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"Holding Silvan"*A poignant memoir about the tragic task of letting go*

By Lou Fancher



Monica Wesolowska Photo provided

The too-short, 38-day biography of baby Silvan, captured in writer Monica Wesolowska's searingly unsentimental "Holding Silvan: A Brief Life" (2013, Hawthorne Books), is one of this year's most beautifully written, tragic, exquisite reads.

Face to face with their seemingly perfect, soft-skinned infant, Wesolowska and her husband, David, learn their newborn child has suffered a devastating, pervasive brain injury. Staring into the gloom of a decision with no clear escape, Wesolowska wrestles and writes her way to resolution. "Holding Silvan" is a story of discovery. It is the brilliantly told, honest, bittersweet journey of a mother lovingly letting go of her child.

Following a normal pregnancy and a delivery that S-curved into a wild, ethical ride, Wesolowska finds herself flung from the heights of postpartum ecstasy into a fog-filled, surreal world of "severe hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy" and 21st century medicine.

The prognosis, delivered in "The Bad News Room" by neonatologist Dr. A, enters her understanding in fits and lumps. "Seizures" are events even her father has endured, she reasons, at one moment. Watching the doctor's hands demonstrate skull plates, shifting like continents in the birth canal and crunching cranial vessels into blood clots, forces her to sit, "sick, woozy, and nauseated." Uttering dire possibility in a single word, "die," is both nearly impossible (to her mother's heart) and a relief (to her sparse, achingly forthright writer's instincts).

When Silvan stops eating and slips into a coma, modern medicine's artificial ability to keep people alive beyond terminal markers of the past wedges her into a mental corner. "Even if he revives, he'll never be able to

survive on his own. Even if he revives, it will be a life of constant dying," she writes.

Wesolowska swings on the pendulum of medical advice and suggestion: parsing the difference between euthanasia and removing a feeding tube; considering an unwaveringly misguided doctor's questions about future regret. (How could there not be a thousand potential regrets swirling in the mind of a parent in her predicament?) Clawing their way out from under cascading, insensitive comments from doctors, friends and family, she and her husband unite. Despite their individual tendencies, split paths of melodramatic expressivity versus skeptical rationalism, they refuse to splinter. Instead, they brace against the wind of Silvan's final days.

Miraculously - yet mounting pain upon grief upon suffering - Silvan lingers. "Desperate for him to stop breathing, I am in love with every breath he takes," Wesolowska confesses.

The 38-day span of Silvan's life allows doubt to crack the surface of the couple's fundamental convictions. Wesolowska is fearless in examining the fissures; delving into religion, faith, marriage, her brother's suicide, and flawed humanity.

Elevated by Wesolowska's distinguished, flowing voice, the memoir parallels the traditions of classic and contemporary literary heroes. Stripped of imprecise excess, void of sentimentality but never cold, razor-sharp in self-examination and often funny just before reverberating with pathos, it almost hurts to read "Holding Silvan." But it's a good kind of pain and ultimately, oddly uplifting. This is great writing, distilled to essential language and never overwrought, despite the tragedy it describes.

Silvan's death is covered swiftly and in a closing chapter, we read of happy September sunshine enjoyed by Ivan and Mark, two children born to the couple in the years following their older brother's death.

The treasure Wesolowska discovers (and swept along with her elegant prose, we do too) is love: messy, rough, agonizing, piercing, tender, swelling, bursting, flooding, irrevocable, mother's love.

Wesolowska, a graduate of Reed College and a recipient of a fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, has been an instructor at UC Berkeley Extension and elsewhere for over a decade. She will discuss and sign copies of her memoir at 1 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 22 at Orinda Books, 276 Village Square.

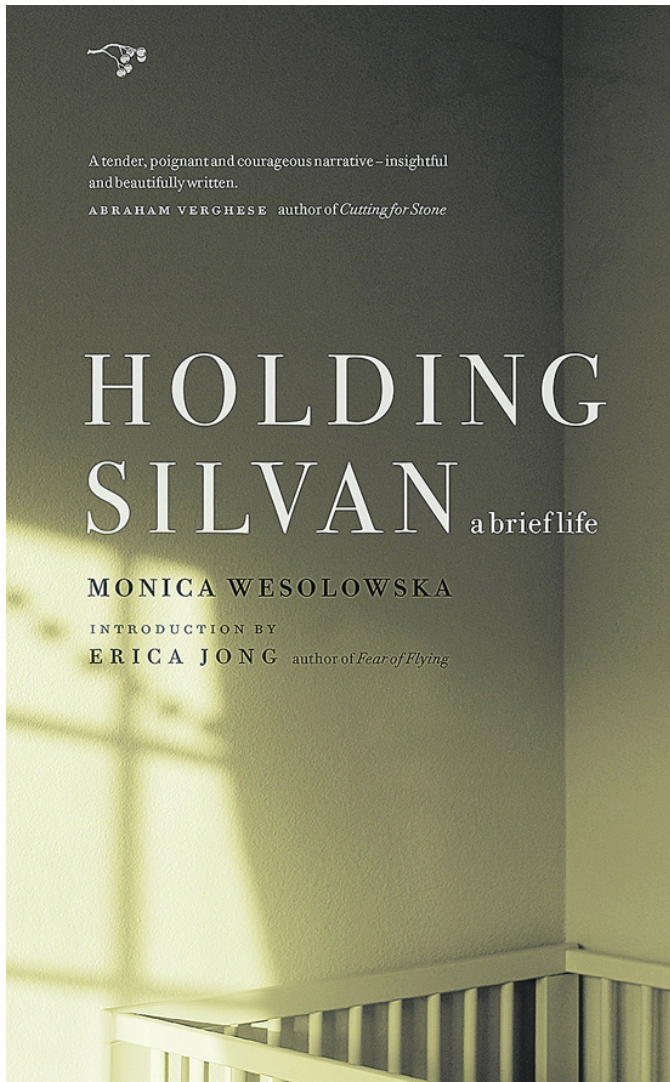


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