

AND THEN LIKE MY DREAMS

MARGARET ROSE STRINGER

Publication date: August 2013

ISBN (PB): 9781922089021 • RRP: \$26.99

ISBN (ebook): 9781922089038 • RRP: \$12.99

ABOUT THE BOOK

And then like my dreams is a memoir written by Margaret Rose Stringer following the death of her husband.

Charles 'Chic' Stringer was one of Australia's most respected stillsmen of the 1970s and 80s; and Margaret Rose too had a long career in production in the film and television industry.

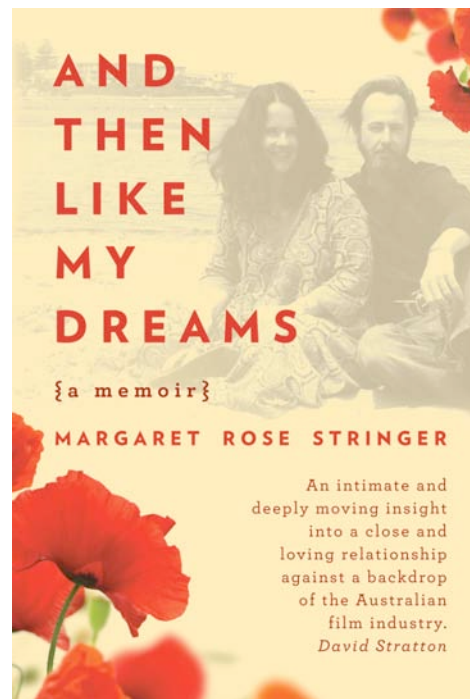
Her story is a frank, funny, self-deprecating account of the meeting of soul mates and the extraordinary bond between them. It is also an account of life after loss – a memoir of bereavement and celebration by the life partner left behind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Rose was born in Perth in 1943 and is now a resident of Sydney, having lived there off and on since 1965. She holds a postgraduate Certificate in Editing from UTS. She has spent her life working mostly in the film/television/video production industry as a freelancer and in the employment of such companies as SBS, Film Australia and AFTVS. She met her lifetime partner and husband Chic Stringer, an eminent stillsman in the Australian film industry, in 1974. Chic died in 2006.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The first chapter opens: 'I dwelt in interior darkness, when I was thirty-one.' What does the author mean by this? How have the experiences of her growing up contributed to this 'interior darkness'?
- Chic might perhaps be seen as a more robust person than the narrator. In what ways does Margaret Rose rescue Chic from his own circumstances at the time of meeting?
- How would you define and describe the dynamic in the relationship between Margaret Rose and her husband? Does this change across time?
- The memoir contains many snippets and scenes of script created by the author. What difference does their inclusion make to the story that Margaret Rose tells? How does their creation enable the author to recreate the past?
- What did you discover about the film and television industry from reading this memoir?
- In what ways does the author include the reader in the telling of her story?
- What is the 'truth tree' that the author describes? Why has she chosen this metaphor?
- What makes a 'successful' real life love story? What are the elements that make a partnership between a couple truly 'great' and able to withstand change across time?
- What is Margaret Rose's reaction and response to the 'death sentence' that is passed upon her husband? How is her reaction in keeping with the nature of their relationship?
- How does the writing of this memoir enable Margaret Rose to move on?
- Consider the following excerpt from the interview between Mal McKissock and Norman Swan referred to by the author in her interview above. Here he is discussing the role of the counsellor in validating the person and he is also talking of their experience in dealing with grief, which is fresh and raw and new:
We need to look for the bereaved person; by and large it's a matter of relearning the world, and you're starting from square one, because this is the first time you've actually been here. This isn't repetitive, this is the first time you've been here, and every step you're relearning the world. And that's really hard, you feel incredibly



vulnerable, you're very regressed, in other words you have the vulnerability maybe of an 8 to 15 year old, and you're on your own. No-one's walked your path before. ... You know, this is the first time you've done it over this death, and so it's a big struggle. So in terms of telling the story, people need to sort out their new relationship with the person who has died. When you talk about memories, when you remember, when you bring the passion of relationship back into the present, biochemically you're actually changing what's happening in your body. It's sort of emotional respite. You're changing the biochemistry, you're feeling passion, as you remember joyous moments you feel joy, even in the midst of grief. So what we're trying to do is help this person live with their grief, live with their sadness and parallel it with joy and relationship, as opposed to put that behind you and get on with the only important thing in life, which is joy. That's a myth. According to this quote, what does Mal McKissock see as the role of the counsellor in assisting a bereaved client with their grief?

- Is it possible to see the experience of writing a memoir as a similar act of validation?
- What do you think is the relationship between writing and memory?
- What is the relationship between writing and grief?
- And what might be the relationship between writing and living?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What difference did it make to you to write your memoir?

