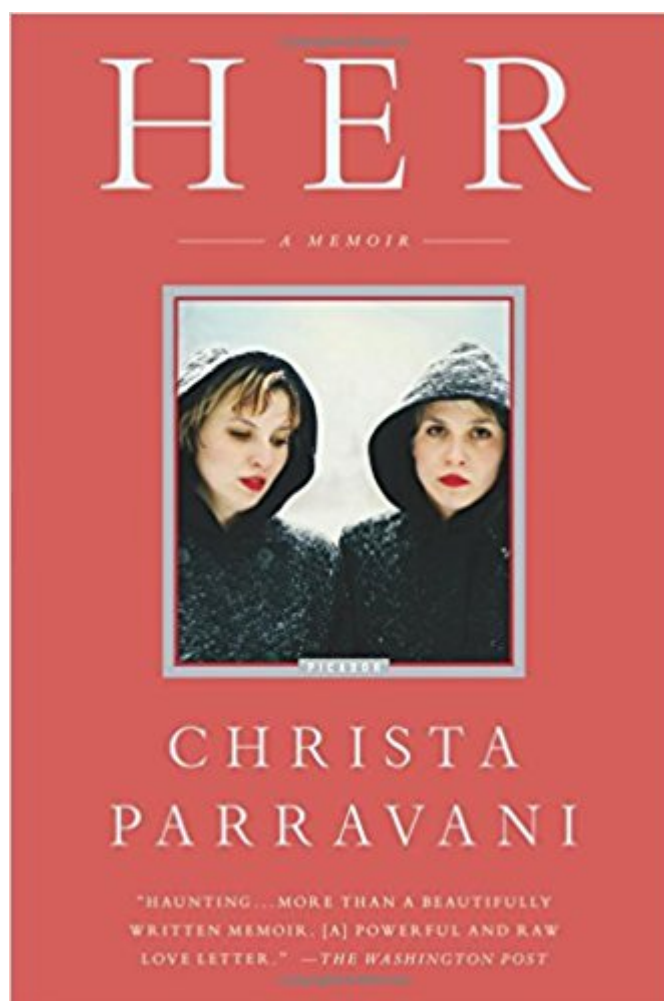


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# Her: A Memoir



## Synopsis

Wall Street Journal, "Favorite Books of the Year 2013"Cosmopolitan, "Best Books of the Year for Women"Library Journal, "Best Books of 2013"Salon, "Best Books of 2013""Haunting... more than a beautifully written memoir. [A] powerful and raw love letter."—*The Washington Post*A BLAZINGLY PASSIONATE MEMOIR OF IDENTITY AND LOVE: WHEN A CHARISMATIC AND TROUBLED YOUNG WOMAN DIES TRAGICALLY, HER IDENTICAL TWIN MUST STRUGGLE TO SURVIVEChrista Parravani and her identical twin, Cara, were linked by a bond that went beyond siblinghood, beyond sisterhood, beyond friendship. Raised up from poverty by a determined single mother, the gifted and beautiful twins were able to create a private haven of splendor and merriment between themselves and then earn their way to a prestigious college and to careers as artists (a photographer and a writer, respectively) and to young marriages. But, haunted by childhood experiences with father figures and further damaged by being raped as a young adult, Cara veered off the path to robust work and life and in to depression, drugs and a shocking early death. A few years after Cara was gone, Christa read that when an identical twin dies, regardless of the cause, 50 percent of the time the surviving twin dies within two years; and this shocking statistic rang true to her. "Flip a coin," she thought, "those were my chances of survival." First, Christa fought to stop her sister's downward spiral; suddenly, she was struggling to keep herself alive. Beautifully written, mesmerizingly rich and true, Christa Parravani's account of being left, one half of a whole, and of her desperate, ultimately triumphant struggle for survival is informative, heart-wrenching and unforgettably beautiful.

## Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Picador (February 25, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1250044391

ISBN-13: 978-1250044396

Product Dimensions: 5.6 x 21.3 x 207.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 258 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #402,057 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #150 in [Books > Parenting & Relationships > Family Relationships > Siblings](#) #691 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Artists, Architects & Photographers](#) #761 in [Books > Self-Help > Death &](#)

