

“Sarah Krasnostein takes us on an unexpected journey through strains of belief that range from dubious to bizarre. It is sometimes disconcerting, sometimes deeply beautiful, and never simple.”

—**JAMES GLEICK**,
author of *Time Travel: A History*

“In an era when it often appears as though beliefs are our biggest dividing lines, Sarah Krasnostein’s *The Believer* comes as a great tonic—a thoughtfully reported, entertaining, and empathetic examination of the beliefs that sustain yet sometimes dangerously mislead. Exacting yet compassionate, she takes readers deep inside communities and lives that may be distant from us, offering portraits that refract back on our own worlds. The result feels deeply wise. If reading a book can make you more human, *The Believer* does just that.”

—**ALEX MARZANO-LESNEVICH**,
author of *The Fact of a Body*

“Sarah Krasnostein’s *The Believer* is filled with everything the world needs more of: compassion, curiosity, and tenderness. Krasnostein brilliantly shows us how to look more carefully, listen more closely, and love more expansively. A complicated, lyrical portrait of belief, meaning making, and the stories we tell that might save us.”

—**SARAH SENTILLES**,
author of *Stranger Care*

“Sarah Krasnostein holds a mirror to the world we inhabit but don’t fully understand, helping us see how our lives are shaped by beliefs at once wholly strange and unexpectedly familiar. Lyrical, haunting, endlessly curious, *The Believer* will restore your faith in the power of stories to bridge the gaps between us.”

—**PETER MANSEAU**,
author of *The Apparitionists*

“Compassion and curiosity permeate Sarah Krasnostein’s writing. Every few pages there is a line so poignant it takes my breath away.”

—**SASHA SAGAN**,
author of *For Small Creatures Such as We: Rituals for Finding Meaning in Our Unlikely World*



**THE
BELIEVER**

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THE BELIEVER

**ENCOUNTERS WITH THE
BEGINNING, THE END, AND
OUR PLACE IN THE MIDDLE**

SARAH KRASNOSTEIN



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

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This is a work of nonfiction, researched and written over a period of four years. For privacy purposes, the following names have been changed:

PARANORMAL

Misha / Amber

Lee

Jessica

Evelyn

Paul

Marina

Luke

Bridget

THE DEATH DOULA

Carol

HALFWAY HOME

Lynn

AJ

THEORIES OF FLIGHT

Neil

The great themes are love and death; their synthesis is
the will to live, and that is what this book is about.

—John Hersey, *Here to Stay* (1962)

PROLOGUE

SARAH

This book is about ghosts and gods and flying saucers; certainty in the absence of knowledge; how the stories we tell ourselves to deal with the distance between the world as it is and as we'd like it to be can stunt us or save us.

The word “distance” comes from the Latin *distantia*, which means standing apart. We have invented numerous ways of measuring this apartness. There's Euclidian distance (the shortest path between two points assuming the absence of obstacles), Manhattan distance (the number of blocks a taxi must travel to reach a destination in New York City assuming, delusionally, the absence of obstacles), Canberra distance (a less colorful metric for the distance between pairs of points in a vector space) and Chebyshev distance, which concerns itself with the moves of a king on a chessboard. We have painstakingly devised metrics for the distance between notes in a chord, strings of computing code, certain and possible events, periods of time, points in outer space and the magnitudes of removal between ourselves and the actor Kevin Bacon.

Psychological distance is a way of measuring the cognitive separation between ourselves and other people, events or times.

It is the felt experience that something, or someone, is close to or far away from us, here and now. Which is to say that there is not a direct relationship between psychological distance and objective distance—something far away in space or time can feel closer than something right beside us, and vice versa. Psychological distance is our superpower and our Achilles heel, a way of flying or falling.

Before it settled into dailiness, the phrase “social distancing” would remind me of something I learned years ago about perspective in space while reclined between my husband and our eldest child under the domed roof of a planetarium: wherever plunked down in the vastness of the cosmos, the narration said, the viewer will perceive themselves to be at the center and this means the opposite of how it feels—there is no center, the universe is more immense than we can possibly conceive, and it is moving away from us all the time.

You’re about to read six different stories, six different notes in the human song of longing for the unattainable. Their combination is the seventh note.

I didn’t set out to find these stories. I stumbled on the first one—a choir in a train station, as absurd as it was beautiful—and this led me to the next and so on. But, of course, while meetings can be accidental, curiosity is not. Until we make the unconscious conscious, said Carl Jung, it will direct our lives and we’ll call it fate.

In each case, I needed to understand them, these people I found unfathomable, holding fast to faith in ideas that went

against the grain of more accepted realities. It may be accurate to say that I needed to get closer to something, someone, that felt very far away. That I believed maybe I could.

One of the lies writers tell themselves is that all things should be understood.