When grief is all there is and you're living in your own private hell, it's not even vaguely possible to imagine life's being normal again. So reaching the point where I could begin to think of pulling Chic's and my story out of my head was a vital step in following the labyrinthine thread out of that hell; and moving from thought to action over the next several years achieved several things:

1. It enabled me to look at what I'd lost and know that I **could** look at it.
2. In writing so much about life with my husband, even though a very large amount was edited out, what I remembered is now fixed forever in my mind. (Even now, when I re-read some of what I've written, I'm amazed by that recall.)
3. It brought truly great joy in the remembering – joy in both the things we did and in the people we were.
4. It made me indescribably proud to have been able to write, well enough to be published!, about the man my husband was.
5. It gave me focus in the maelstrom.

At what stage in the grief process did you feel able to begin to write? Did the process of writing change the process of grief?

It was something like a year after Chic left me that I started to put down words. I simply wrote as things came into my head, and then rearranged as I saw necessary. The first completed draft wasn't ready for a fair while, but I don't recall precisely how long ... all I know is that my professional assessor sent back a report dated July 2010.

As to where this fell in the grief process – I don't see any 'process'. Grief doesn't happen in linear fashion. Whereas in February one may be feeling totally wretched, one may be more upbeat in June; and then, in November, mired again in misery. Grief simply goes 'round and 'round, without falling neatly into stages.

So this means that I can't answer the question as put to me: but I can (and will) say that writing about us made having to be without my husband something better able to be coped with. Until, that is, I received back the assessor's report on the first draft, and realised I was going to have to write about Chic's dying ...

Tell me about this first draft: what audience did you have in mind when you wrote it? What kind of a story was it that you were contemplating that could leave out Chic's dying?

Oh, I wasn't thinking of my 'audience' at all, in the first months: I just wanted to write about Chic. That's what consumed me: the telling of his story. Who would read it? – that was a step beyond my thinking capabilities, in the beginning. All I knew was that **I would not let the world forget him**; and that occupied all my thoughts – so it seems that all along I intended for the book to be published, somehow or other.

And as I wrote it occurred to me – somewhat egotistically, perhaps – that it was turning out to be quite interesting: that the life we had was not a normal one, and that it might prove to be ... quite readable by – well, several people!

What I wrote when it came to the dreadful part where I lost Chic was this:

I had thought very briefly of writing of his dying because an author I met at Uni, who had written of her own husband's death, said that for her it had completed the story. She didn't use that hideous term 'closure', which is why I gave the idea momentary consideration.

But I cannot.

There is too much pain.

And, you see ... it is no-one else's business.

and my assessor, in response, wrote: Think about your statement about Chic's dying: '*it is no-one else's business*'. *If it is not, then why is his living and your life together anyone else's business?*

and so, having seen the truth, I had to get myself together and force myself to tell the whole story.

Re-living that time to write about it was the hardest thing I've ever done. I hope it was worth it.

What was left behind on the cutting room floor?

That first draft was absolutely chokka with amusing anecdotes, with little vignettes that illustrated Chic's personality and/or our relationship; and I found it deeply hurtful that my assessor kept writing *Why am I reading this?* after so many of them.

Whilst the writing of the second draft did eliminate a fair bit, it took until the third and final draft before I really grasped what she meant and was able to axe so much.

There had to be a point, a reason, for the inclusion of any little story; its being amusing wasn't enough. After all, I could've written well over 200,000 words if it were simply a matter of raising a laugh; and I finally saw that as a kind of directive.

Can you talk a bit more about the distinction between bereavement and grief?

Bereavement is what happens to you – the state or condition you're in when someone you love dies; and **grief** is what you're feeling.

You can experience grief for many different kinds of loss – a job, say; a pet; something that was stolen – but bereavement is more commonly associated with where you are when you lose a person you loved greatly.

Mal McKissock, the other principal of the centre whence comes my own bereavement counsellor, Dianne McKissock, was interviewed by Norman Swan for the ABC's Health Report some years ago; and that interview (which you can access at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/healthreport/bereavement-and-grief/3503228>) contains everything you would want to know about this distinction.

It's a really great interview: both men do this important subject justice.

In what way do you see your book as being of assistance to others who may have lost a soul mate?

I'd like to think that there are people in the reading world who, being themselves bereaved, might realise that they, too, can write about those they've lost.

I go so far as to hope that they come to an understanding of the great personal good it will almost inevitably provide them with to do so ...

And I hope they will come to understand that no matter how strong the bond, no matter how deep the love, there is an end to the piercing suffering. There is never an end to the loneliness; never an end to missing the person lost; but there will be, eventually, an end to the terror.



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