



## Book

### Mortality, destiny, and possibility

In terms of the sorrow wrought, how does heartbreak compare with bereavement? In terms of grief, how does the death of a lover compare with the death of a brother? How do we grieve for a loved one whose dearest wish was to die? How can we show love for those who are dying without lapsing into platitudes? How can we keep the ship of the mind steady in the stormy seas of the modern world? Should we think about mental health in terms of destiny or of possibility? These are some of the questions that surface in Lorrie Moore's surprising, surreal new novel, *I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home*, and she sets about answering them with hectic energy, a zany swirl of images, word games, black comedy, and a zombie ex-girlfriend.

The story is led by Finn, a high school teacher from Illinois who is part radical, part reactionary; he is paid to teach history but is so appalled by his students' numeracy that he devotes part of each lesson to mathematics. Finn is someone with a long history of mental health problems who gauges his level of psychosis by submitting online comments to *The New York Times* (as "Melvin H") to see if they will be accepted. Finn's brother Max is dying of cancer in a New York hospice, and he finds it difficult to know what to say to the dying man, or the nurses, or Max's Ghanaian carers. He wonders why there is even a guard on the door—"What did they need protection from in a place like this? Some visitor who would kill them all with a flu caught on a Carnival cruise?...That would be a godsend."

Finn's attempts to be present and caring for his brother are stymied not only by his flippant attitude, but also by his enduring preoccupation with his ex-lover Lily, a professional clown who had repeated episodes of suicidal feelings throughout their time together. "But the wishing to die isn't really her", he reflects, "The wish is made into actions

and words by her illness. It's an extra room in the house of her head. It's like a spider inside of her telling her from its corner to burn down the whole thing."

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Lily and Finn have been apart for a year, but when he hears she is in trouble he leaves his brother's bedside to go to her. Halfway home, Finn's car flips off the highway, and it is as if a whirlwind has transported him from Kansas to Oz—from that moment on, events take a hallucinatory turn.

It turns out that Lily is not ill—she has died by suicide. Her expressed wish, that her remains be taken to a medical research facility, has not been honoured: she has instead been interred unmarked in a woodland burial ground. When Finn arrives, he sees Lily's corpse standing "in the dead fleabane", wearing a shroud; Finn resolves to take her to the research facility anyway—or does he? The ambiguous narrative resists telling you one way or the other, and leaves open the possibility that he has hallucinated the whole thing. "If anyone is on the lookout for us we will be like Heisenberg's electrons", says Finn, "we'll have speed but no discernible location". The result is a classic roadtrip story, an entertaining, often funny quest across the USA, but this time with a zombie ex-girlfriend as the hero's companion, and a research facility down a "dead end" as their goal.

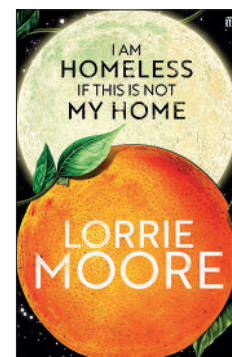
Finn is on his roadtrip with Lily when Max dies, but later summons his brother from the lights of a chandelier—another hint that the whole roadtrip could be interpreted as a psychotic experience. Most of the novel consists of the conversations Finn has first with his brother, then with his ex-lover Lily

in the car and in an old-time boarding house, about life and death, love and purpose. The choice of temporary accommodation seems deliberate—a shadow narrative is led by the letters of a long-dead proprietor of the same boarding house. "I am homeless if this is not my home" comes across as a plaintive plea from one lover to another—Finn feels most at home when he is with Lily. But at the outset of the novel the phrase is inverted as a subtle comment on homelessness among Black Americans with schizophrenia, who, Moore knows, are treated very differently from white people with the same condition: "The white schizophrenics were allowed to ride bikes here. The black schizophrenics huddled under blankets and cardboard on sidewalks against the facades of the skyscrapers. Pieces of paper rolled into jars with scrawled writing facing outward: I am not homeless. This is my home."

Moore writes beautifully, and with great sensitivity, about depression, suicide, and psychosis without the prose ever feeling dutiful or solemn. And in the end Finn gets what he came for—on their approach to the research facility Lily says to him "Here with you? This is my home." The journey is cathartic, and at its conclusion Finn goes home, deletes "Melvin H" from his usernames, and begins volunteering in a hospice. Life is more precious for him now, and he no longer frets about what to say to people who are dying. "So what is death like anyway?" he asked Lily, in one of their final, undead conversations. "Kind of what you think", she replies, "And kind of not what you think...It's sort of what you make of it."

Gavin Francis  
<https://www.gavinfrancis.com/>

Gavin Francis's book about the NHS, *Free For All—Why the NHS is Worth Saving* (Wellcome) is published on Aug 31, 2023.



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 Lorrie Moore  
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