THE CHOIR

Snow-blinding whiteness does not immediately come to mind when I think about the South Bronx. Once the habitat of the Yiddish-speaking Jews of my maternal grandfather's childhood, the neighborhood has longer been the domain of the Latino and Black families who arrived in search of the same security his father had arrived seeking. But when I climbed the stairs to change trains at 149th Street and Grand Concourse, there it was: an expanse of milky cheeks mottled red, like Cézanne's peaches, and corn-silk braids and platinum beards untethered to mustaches. From their dress, they appeared to be from a different time altogether: a full Mennonite choir, singing. And, despite the startling homogeneity of this choir of men and women, it also appeared as a pastel rainbow. The lavender and lemon, teal and pink of the women's homemade floor-length dresses reflected the sounds they were making, which were their own soft rainbow of harmony.

I stood there, frozen in the summer heat, too transfixed by the sound to wonder why. I could not take my eyes off them, the people of this bizarre choir. How confident they looked. How very nice it must be to stand shoulder to shoulder, to be one of those voices and therefore, somehow, all of those voices.

I was approached by one of the singing women who was, in fact, a blue-eyed girl of fifteen or sixteen, her blonde hair obediently smooth under the tiny white tent of her bonnet. Smiling, she handed me “a tract.” And when I took this booklet and thanked her, she said, smiling still, that it was important for me to be prepared. The end of days would come, she assured me, and it was coming.

PART 1
BELOW

And ghosts must do again / What gives them pain.

W. H. Auden, 'The Hard Question' (1930)

THE DEATH DOULA

KATRINA & ANNIE

This situation is not common, but it is the most mundane thing imaginable. To knock on someone's door and be let in. To see your photos in their photos (wedding, school, holidays). To look at their teenage son and see your own son a decade on. To sit on their chair, by their fireplace, laughing. To use their bathroom and dry your hands on the towel still damp from their own clean hands.

This is also not common; also the most mundane thing imaginable. Katrina, fifty-nine, has a husband named Peter, three stepsons, one biological son. Katrina has a friend named Carol whom she's known for thirty-five years and on whose lap she is currently resting her blanketed feet. Katrina has a warm home, her own patch of sky over the deck out back, a lounge in which to sun herself, a full fruit bowl in the kitchen, some mild annoyance at Pete being behind with replacing the carpet in the front room. Also: cancer, blurred vision, light sensitivity, a racing heart, extreme nausea, the shakes. Katrina has, if she's lucky, six months left.

This is not common. It has taken a year to make contact with Katrina. It is, as you would expect, difficult to find a patient in palliative care who wants to make time to talk with me.

“Use my name,” Katrina says, directing me to throw another pine cone on the fire.



The first time I stumbled across the words “death doula” they clobbered me. Strong words made stronger by the drum of their alliteration, but that wasn’t it. It was the startling directness about a matter that concerns us all, and which we talk about rarely and only in swerving euphemisms.

Not with us anymore, not long for this world, to pass away, to lose the battle with, to lose one’s life . . . as though it were a wallet in the back seat of a taxi driving away.

I liked that frankness and I feared it. Also, I had no real idea what the term meant. I understood vaguely what death doulas must do only because I was familiar with birth doulas: trained professionals who provide emotional, physical and educational support to mothers before, during and after labor. Thirty-eight years old and an entire profession a mystery.

“You know that Leonard Cohen song?” Annie Whitlocke asked me early on. “Where there’s a crack that’s where the light comes in? Well, where there’s a crack—at the hospital, with the doctors, in the family—that’s where the death doula comes in.”

Annie lives in a suburban house distinguished from its neighbors only by the string of Tibetan prayer flags on the front porch, batting in the breeze like lashes. That, and the fact that the backyard contains an enormous gold-painted Buddha and the living quarters of a senior Tibetan Buddhist monk.

Annie has to tilt her shaven head backward to look up at most people through glasses that magnify her already-large eyes, and has a habit of emphasizing emotionally exciting information with a puff of breath that reminds me of a small child playing with a toy car. This lends weight to her own evaluation of herself: childlike in the Buddhist sense of “beginner’s mind.” But it is not quite the reason why she will say, at the age of sixty-six, “I don’t know the rules of life, how you react, and what you say . . .”

She hates the word client. Finds it extremely hard to accept money for the work she does. On the one hand, she is highly trained and has to be able to support herself if she is to continue providing this type of service. On the other, she would not be as effective at what she does if it was simply a commercial transaction. She is a perpetual intimate stranger.

The boundaries of Annie’s work are bespoke to each job, necessarily unclear and always shifting, but most days start the same when she wakes in darkness. Shortly after her alarm goes off at 4:15 AM, Annie says the Buddhist prayer known as the Four Immeasurables. *May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness. May they be free from suffering and the cause of suffering . . .* Then she listens to public radio while she boils water, squeezes a lemon and prepares for more prayers at her altar, setting an intention for the day, which is to be of benefit to others. By 6:10 AM she is at the park walking the three dogs, Lady—zipping across the football field in a fresh diaper, her hind legs tethered to her dog-wheelchair—and old Bob and Missy limping along under the rising sun.