## Customer Reviews

An Best Book of the Month, March 2013: Brave, raw, and ultimately uplifting, Christa Parravani's debut memoir unbraids the memory of her life from her identical twin, Cara, who died of an overdose at age 28. Cara had been the larger, hungrier twin since birth, but they both emerged from a chaotic childhood to become magnetic and creatively precocious. Cara claimed writing as her territory, so Christa took pictures. They married young but remained more devoted to each other than their spouses. Then in 2001, Cara was viciously raped while walking her dog in a park. She survived, but she was deeply damaged, physically and psychologically. Christa tried for years to restore her, and after Cara's death, she felt as if she became her sister. She heard Cara's voice as her own, saw Cara staring back at her from mirrors-in warning, and also as an invitation to tear apart her life "just as she'd shredded her own." Such hallucinations are a common delusion among the newly twinless: "they become a breathing memorial for their lost half, and half of them die within the first two years. Told in part in the voice of her lost sister, *Her* is the story of how Christa clawed her way back from this gulf of grief and gave herself permission to live. --Mari Malcolm

Exclusive: Alexandra Fuller Interviews Christa Parravani

Alexandra Fuller: On one level, this memoir is about the shocking connectivity of being an identical twin and what happens when you tragically lose your twin. But on another level, it feels like a classic coming-of-age story with the most awful twist imaginable: you were unable to grow up and become a fully realized version of yourself until your sister died. Does this feel true? Christa Parravani: It was nearly comfortable sharing an identity with Cara, almost fulfilling. It's difficult to imagine now how we tolerated bartering our individualities for closeness with each other. But it was simple at first: I liked chocolate ice cream, so Cara liked vanilla. I wore pink; Cara wore blue. Then adult desires complicated our agreement. Cara wanted to be a writer, and I did too. When we both married, room needed to be made for our husbands. Being adults meant moving away from each other, but twinship impaired our abilities to move up and out in the world. If my attention was diverted from Cara, I felt I was being unfaithful to her. Now I see my life as divided in half: before and after Cara. The hardest years after Cara's death were full of unimaginable grief. I couldn't believe that I could live while she had died. Twins were supposed to have the same fate, the same experiences. I simply didn't know how to go on without her. I looked in the mirror and saw her staring back at me. I'd laugh and hear her. And those kinds of experiences began to define me as much as my life with her ever had, even more so. I look at what has become

of me: I'm a happy wife to a loving and brilliant husband. I'm a mother to a sweet baby girl. I'm a survivor. It's probably hard to believe, but I would relive every painful moment again to have what I do now: my own separate life. AF: Your story is wonderfully layered, and the layering is almost always expressed as either a kind of sublime twin scenario (a magically connecting experience) or as a duality (a horribly alienating experience). As the story progressed, I found myself seeing ways in which you and Cara often seem to be leading a dark double life beneath that already double life of your twinship. Do you think you felt less lonely in those dark places because you could act as companions and guides into your private underworld? CP: There was nothing we didn't share, including the proclivity for dark behavior. It was programmed into us from our childhood, from what we'd seen in our home. Neither of us understood yet that we could control those impulses, and we'd act out blindly. There was a lot of shame because of that, and we'd bounce it back and forth. We embraced each other at the same time we pushed each other down. We truly were ransom holders with each other's secrets--scorekeepers, always threatening to leave the other or tell on them. But there was also safety in that, a place to return where we knew we'd be understood. AF: In spite of the fact that your sister dies from her drug addiction, it seems almost a secondary theme in the book. I come back to the question of layering. What you seem to be saying is that Cara didn't die of a drug overdose, so much as from an aversion to the awful pain she was in. It's a refreshingly nuanced take on addiction. Was it important for you to steer clear of judgment? Was this something that came with writing? CP: While Cara was alive, I was judgmental. I wanted to shake her until she agreed to stop taking pills and heroin. I knew they would kill her. It was difficult not to pass judgment as I watched her blot herself out. As a writer though, it wasn't my place to pass judgment. That never accomplishes much good in writing. Drugs were clearly my second rival. Cara's pain and trauma took her first. They were the primary things in the way, the cloak over her. If I was going to try and get to the root of my sister's troubles in *Her*, I needed to go deeper. That meant trying to parse out the reasons for her drug use instead of laying blame. AF: Your relationship with Cara was so exclusive, so seemingly mysterious that even your mother is unable to insert herself between you. And after her death, Cara still comes to you, or is with you (in your imagination, in your dreams, and in psychic readings) as the primary force in your life. Did writing this book change your relationship with Cara? CP: I often had the feeling while writing that Cara was with me. Writing *Her* was a way of being with Cara again. I found that the more time I spent writing, the less I grieved in my daily life. I needed her to haunt me, to still be there. So I mimicked her behavior to try and bring her closer to me. I created her ghost in my own flesh. After Cara died, we were even more enmeshed than when she was alive. But then something really surprising happened: The closer I

