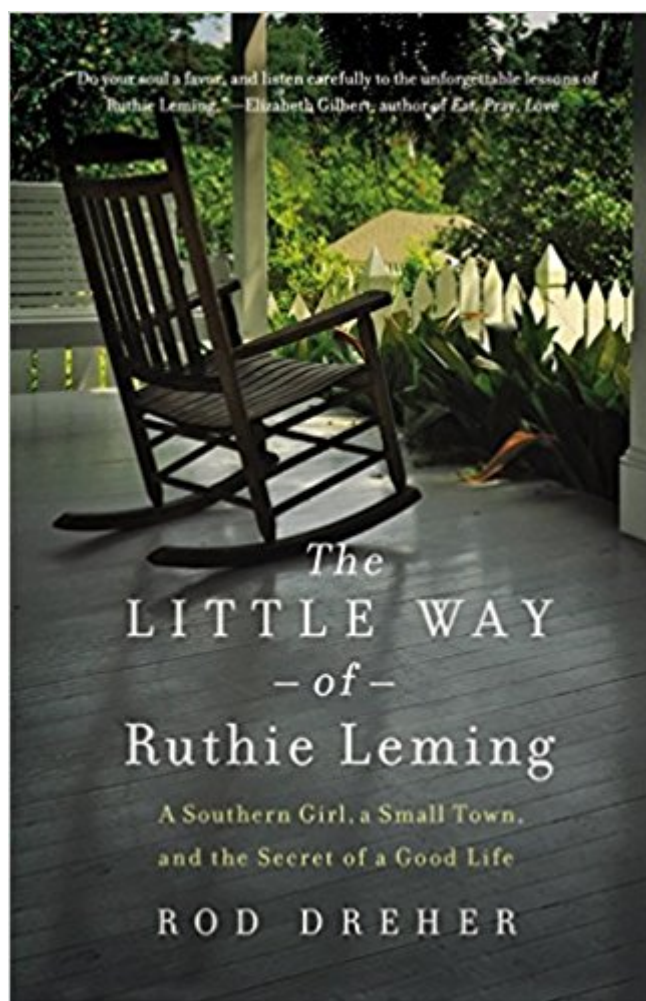


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The Little Way Of Ruthie Leming: A Southern Girl, A Small Town, And The Secret Of A Good Life



Synopsis

THE LITTLE WAY OF RUTHIE LEMING follows Rod Dreher, a Philadelphia journalist, back to his hometown of St. Francisville, Louisiana (pop. 1,700) in the wake of his younger sister Ruthie's death. When she was diagnosed at age 40 with a virulent form of cancer in 2010, Dreher was moved by the way the community he had left behind rallied around his dying sister, a schoolteacher. He was also struck by the grace and courage with which his sister dealt with the disease that eventually took her life. In Louisiana for Ruthie's funeral in the fall of 2011, Dreher began to wonder whether the ordinary life Ruthie led in their country town was in fact a path of hidden grandeur, even spiritual greatness, concealed within the modest life of a mother and teacher. In order to explore this revelation, Dreher and his wife decided to leave Philadelphia, move home to help with family responsibilities and have their three children grow up amidst the rituals that had defined his family for five generations-Mardi Gras, L.S.U. football games, and deer hunting. As David Brooks poignantly described Dreher's journey homeward in a recent New York Times column, Dreher and his wife Julie "decided to accept the limitations of small-town life in exchange for the privilege of being part of a community."

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Customer Reviews

A Conversation with Author Rod Dreher After decades as a professional journalist, was it difficult to write such a personal story? Were there any unexpected challenges that came up during the writing process? The chief difficulty came for me in having to recognize that the people I was writing about weren't just subjects, but people I loved and cared about, and among whom I lived. I constantly

thought about balancing respect for them and their feelings with respect for the truth. Everybody loves the fun stories about Ruthie, but if I had left it at that, it wouldn't have been the whole story of Ruthie. What I didn't expect were the philosophical challenges that came up as I worked on the book. I was most struck by the nature of Ruthie's courage in facing her cancer. I learned as I reported the book that Ruthie never talked with her husband or her children about the possibility of her death--this, even though she lived for 19 months with terminal cancer. She was both accepting of death, and terrified of it. She lived with a lot of denial. In learning more about her, I came to understand that the line between heroic courage and stark terror is far more ambiguous than I thought. Maybe the main difference between us was that while my nature was to approach the world from a critical stance, she accepted life as it was. She almost always met it with humility, fidelity, and above all, love. It is perhaps the most beautiful paradox of Ruthie Leming's life that in showing us how to die, she showed us how to live. To write *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*, you interviewed many people from your hometown and your immediate family. What was that process like so shortly after Ruthie's passing? I felt as if I were trying to cross a minefield. She had been gone only three months when I started these interviews. The hardest interviews, of course, were with my family. During one interview, my father stood behind the couch in his living room talking about Ruthie, and in mid-sentence broke down into sobs, and had to grab the furniture to steady himself. It was heartbreaking to watch the man who had always been the rock of our family reduced to that, and awful too to know that I had forced him into it with my questioning. But I also knew that I couldn't flinch, and neither could he. This story had to be told. Without a doubt the most difficult interview was with Ruthie's husband Mike, a big, quiet man who doesn't talk much, and never about his feelings. He collapsed emotionally during the interview, but pushed himself on, saying what needed saying. I've done lots of interviews in my career, including talking to 9/11 survivors. But nothing as searing as that one. Community is a strong theme in the book. How did your idea of community evolve over the course of Ruthie's illness and how did it lead to your decision to leave the "big city" for a tiny country town? Everybody wants to belong. I grew up in a close-knit place where I belonged, until I got to high school. Suddenly I didn't. I was bullied. This happened at the same time that my father had no idea what to do with me. Paw was, and is, a good and loving man, but as I began to turn out different from what he expected--bookish, nerdy, and intellectual, instead of outdoorsy and athletic--the distance between us grew wide. Thank God for Mam, who battled with him on my behalf, so I could leave home and spend my junior and senior years in a public boarding school for gifted kids. I put my hometown behind me, and never looked back. And then Ruthie got sick, and I saw the community in a new way. I also began to see myself in a new

