

Behind the Mask: Living Alone in the Epicenter by Kate Walter

[135 pages, so I'm counting this one towards #NovNov, too]

For Walter, a freelance journalist and longtime Manhattan resident, coronavirus turned life upside down. Retired from college teaching and living in Westbeth Artists Housing, she'd relied on activities outside the home for socializing. To a single extrovert, lockdown offered no benefits; she spent holidays alone instead of with her large Irish Catholic family. Even one of the world's great cities could be a site of boredom and isolation. Still, she gamely moved her hobbies onto Zoom as much as possible, and welcomed an escape to Jersey Shore.



In short essays, she proceeds month by month through the pandemic: what changed, what kept her sane, and what she was missing. Walter considers herself a “gay elder” and was particularly sad the Pride March didn't go ahead in 2020. She also found herself ‘coming out again’, at age 71, when she was asked by her alma mater to encapsulate the 50 years since graduation in 100 words.

There's a lot here to relate to – being glued to the news, anxiety over Trump's possible re-election, looking forward to vaccination appointments – and the book is also revealing on the special challenges for older people and those who don't live with family. However, I found the whole fairly repetitive (perhaps as a result of some pieces originally appearing in *The Village Sun* and then being tweaked and inserted here).

Before an appendix of four short pre-Covid essays, there's a section of pandemic writing prompts: 12 sets of questions to use to think through the last year and a half and what it's meant. E.g. “Did living through this extraordinary experience change your outlook on life?” If you've been meaning to leave a written record of this time for posterity, this list would be a great place to start. ★★☆☆☆

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