What follows varies. Yesterday she went to the vet, then dropped the dogs home before driving across town to visit a

single mother looking at an early death. Her goal for the young woman: to help her live without thinking of dying so she and her child can enjoy their remaining time together. Toward this end, Annie will teach her mindfulness meditation so that she can just have a bit of a break by resting in the present moment rather than constantly thinking and thinking about the past and the future. Also, Annie will inform her about advance care directives—instructions regarding her medical treatment for when she is no longer able to voice them herself. Having read a book with her son from Annie's vast collection, the woman is now working on creating her own book for the child, intentionally speaking to the stages he will go through without her—some kind of preparation for when the time comes. Annie's goal is to help the woman and her child in whatever way she can in order “to develop a safe place, a healing place within themselves.”

“It's just wonderful,” Annie explains, and I say something that indicates agreement while inside I experience a racing panic followed by a retreat into a place that feels far away from this woman and her child and their books and Annie's “wonderful,” but which I know is not.

On another day, in Annie's colorful and cozy living room, she shows me the Goodbye-box she ordered from a play therapist in the Netherlands. In addition to a coffin smaller than a sandwich, the box contains human figurines of various sizes, miniature flowers, hearts, stars, a candle holder, emotion dice with a different facial expression on each side and a music box. Everything is made from blond wood and hand painted, sparingly, in pastel colors. The medium is the message: the toy's

frank utility evidences an organization of mind profoundly different from our prevailing sensibility where death—like sickness and age—only ever comes as a shock, an elevator opening on the wrong floor.

Though she once texted me with an offer to be my death doula should I die in time, and on another occasion discreetly sent through a picture of the flower arrangement on a corpse she had recently “washed and shrouded,” Annie’s interest in dying and death cannot accurately be characterized as morbid because there is nothing gloomy about her. It’s less the case that these are topics she discusses too much; more that we discuss them too little.

“I thought this was just perfect,” Annie coos, turning the crank on the music box to release a sweet, but not sad, song before maneuvering a few of the wooden figurines around. “It’s for children to play. Mommy’s going to stand here, Dad or a friend is going to stand here. We’re going to put the flowers over here. They can have the visual, I mean how good is that?” She kneads the emotion dice in her palm, considers its different sides. “So they’re feeling sad right now, maybe they’re feeling a bit angry or, you know, maybe there’s some happiness. In the coffin, we can put flowers, notes . . . It’s just beautiful.”

To explain how she got into her line of work, Annie says a few different things. That it’s hard to know. That there are degrees of loss, death and dying are just another loss, and that it’s possible to come to an understanding of it. That she had to question herself, her interest in this work, as part of her clinical pastoral education at Monash Medical. And, finally, that when she was

six months old, her parents split up and she was sent away to a home for a couple of years.

“Even at that age, I do remember a loss,” she says. She was placed with different carers. She felt unhappy, not safe. Became very ill with scarlet fever and was sent to the Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital. High above the Yarra river where branches bend towards the brown water and where one may rent a canoe—that same stretch where sixty years later I regularly take my son to feed the ducks—Annie the toddler sat, terrified, in isolation, her eyes wrapped shut. And when she explains this to me, the quiver in her voice conveys that a part of her is sitting there still. She remembers having no idea what was going to happen next because first she was at her mom’s, then she was with this other person who was not good, and then she was placed with a much nicer family only to be ripped away and taken to hospital, where she was left in the dark. When she recovered, she was kept in a cot with another child from whom she caught the measles. So she was removed, again: returned to isolation, where no one was allowed to touch her without plastic gloves.

When Annie finally went home, to her mom and nana and grandpa, she found that her older sister—no longer an only child—perhaps resented her. At first, when she tells me this, I misunderstand the living configuration. I ask whether, when they were placed in care, she and her sister were kept together.

“Oh no,” she corrects me, “Mom kept my sister. Because I was the younger one, and my mother had moved in with her own parents . . .” She trails off, starts again. “I was young, and I cried a lot, it appears . . . In those days, mid-last century—” She interrupts herself with a big laugh, saying she sounds like she

should be in a rocking chair, but I understand that laugh to be doing something different.

She tries again. “If my mom had gone to the authorities, asked for help, I would have been made a ward of the state and she didn’t want that so she had to try and find some way to still keep the family together but at that stage she was unable to keep me.” Annie’s tone here is official, the voice of the administration telling a serviceable narrative that makes my stomach tighten.

At first, her sister did not know who she was, this smaller child receiving anything she asked for from adults trying to alleviate their guilt. So a rift that’s never quite healed developed between them, she explains.

“Okay then, life, life . . .”

Annie says this to speed the narrative along, so we don’t get too lost in the morass of detail which is the difference between life and the story of a life but also, I suspect, because of feelings she prefers to keep at bay with the big laugh and the bureaucratic tone. So “life, life” is said in the spirit of *et cetera* or *yada yada*, but also with a deeply sorrowing and authentic acceptance which I find so graceful and moving that I have to look past my page and out into the yard, where the gold-painted Buddha is reflecting so much light it appears to be generating it.