way. Ruthie was a healthy woman in the prime of her life, and had never smoked--yet she came down with terminal lung cancer. If that could happen to a woman like her, anything was possible. What would I do if it happened to me, or to my wife? We had friends in every place we'd lived, but we hadn't lived in any one place long enough to put down the roots that Ruthie had, not only because she spent her life here, but because she cultivated roots laid down by previous generations of our family. I came to understand that my family needed what Ruthie had, the kind of things that money can't buy. I could have at least some of it, I realized--but only if I sacrificed my own individual desire to follow my career wherever it took me. The lesson is not that everybody should move to a small town, or should return to their hometown. The lesson is that you need your community more than you think, and that you should practice what the Benedictine monks call "stability." That is, do your best to stay in one place, put down roots, and resist the currents of our culture. You say that returning to St. Francisville was an unexpected decision, but felt like what you had to do. What has it been like to come back to the town you grew up in and then left as a young man? People have been great, really great. I find that some of the ordinary things that I rejected when I was young--the quiet, mostly--are things that I crave now, things that feed my soul. I love the fact that my kids can see their grandparents, and are getting to know a range of cousins they never really knew they had, because we were never able to visit long enough in the past for them to spend time with these people. The familiar used to feel oppressive; now it feels comforting. Now you're back in St. Francisville. Do you think you will stay or will your love of city life kick back in? Oh no, we'll stay. We want to stay. We are home. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Dreher and his sister, Ruthie, had always been different. While he chafed at their small town of St. Francisville, Louisiana, she was deeply at home and settled. His journalism career took him to New York and Washington, D.C., while she taught school and raised a family with her childhood sweetheart, staying close to the homestead their parents had made. She also stayed close to the rituals, traditions, and spirituality that knit family and community, a closeness and spirituality that fortified Ruthie when she was diagnosed with a virulent cancer. Watching his sister's grace and the kindness of family, friends, and neighbors, Dreher pondered what he'd been missing in his own life and how he might achieve the sense of peace and connection at the center of Ruthie's life. He goes deeper, in search of the reason for the abiding tension in their otherwise loving relationship and for the balance in his own family life that ultimately leads him back to the hometown he once fled. Dreher offers a hard-eyed self-examination and a loving, but complex, portrait of filial love. --Vanessa Bush --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

I love Rod's writing and I've been looking forward to this book a great deal. His writing throughout his sister's illness and in the wake of her tragic death was beautiful, heartfelt, and poignant. It also made me think. When I heard he got a book deal to write this story I was thrilled, because I know the ultimate message of this book is something that we all need to hear. I particularly love the way Rod manages to tell the tale of Ruthie's small town life in a real and honest way. It would have been easy to ignore Ruthie's flaws and pretend she was perfect. Rod manages not to do that, which is a real triumph. Instead he makes Ruthie real and he ensures we can all identify with her one way or another. I hope this book is a smashing success and I highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in community, faith, and family. I promise it will make you think--and you'll be all the better for it.

With topnotch, absorbing, compelling writing Rod Dreher gives us an account of his torture at finding peace with his deceased younger sister Ruthie. At 40, Ruthie succumbed to a virulent form of lung cancer (she never smoked). She had been a beloved member of a small southern town, St. Francisville, in Louisiana. Living in Philadelphia as a writer, journalist, and critic and embracing an urbanite lifestyle, Rod is moved and shaken by the close-knit community's support of his sister and her family as they go through this harrowing ordeal. Many years earlier, Rod, a naturally gifted writer, broke the heart of his father and Ruthie for moving north east to pursue his dream. Rather than share in Rod's happiness for success, Ruthie and his father condemn him, seeing his move to the big city as a betrayal of family and working class roots. What makes their condemnation worse is that Rod deeply loves his father and sister. They are loyal, strong, loving, and connected to their community. However, their inflexible views on staying close to home compel them to judge Rod harshly and unfairly. Worse, his sister's rebuke of her older brother, both implicit and explicit, ripples through the community and makes Rod's return difficult, to say the least. Rod internalizes the guilt and questions his decision to move to the urban world, explore fine wines, sophisticated dishes, philosophy, café society, and the like. Ruthie is appalled by Rod's sophisticated lifestyle, which she sees as self-involved snobbery. Rod takes her judgment to heart and wonders if he's compromised his Christian faith for blind ambition. As I read this tormented memoir, I felt that Rod all along never did anything wrong, that he is a good person, a good Christian, and has nothing to apologize for to his family. However, Rod drinks his family's tribalistic, provincial Kool-Aid, so to speak. His cultural criticisms that are published began to point their finger at him. He sees himself as a

