

How Can A House Be So Much Quieter Without the Quiet?

The Glen Rock Book of the Dead

by Marion Winik (Counterpoint, \$20, ISBN: 9781582434315)

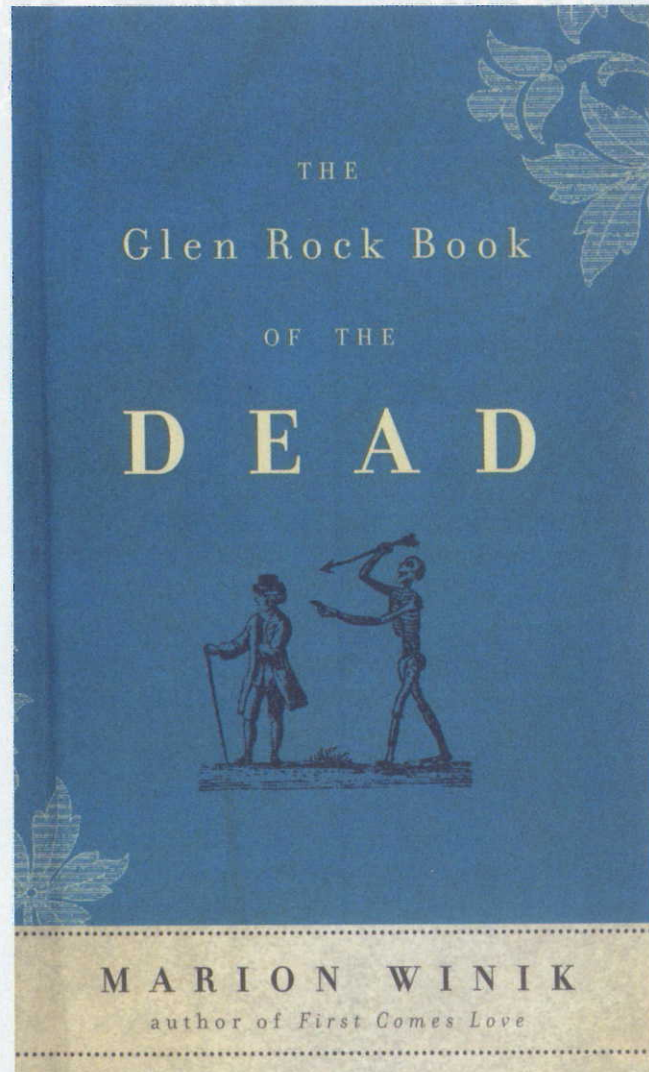
Who among us hasn't sat amidst a group of mourners collectively wincing as a well-meaning clergyman or family member struggles to capture the essence of the recently-departed? It's the daunting challenge of the eulogist's task that makes Marion Winik's collection of brief (in some cases no more than two paragraphs) reminiscences of 49 people and one building (a New Orleans house destroyed by Hurricane Katrina) that have touched such an extraordinarily moving exploration of the meaning of life and death.

Drawing inspiration from such disparate sources as *Spoon River Anthology* and *Mexico's Day of the Dead*, Winik (formerly of Glen Rock and now living and teaching in Baltimore) sat down in early 2007 and began to summon up memories of people – friends, family, lovers and the occasional adversary – whose lives had intersected with hers. Each of these essays is a masterpiece of compression and lyrical prose, undoubtedly owing to Winik's background as a poet (she's the author of two published collections, now out of print but available on her website). In a decision that contributes much to the book's unique character, Winik chose to refer to her subjects as archetypes – “The Skater,” “The Maid” or the “The Golf Pro” – rather than by name. Explaining her decision in a recent email, she says that she “felt it made the portraits more open and resonant, less obituary-like.” Without doubt, it has the powerful effect of transforming the gritty particularity of her subjects' lives into something universal.

While most of Winik's sketches are sympathetic, there's nothing soft or gauzy about them. There are deaths by suicide, violence, AIDS and drug overdose. As if by a conjurer's trick, but in truth through the vehicle of consistently perceptive and tough-minded writing, these characters flourish on the page, as their lives intertwine with the author's. Some of her stories hit with the force of a hammer blow; others slice cleanly like a knife.

Can there be a more haunting description than this one of a woman, “The Democrat,” dying of Alzheimer's disease?: “You wouldn't think there could be so many years of this, that death could be so patient, determined not just to take you but to erase you altogether.” Capturing in a single sentence, the wife of “The Quiet Guy,” Winik writes, “She had a PhD in his likes and dislikes and her greatest pleasure was to display this knowledge.” The account of his sudden death in a TGI Friday's is heartbreaking in its cool matter of factness: “They brought his dessert, he asked for the check, and he put his head down. Not the worst way to die, but a cruel way to leave. She paid the bill and took the bus home.” Winik leaves the widow, musing, “How can a house be so much quieter without the quiet?”

Of the many moving pieces in this collection, especially powerful is



“The Baby,” in which Winik juxtaposes the stillbirth of her son in 1987 with the loss experienced by the parents of the students slaughtered at Virginia Tech in 2007. She confessed that this piece was the “most heartbreaking. There was less of the tender reminiscence feeling that I had with many of the others, more raw pain.” And she captures that pain in the concluding lines of the essay, exposing the relativity that is an undeniable, if rarely acknowledged, aspect of grief: “If I had to lose him, at least it was before I knew him, before all my love poured out of me like milk. At least I could still start over.”

In the wry piece that concludes the book, “The VIP Lounge,” Winik imagines a merry band of celebrity shades frolicking in eternity: Princess Di sharing a story with JFK, and John and George jamming with Elvis while they “wait for the others.”

“Nothing stops it,” she observes. “Not beauty, not humor, not talent, not wisdom. Not youth or health or goodness or fame or love. Not people who need us. Not a job to do.” In her capable hands, there's nothing banal about that conclusion; instead, on the evidence of the lives recalled in these essays, it's one chiseled out of the rock of hard-earned experience.

In *The World According To Garp*, John Irving wrote, “we are all terminal cases.” That truth, so tragic and so exhilarating, is the gift Marion Winik offers up with honesty and compassion in this incomparable book. **HBG**