came to Cara in writing, the farther away from her I was in my life. It was a magical experience, really. I felt like we were getting to know each other again, talking things over. By writing, I was able to have this fantastic relationship with my sister. In some ways, it was a healthier relationship than the one I had with her while she was alive. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** Few of us see ourselves in a living reflection, knowing *me* literally and figuratively through *her*. Cara and Christa Parravani were inseparable, identical twins bonded by a ferocious love that protected them against an abusive father, a militaristic stand-in dad, sour romantic relationships, and sometimes even each other. "We knew who we were: We were best friends. We were enemies. We were all we had." Cara's violent rape, hardcore drug addiction, and personality disorder frame the book's primary trauma, but are, perhaps, trumped by Christa's struggle to survive when half of her • Cara • dies. At the very least a memoir, *Her* is more an homage, a form of therapy, and a declaration of independence from an unsustainable survivor's guilt. Concise and captivating, Parravani's prose paints her phoenix-like transformation such that the reader feels the flames of her fire. A poignant, book-arc-ing metaphor illustrates Christa's battle to accept herself without a mirror image. Initially a photographer, Parravani captured her observations and her twin with pictures. Years after Cara's death, in a final attempt to claw free from depression, she writes. No longer a passive watcher of her own life, Christa authors this twin's memoir, and thus her future. Raw and unstoppable, *Her* illuminates the triumph of the human spirit • both individual and shared. --Katharine Fronk  
--This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

*HER* inspires us as readers to love with our whole heart AND to communicate that love, because life can change in the blink of an eye. Parravani bravely reveals herself, her twin sister, and their complicated relationship with brutal and often unflattering honesty. It is this honesty that makes the twins Christa and Cara REAL to the reader. We experience the pain and helplessness of their love and loss, and eventually we feel the peace of their forgiveness. Christa Parravani has given us a glimpse into her world, and with it she's given us a greater understanding of the people we love and the crazy things they do.

This was a very well-written story about two sisters...twins. One is bent on self-destruction and the

other seeks a more balanced life, with marriage and stability. Strangely, after the wild sister dies, the "normal" sister begins to take on her twin's persona, complete with drug abuse and promiscuity and emotional chaos. This is a very interesting story, although a sad one, because it is heart wrenching that the twins do not fulfill the unspoken promise between twins...two people born to each other....to be there for each other. No, death takes one of them and the other is forced to learn to live without her "other half." She is lonely and haunted. I enjoyed this book, despite the sad subject matter. It is well-written and interesting until the end.

I've never had a book present me with such a dilemma. I was absolutely compelled to devour it and, at the same time, not wanting to even think of what was going to happen next. Of course, before I ever picked the book up, I knew one of the twins would commit suicide so I knew all the while I was reading how that would turn out. It is written in such a way that it truly comes to life.....gory and horrible as it may be. I never gave much thought to the relationship of twins. I had always thought that they probably had lots of fun together. I never considered how complicated the "twin relationship" might be. I hope that, in most cases, it's not as "far out" and truly tragic as these twins experienced. Definitely not a light summer read but truly an example of amazing writing.

Kept me reading. Fascinating!

I haven't read a memoir that affected me this much since *Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls. I'm still haunted by this story of identical twins whose lives are so intertwined that they practically live as one person. Together Christa and Cara overcame a difficult, abusive childhood to become artists: One is a writer and one is a photographer. Years later, Cara is raped by a stranger; it is this event that leads to her drug use and suicide. Unable to cope with the loss of her sister, Christa embarks on her own journey with drugs and alcohol; Christa is left to deal with the loss of her sister and she simply does not know how. Christa Parravani puts it all out there in her writing. It is at once both beautiful and awful and always searingly honest.

An amazing heart breaking story. This would make a fantastic movie, but only if it was well made and not some Life-time special.

Christa Parravani has written something entirely new: it's a memoir but that worn word doesn't begin to describe it. A clutch of different words can attempt to: ghostly, haunting, flooring, searing,

lyrical, etc. But adjectives fail. Words fail. That's part of what Christa writes about: sitting through the bloody smoke of their failure until it has all settled down and you can breathe again. Her is an eulogy, an elegy and it's totally triumphant. As a piece of literature and as a piece of spiritual prose and as a piece of psychological analysis, it contributes to the world in many, many facets. You will believe in the non-rational and it will make you weep with gratitude for having opened to it. Thank you, Christa.

I lost my sister two years ago and have been contemplating writing my own memoir since her death. In searching for an example of how this type of story could be told, I stumbled upon, Her. I couldn't have found a more inspirational, beautifully written, tragic story. Ms. Parravani shares her deeply personal pain, her beautifully inspiring photographs, and the raw loss she experienced when she her twin died. This is something not just a twin might experience, but grief felt by sisters, siblings or family, when one is lost and one must live on despite that tragedy. Ms. Parravani, thank you for sharing her.

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