hypocrite, someone who let self-fulfillment, career advancement, and the entertainments of urban life cause him to abandon his family. He moves back to find connection with the small town that raised him. He never condemns Ruthie for her unfair judgment of him, but emphasizes her loving, fiercely courageous, empathic nature. However, in this painful memoir, we see a very good man who needed to leave his small town to spread his wings. His return home was based on both guilt and an honest desire to feel the connection of a small community. But can you really return home? Can you really appease the tribalistic impulse? Is it wrong for a gifted writer to find success in the big city? In this complex, compelling memoir, we find there are no easy answers. A complement to this book that amplifies a lot of his struggles is Rod Dreher's *How Dante Can Save Your Life*. Both books are highly recommended.

I'm a longtime reader of Rod Dreher's and was looking forward to this book, which he heavily promoted in his column. Generally, Rod and I are on the same socio-political side. (A forewarning for those family and friends of the Dreheres and Lemings who might read this: You might not like my honest opinions after this point.) Overall, it's written well. Rod's feelings about his hometown, state and the characters that inhabit them bring a particularly delightful quality to his writing. I also appreciate his showing his family's unflattering side (and his family's willingness for that side to be revealed), though his blog posts about the same are not as comprehensive. For example, a few of his blog posts about Ruthie have a Photoshopped picture of her with a halo, which I thought was too much; I'm not sure if it was brotherly love, grief, guilt or some combination thereof that precipitated those posts. What was she? The book finds her to be a loving and beloved daughter, wife, mother, sister (a loving sister, to some degree) and friend who loved her hometown and had a simple faith. She's one of many women in that form and I didn't find her particularly remarkable in that sphere. However, to her brother and those whose lifestyle - albeit an honest lifestyle such as Rod's - clashed with her thinking, she was also narrow-minded and nasty. For me, her character could not recover from the Christmas dinner incident, which reflected poorly on her, her husband and on Rod's parents (who showed an unsaid favoritism to their daughter, IMO) as well (and was a poor example to Ruthie's oldest child who must have been present). Her later "holier-than-thou" comment and the discovery of how she damaged her children's relationship with their uncle sealed the deal. Now, on the other side, as much as I like and usually agree with Rod in his blog, he can indeed come off as being pompous (for lack of a better word), especially when he's going on some philosophical, existential-type, over-thinking bent in a post (which are the posts I usually ignore), though I believe he's a well-meaning man who has OCD when it comes to analyzing things. As an

example, think about the part when he and Hannah are in Paris when he starts blathering on about something philosophical when he and Hannah could have enjoyed a QUIET reflective moment, and Hannah shuts him up. Rather than simply explain to her kids that her brother and she were very different, and to love Uncle Rod as he was (and try to ignore the stuff that could drive you crazy), it became apparent that Ruthie sniped about him to her children and placed an impediment to their developing an untarnished relationship with him. How petty. There is also no doubt for me that she was jealous of Rod's hard-earned success, which any longtime readers will know, has brought him fame and threats to him and his family. If there is a positive thing about Ruthie that I wish readers would take away, it was telling her children not to be mad at God for her illness. (I'm always amazed that people get mad at God for bad things, yet conveniently forget to be thankful for all the good He gives them.) I think the late Elizabeth Edwards told her children the same thing. We ALL die; Ruthie wasn't going to be any different. We ALL experience trials and tribulations, some, such as illness, which will lead directly to our deaths. My belief, and God grant me the strength to keep this belief should I suffer a terminal illness, is that part of our duty on this earth is to take the worst that life throws at us and accept it with grace. On this thinking, I do salute Ruthie. Rod hit a home run with the concept that we all need to belong to a community; that we all need roots; and the importance of contributing to our community, although the community in which we choose to settle does not have to be the community in which we were raised. The outpouring of love and support from the townspeople before and after Ruthie's death opened his eyes to the value of living somewhere where everyone knows everyone; it not only drove home the importance of community, but it also literally drove him back to the community to which he'd thought he would not return. Overall, it's a decent read, and it's worth it for Rod's insights on community (and some regarding family dynamics) but you might not come away with loving the person around whom the book is centered as you would expect to do, particularly if you were familiar with Rod's posts about his sister.

I stayed on this because I felt I was familiar with some of the stories.

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