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Phantom Limb

by Janet Sternburg



About the Book

"Do you know what I do when I leave my parents' apartment? You must never say another word about this, but I get into my car, roll up all the windows and I scream." So says the author's cousin, speaking with self-aware humor of the difficulties faced by a grown child at the end of her parents' lives.

Phantom Limb, a story of a family across generations, is a book for anyone going through the last years and loss of their parents -- or, indeed, any great loss that survives in memory.

The book takes its title from the situation of the author's mother who, having lost a leg, continued to feel pain as though the leg were still present. The author suggests we all have the condition of phantom limb: someone no longer with us remains a part of us. The question is: do we hold the memories, or try to rid ourselves of painful phantoms?

Phantom Limb is a book in which ordinary people live through critical tests of body and spirit. When she learned her daughter had cancer, Sternburg's mother said, *"I am a lioness and you are my cub."* Years later, successfully recovered, Sternburg sets out to help her mother's pain. Along the way, she uncovers new thinking about the relationship of mind to body, about the nature of memory and the of the brain. A poignant story of discovering the depth of love between grown child and parent, **Phantom Limb** provides a structure for life choices. In its resolution, the book offers a vision that links us all in the struggle to make peace with the physical and emotional phantoms of the past.

Phantom Limb charts a journey every adult must make.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you think we all have the condition of phantom limb, someone or something no longer with us who remains a part of us?

2. Phantom Limb treats the inevitability of losing one's parents. Does our society prepare us adequately for this loss? Sternburg writes about the limitations and strengths of one's own parents. Do you feel that those limitations and strengths return in you?

3. Faced with the author's decision to put her mother in a nursing home, would you have done as she did? Why? Why not?

4. Sternburg begins the book with the need to expand her own heart. By the end, she has learned to forgive. Is this a journey you have taken, or want to take? To what extent could you identify with the events of her early life?

5. To what extent could you identify with the events of the author's early life? "My father is sitting behind me, my mother in the back, the three of us in a very different configuration from the way we sat on our weekly drive in our 1950s Buick with its mighty fins. Then I was in the middle dying for air." What can you glean from the relationship of the three?

6. How did you react to Janet's descriptions of her mother? How would you characterize Sternburg's relationship with her mother at the beginning? At the middle? At the end?

7. What do you think of the author's cousin, who rolls up her windows and screams? Is that familiar? What do you make of the passage: "All over America people are screaming trying not to be heard?" What do you make of this wish not to be heard? Is it fear of hurting parents? Of being an embarrassment? What might keeping quiet about one's emotions do to a person? In this story, the car serves as a safe place. What are other safe places to cope with excess emotion?

8. What does a crisis of this sort do to a marriage? In the book, there is support, and also strain. What can you detect from this book, and in others' experiences?

9. "I am a lioness and you are my cub." These words are the author's mother's response to learning that her daughter has cancer. How do you interpret this? Is she saying, "fight?" Is she herself a fighter? Were you surprised, as Sternburg was, by this reaction?

10. At the end, there's an image of Janet cradling the artificial leg in her arms. How do you interpret that image? She is left with her parents' possessions. What do you think she did with them all?

11. What is an inheritance? Is it money? For the author, furniture plays a symbolic role, as does her interpretation of objects like a ring and a wig. What is an inheritance to you? Your legacy?

12. Why do you think the author found out so much about her mother's medical condition? There are many different ways to respond to an illness, or any emergency. Consider the ways Janet did it. Do you think that trying to control events by knowledge helps one to cope?

13. "Is memory worth it if it brings pain?" This is the question asked in the book. How would you answer this question?

14. Are there phantom limbs in your own life? People no longer with you but who remain part of you?

15. . The author writes that she is "aware of how much ordinary pain there is in the world, and questions: "why so universal an experience is so little acknowledged." Do you agree with that observation? If so, why do you think we are so reluctant to acknowledge not feeling well? What are the consequences? Do you agree with the author when she writes that: "We need new words for illness."

