

“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.

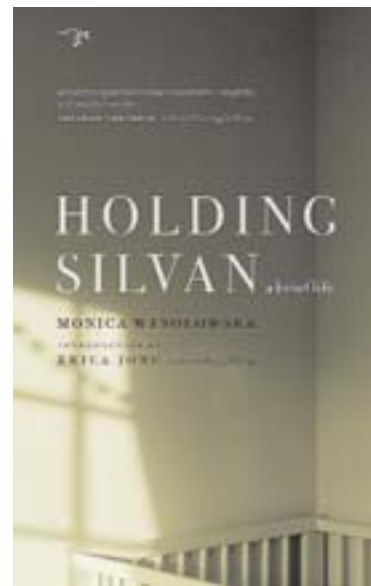


Image provided

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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Car Travel with Pets

By Mona Miller, DVM



Mona Miller’s 2-year-old golden lab, Luka, travels safely in his car harness. Photo M. Miller

California is a very pet-friendly state, and the Bay Area has an abundance of hotels, parks and public areas that welcome our furry and feathered friends. Many of us consider our pets part of the family and want them to accompany us on vacation. Some dogs readily jump in the car and sit quietly in their assigned seat. Others, however, cruise around the car’s interior during the trip. This can create distraction and other safety issues for both the driver and the pet.

Should dogs be allowed to stick their heads out the window? Some dogs really enjoy this and never suffer ill effects. However, there can be significant health risks. I have seen dogs with life-threatening injuries who have fallen out of cars moving at even low speeds. Ear flaps can get irritated and swollen from repetitive flapping in the wind. A dog can get eye injuries such as corneal ulcers or lacerations from small rocks, dirt or other debris. There is a company that makes eye goggles specifically designed for dogs (Doggles) to help protect against high-speed wind, as well as ultraviolet light. Most dogs need

an adjustment period to get used to this headwear.

Restraint while being transported is an important topic. As of 2009, California requires any animal transported in the back of a vehicle “in a space intended for any load” on the highways to be either (1) cross tethered to the vehicle or (2) protected by a secured container or cage, to prevent the animal from falling, jumping, or being thrown from the vehicle (Cal. Vehicle Code § 23117). This does not apply to the interior of the car, where there are also safety concerns. The American Veterinary Medical Association statement recommends keeping dogs in properly secured, size-appropriate kennels that have good ventilation, or alternatively a seatbelt harness system. The rear seat of the car is the ideal location, since deployed airbags in the passenger seat can cause injury.

In 2012, several states (although not California) passed “distracted driving” laws regarding proper restraint of animals in vehicles. The purpose of these laws is to prevent accidents and protect human life, al-

though clearly there are benefits to the animals as well. In a collision at 50 miles per hour, a 10-pound dog will hit an object with 500 pounds of force. Imagine those internal injuries sustained to both the person driving the car and to the animal.

Cats, birds and other pets traveling in cars should also be contained to a specific area of the car. Accidents can happen even with a calm, well-trained pet. Something startling may cause your bird to fly off your shoulder and around the car’s interior in distress. Any pet that gets onto the floor under the driver’s feet can not only distract the driver but also get injured during braking of the car. Restraint also allows the driver to safely open the car door at a rest stop without fear of the pet running out. A friend of mine lost her cat in Kansas during a cross-country move when she opened the car door.

I feel that driving with pets should be a goal-oriented activity – to get where you’re going with Buffy or Fluffy safely and securely, so that you can enjoy the destination. Some useful websites are: www.avma.org and www.dmv.org/how-to-guides/pet-travelling.php.



Dr. Mona Miller lives in Lafayette with her son, two cats and Luka, a yellow Labrador. She has worked in the Lamorinda area since moving here in 2001. She attended U.C. Berkeley as an undergraduate, and received her DVM from U.C. Davis. She can be reached via email at MonaSDVM@aol.com.