide to the Lost Art of Consolation

Fontaine (M.) (ed.,trans.), Pp. xxiv + 240.  
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022.  
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For most of us grief is a very personal thing. Those of us that have dealt with great bereavement can testify to great periods of feeling distinctly alone. Even being cut off from the mass of emotions that want to flood our brains, often people are inconsolable after a loss and even the best of intentions from other people will be vehemently opposed. The only way that people can get over this type of grief is the eventual realisation that others have been there before. This is the case with the latest in the Ancient Wisdom series published by the Princeton

University Press. Translated and introduced by Prof. Michael Fontaine of Cornell University, it aims to bring the 'Lost Art of Consolation' back to the reader through the words and thoughts of the Roman philosopher and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero.

Before the analysis of the Consolation begins, we must first address the elephant in the room. This is not strictly a normally translated work of Cicero. This translation comes from a document that surfaced in the 16th century, the authenticity of which was debated for the next four centuries, until the conclusion was reached that the work was based on fragments of a lost text by Cicero. But as Fontaine well observes, some fakes are better than others. This book, although not a complete original, still holds at its core the thinking and writing of Cicero - a Cicero that is exiled in Tuscany, a Cicero that has just lost his beloved daughter Tullia and a Cicero that soon expects to lose his own life in the chaos that has become the Roman Republic after the assassination of Julius Caesar. Cicero mourns for his daughter, for his career and for his own life and this is why this reconstructed book is so important, because we all have known these bitter fruits and remain students of consolation and grief our whole lives.

The message from Cicero is one that must be read from a Stoic viewpoint. This message to the modern reader might seem harsh

and for those studying theology or religious studies this book probably will fly in the face of most modern-day conceptions of religious belief; but the reader must remember, as Fontaine has introduced this book to us, that this is a personal journey through grief by Cicero and it will reflect his own beliefs on death and mourning – beliefs that were probably common within the Stoic community. For us in the 21st century Stoicism is also something that has been forgotten, much like the manuscript that this book was based on. Cicero strives to create his view on death by examining how many prominent and noble Romans from the past dealt with grief and that tactic of evaluation is one that he wishes to convey even to the modern readership. It is a good idea to learn from others to process loss and in the end to come to terms with mortality and death.

At a cursory glance this book might then sound quite depressing and self-denying but that would be a wrong conclusion to draw. Cicero asserts that death is in fact the greatest gift to man (although he admits that to reach this conclusion was personally traumatic and hard given that it was his own daughter and not merely some philosophical conjecture that could easily be dispensed with). I would say that it wasn't until Cicero had lost so much and was dealing with the prospect of losing even so much more that the full ramifications of Stoic philosophy truly hit him. Death to Cicero is a blessing, a release from all the ills of the world from diseases to war: death releases man from it all. When reading this book, we should also take heed of what Cicero calls excessive grief as through his Stoic lens an over-emotional response is very unbecoming. This statement in today's world of mass fandom and fixation probably seems the most out of place. Grief, now in the 21st century, has become a public spectacle inviting the whole world into someone's personal loss. Cicero could not have imagined such an outcome even with the existence of the Roman spectacle in his life time.

In the book Cicero also doesn't go so far as to say that death is a blessing to everyone. Yes, it does end all earthly struggles and sickness, but it does not guarantee happiness in the next life. Here in Cicero's version of heaven only the righteous and the good can look forward to it. For the rest of the suffering souls, eternal damnation is the only result. Thus, if you are grieving someone that did not meet Cicero's judgement of a righteous and good life then I am sorry but your grief might well have to extend for eternity. But such is the nature of Cicero's balanced Stoicism: it gives with the one hand and takes away with the other.

*How to Grieve* is thus a very interesting book. It will probably make you angry in some parts or frustrate you in others, but the end its value comes by realising that inherent humanity of the author, Cicero. In the end Cicero is just a father coming to terms with the loss of a child. He tries to make sense of the world as best he can, with the resources and knowledge that he has. In that aspect he is like every one of us reading this book today. Fontaine did a marvellous job of bringing this book to life especially since the subject of the book was death and how we might respond to it when loss inevitably will strike our own lives. We may also ultimately, one day, find the energy to alter our views in the face of tragedy and to overcome and heal with time and fortitude the wounds of loss.

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