16. Sternburg asks a number of philosophical questions in the book --- What does it mean to be good? Can one fix things? What is the nature of memory? What does she mean when she says "memory is diasporic?" And later, when she says it can also be "congregant?" How does she answer the questions she poses? How would you?

Author Bio

Janet Sternburg is a writer, poet, memoirist, playwright, filmmaker, and photographer, often called a Renaissance woman for the breadth and depth of her vision.

Her books include *Optic Nerve: Photopoems* (Red Hen 2005) in which she integrates her photographs within her poems so they function as visual stanzas. In the prologue to *Optic Nerve*, poet Molly Peacock writes, "Her photopoems redefine both poetry and photography." In *Phantom Limb: A Memoir* (American Lives Series, University of Nebraska Press 2002), Sternburg writes a meditation in which she suggests that we all have phantom limbs--"someone no longer with us who remains a part of us." Bill Moyers has described her book as "The perfect metaphor for . . . the ultimate inevitabilities of life." Other books include *The Writer on Her Work: Volumes One and Two (WW Norton and Co. 1981* and 2002, respectively), described as "groundbreaking. . . landmarks" by *Poets & Writers* magazine and selected for inclusion in *500 Great Books by Women*. Volume one has remained continuously in print for twenty-eight years and was re-issued by W. W. Norton in a twentieth anniversary edition. She has just finished *My Zombies: A Family Memoir*, the second volume of the trilogy begun with *Phantom Limb*.

Her work in theater and film includes ten years as director of writers in performance at the Manhattan Theatre Club, where she pioneered new ways to present literature on stage, adapting and directing Stockard Channing in *Colette*; Zoe Caldwell in *Isak Dinesen*; and Marian Seldes both on stage as Louise Bogan and as Virginia Woolf in Sternburg's award-winning film, *Virginia Woolf: The Moment Whole*. As former producer for NET, Sternburg's films have been broadcast on national public television and the BBC; her documentary *El Teatro Campesino* was featured at the New York Film Festival at Lincoln Center. In 2008, her play *The Fifth String* was produced as a reading in Berlin and currently is being readied for a full production there.

She has also been active in cultural innovation, serving as senior program adviser in media to the Rockefeller Foundation where she co-chaired a symposium, *Curators across Cultures* at the Foundation's Bellagio Study Center, and co-curated *Remapping Cultures* at the Whitney Museum. She has also served as the senior program officer for the New York Council for the Humanities. She has curated and written two thirteen-hour television series of independent films; one, *Through Her Eyes*, is the first television series of films by and about women.

Sternburg's photography has been exhibited in one-person gallery shows in New York, Los Angeles, Mexico (Bellas Artes, San Miguel de Allende), Berlin, Heidelberg, Munich, and forthcoming as a public art installation at the Seoul Institute of the Arts in South Korea. Her work has appeared in portfolios in numerous prestigious publications, among them *Aperture* (six pages) and *Art Journal* (cover image and nine pages of her photographs), and has been widely acquired by private collectors and museums. In 2003, Sternburg's photography was honored when she was chosen by the *Utne Reader* as one of forty creative people in all disciplines whose work is "innovative, with depth and resonance, full of ideas and insights that challenge us to live more fully."

She is the recipient of numerous grants and fellowships, among them from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Djerassi Resident Artists Program, and the MacDowell Colony. She has also served on the board of PEN USA, where she chaired its literary awards. She divides her time among Los Angeles, New York, and San Miguel de Allende (Mexico) where she takes many of her photographs. She is an active partner in the life of California Institute of the Arts, both as educator and colleague of her husband, Steven D. Lavine. She has published her work in such diverse journals and magazines as *Common Knowledge* and *O at Home*; traveled widely and written about such places as Iran, India and Morocco; and has spoken about her work at universities, museums, conferences, symposia, radio and television throughout the United States and the world.

Critical Praise

"When I first read **Phantom Limb** some months ago, it moved me deeply. It is evocative, raw, absolutely genuine and original and I was stunned that the author had the courage to share so much of herself."

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