

## The Little Way of Ruthie Leming: A Southern Girl, a Small Town, and the Secret of a Good Life

By Rod Dreher

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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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**The Little Way of Ruthie Leming: A Southern Girl, a Small Town, and the Secret of a Good Life** By Rod Dreher **Bibliography**

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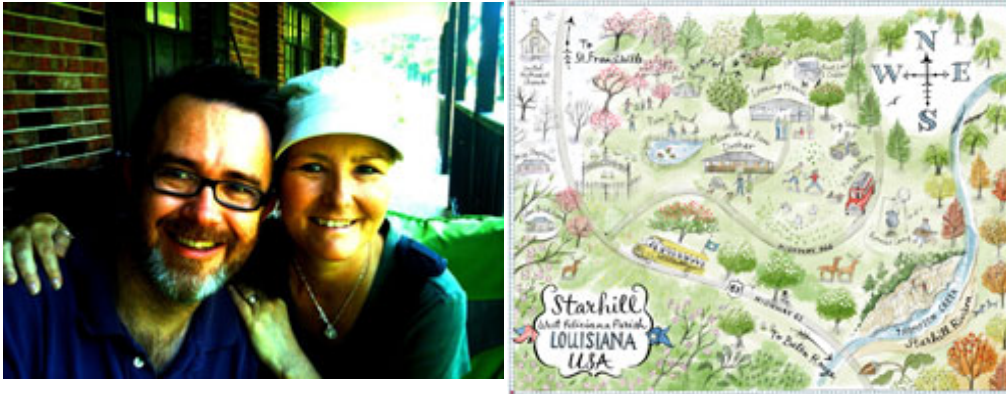
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### Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

### 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 led 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.

From [Booklist](#)

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

#### Review

If you've ever felt an outsider in your own family, you've got to read this book. If you have ever had any "sibling-issues" you've got to read this book. This true, powerful, deeply-moving, and masterfully-told story is nothing less than a gift. And yes, indeed: it will change lives.

**-- Eric Metaxas, New York Times bestselling author of Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy**

If you are not prepared to cry, to learn, and to have your heart cracked open even a little bit by a true story of love, surrender, sacrifice, and family, then please do not read this book. Otherwise, do your soul a favor, and listen carefully to the unforgettable lessons of Ruthie Leming.

**-- Elizabeth Gilbert, author of Eat, Pray, Love**

Emotionally complex and genuinely affecting.

**-- Kirkus Reviews**

This is an authentic and deeply touching memoir, which honestly asks many of the best questions about the things that matter. Interacting with this story will change you!

**-- Wm. Paul Young, author of The Shack and Cross Roads**

This book will make you feel hunger pangs for what you didn't know you even missed. And then it will feed you, line upon line, soul bread. As the Israelites ate manna in the desert, Dreher's evocative prose gathers the unforgettable manna moments of Ruthie Leming's life.

**--Ann Voskamp, author of One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are**

Rod Dreher tells a tale of dear things lost and dear things restored, but also, and unflinchingly, confronts some harder truths about old wounds that never fully heal and old misunderstandings that won't quite go away. This is a book that strives for truth more than beauty-and is all the more beautiful for it.

**-Alan Jacobs, author of The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction**

"The Little Way of Ruthie Leming is Steel Magnolias for a new generation."

**-Sela Ward, Emmy Award-winning actress and author of Homesick**

"Thoughtful and thought-provoking..."

**--USA Today**

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