

A Widow's Awakening

By Maryanne Pope

Q&A

1. What is the book, *A Widow's Awakening*, about?

The book is about grief – the sorrow, anger, confusion and denial associated with coming to terms with accepting the unexpected loss of a loved one. It's my personal story about the loss of my husband, who was a police officer. He died in the line of duty on September 29th, 2000. This book is basically a journey through my first year of grief – it's heart-wrenching in places and pretty funny in others but always brutally honest, which I think is its greatest strength.

2. What do you want the reader to take away after reading it?

That will depend on the individual reader and where they're at. If they are grieving themselves, they will very likely be able to relate to much of what I was experiencing, although the specific details will differ obviously. If they have never experienced a significant loss, then they might be more empathetic to someone in their lives that is.

If they are interested in the police world and what's its like to be married to a police officer and then lose that person in the line of duty, this book will be of interest. And if the reader is experiencing or has experienced emotional and psychological difficulties when coping with events, then this book will certainly let them know they aren't alone – and that sometimes our minds take over when we can't accept reality.

3. What is the potential benefit to the reader?

Well, first and foremost, this book is entertaining! That's where the honesty comes in. I really went off the deep end after John died – not right away. In fact, I accepted his death very quickly but then when I saw everyone else around me moving on with their life, which is normal, I began to backtrack. I began to search for a bigger reason to explain John's death because it wasn't fair that everyone else got to go on with their own life while I was widow and in a great deal of pain.

I think most readers will be able to relate to my experience in the book because life isn't fair and sometimes, it hands us a really tough hand to deal with. Now that years have passed and I can see that year for what it was: a journey of loss and growth, hope and confusion, denial and acceptance, I think sharing this with readers may be of help to others. Basically, the benefit to readers is that most people will be able to relate to some of the thoughts, feelings and questions raised in the book – and not feel so alone themselves.

4. Who is your target reader?

My target reader is someone who has experienced a significant loss – be that death of a loved one, divorce, loss of a job, declining health, etc – as I'm hoping this book will help them realize that what they're experiencing – emotionally, psychologically, spiritually and physically – is okay to experience as long as it's worked through in a healthy way. Mental health issues such as grief, depression, suicide, post traumatic stress disorder, denial, etc are explored in this book and in light of some of the recent events in the news, we're seeing more and more of these mental issues manifesting themselves in tragic ways.

Other target readers are people involved or interested in the police world and emergency services, as this book is a real behind the scenes look of the experience of being married to a police officer.

5. What are you/the widow awakening to?

John's death forced me to awaken to the reality around me. Workplace safety scarcely crossed my mind before September 29th. Now, it has become an integral part of my life. It is also an 'awakening of the soul' kind – in the days following John's death, it just seemed that there was an interconnectedness between myself and the world. At first, this was overwhelming but now that eight years have passed, I still do see the interconnectedness of all us and our environment. I think I'm processing it in healthier ways now versus quite so personally as I did in the first year!

The awakening also refers to truth: I think it's important we each ask ourselves what is really going on in the world around us? I use the events surrounding 9-11 as an example of this. Plus our environmental situation. Waking up to reality and truth versus living in denial is essential to our survival as a species. I guess John's death woke me up to what I needed to be doing with my life and perhaps reading this book might wake up a few others to find and pursue their purpose.

6. What is the connection of the book to the John Petropoulos Memorial Fund?

The JPMF was started after John's death by several of his recruit classmates. Over the years, it has evolved from a few core individuals who wanted to ensure something positive came from John's death into a non-profit organization that educates the public that workplace safety for emergency services personnel is a shared responsibility; when communities work together, risks to these workers can be minimized. We have two PSAs – one about building safety and one about traffic safety – that have aired on TV over 80,000 times in Western Canada. We're working on a third safety initiative now, which will be a safety video about how and why to make buildings and industrial yards safer for everyone, including emergency services personnel who may have to attend after hours and in unfamiliar conditions.

The JPMF is an amazing legacy to John but more importantly, it is a true ‘bridge’ – John isn’t able to live his dream of being a police officer but the efforts of this Fund is helping ensure that other emergency services personnel make it home safely to their families after every shift.

7. How long have you been working on this book?

Eight years. I started it 2 weeks after John’s death. I’ve had three editors and one literary agent. The manuscript has gone through approximately 15 rewrites and it has, in its various drafts, been sent out to over 20 publishers, both small and large, in Canada, the US and the UK. This final version of the manuscript has not been read by any publisher.

On a more personal note, the reason WHY I wrote this book is because I always wanted to become a writer (since I was seven). After University, I did take several writing courses and tried a few short stories. I was also working half-heartedly on a fictional novel when John died. The day before he died, we had a big fight about my writing and I told him how scared I was that I’d wake up twenty years from now and still not have written a book. He’d looked at me and said, “You’re probably right – but as long as you know that will have been your choice.” Tough love – but it ended up being the best thing for me. So when he died the next day, I knew exactly what I had to do. It still breaks my heart that it took such a tragedy to get my act together – but an even bigger tragedy would have been if I’d let John’s death stop me from pursuing my life long dream.

Also of note is the fact that in the past John and I had argued about me always wanting a ‘paycheque’ to fall from the sky so that I could quit my day job and write full time. He warned me I had to work hard towards my dream instead of just wishing things could be different. I’d read Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* many times and she, of course, maintained that in order for women to write fiction, they needed a secure income and a room of their own. When John died, I got just that – his paycheque for the rest of my life and a mortgage-free home in which to write. This is what my play, *Saviour*, is about.

8. What was your experience writing the book?

The first draft was sheer agony. The second through about the fifth drafts were therapeutic and helped me sort out how best to work with the JPMF to tackle the issue of workplace safety for emergency services personnel. The six through about tenth drafts were about learning how to write an engaging story. The eleventh through fifteenth drafts were about fine-tuning, getting rid of non-relevant bits, and, interestingly, they were also the drafts where I was finally able to reveal the most honest components of my journey. I was too embarrassed in the early years to admit – even to myself on the page – the extent of my confusion and thoughts. It was when I tried a fictional rewrite of the book that I finally broke through the barrier and really let the truth of my early thoughts and feelings into the page.