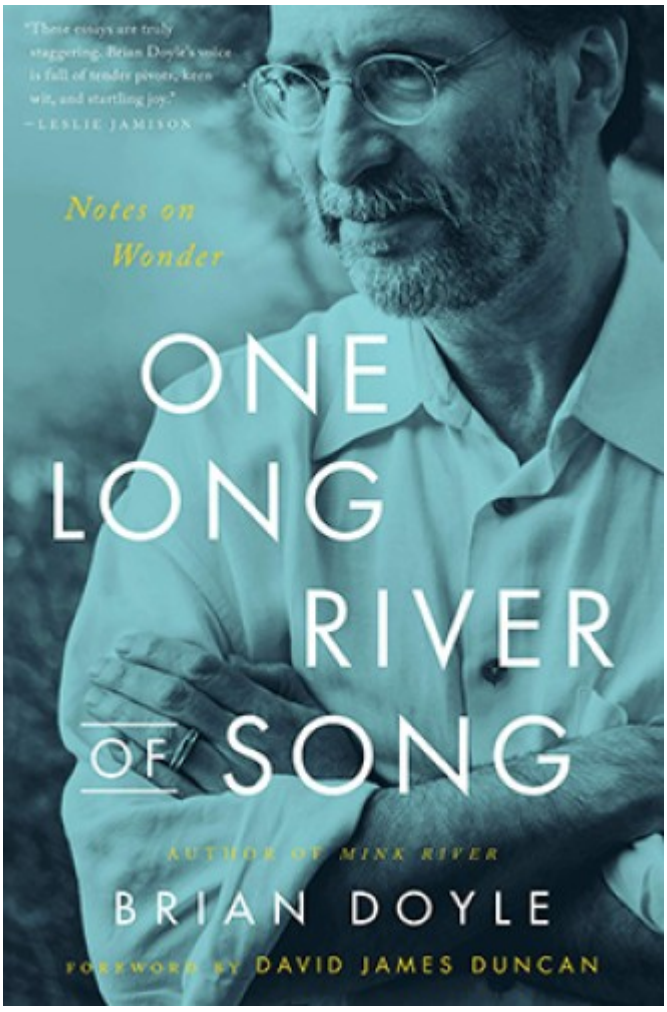
Brian Doyle’s rivers of words

A new collection of Doyle’s nonfiction overflows with wonder.

by Tom Montgomery Fate in the February 26, 2020 issue

In Review



One Long River of Song

Notes on Wonder

By Brian Doyle
Little, Brown

Brian Doyle, who died abruptly from brain cancer in 2017, was a husband and father, the editor of *Portland Magazine* at the University of Portland, and the much-loved author of more than 20 books of essays, fiction, and prose poems that he called “proems.” He wrote with a rare emotional acuity about everyday life—his children, his marriage, his parents, his siblings—and about the natural world of sturgeon, shrews, and otters. A committed Catholic, Doyle also often wrote about his faith, and with the kind of honesty that draws a wide readership. This new collection of Doyle’s nonfiction is, appropriately, a wonder-filled book that includes some of his best work.

“You tiptoe back toward religion, in my experience,” he writes, “cautiously and nervously, and more than a little suspicious, quietly hoping that it wasn’t all smoke and mirrors, that there is some deep wriggle of genius and poetry and power and wild miracle in it, that it is a language you can use to speak about that for which there is no words.” Doyle’s essays often wriggle with wild miracles.

One of his favorite subjects is the heart, that “bloody electric muscle” and “wet machine from which comes all the music we know.” In one of his most celebrated essays, “*Joyas Voladoras*” (Latin for “flying jewels”), he compares the biology of the hearts of different animals, from a hummingbird’s, which is the size of a pencil eraser, to a blue whale’s:

> The biggest heart in the world is inside the blue whale. It weighs more than seven tons. It’s as big as a room. It is a small room, with four chambers. A child could walk around in it, head high, bending only to step through the valves. The valves are as big as the swinging doors in a saloon. This house of a heart drives a creature a hundred feet long.

These short informational sentences soon lead to one of Doyle’s trademark “rivers of song”—the long, cumulative sentences that gush and flow for a hundred words or more as they gather up the images and ideas the essay carries before offering them back to the reader in what feels like an invitation:

> You can brick up your heart as stout and tight and hard and cold and impregnable as you possibly can and down it comes in an instant, felled by a woman's second glance, a child's apple breath, the shatter of glass in the road, the words *I have something to tell you*, a cat with a broken spine dragging itself into the forest to die, the brush of your mother's papery ancient hand in the thicket of your hair, the memory of your father's voice early in the morning echoing from the kitchen where he is making pancakes for his children.

In these kinds of sentences, readers learn to use the commas as rocks to rest on among the stream of words while pausing to consider the shifting currents of metaphor or look for the hidden pool of insight.

Doyle uses contrasting sentence structures to mirror his thinking in another essay about hearts, "Heartchitecture," this time relying on statistics:

> One woman dies every minute of every day from a failed heart. More women die of failed hearts than men. Failed hearts kill more women and men than the next seven causes of death combined. The highest rate of death by failed heart is in Utah. The lowest rate is in Mississippi. More than four hundred babies are born every day with flawed hearts.

This last fact is important to Doyle, as one of his sons, Liam, was born missing a chamber in his heart. This is the subject of yet another essay, and it's likely the reason Doyle so often returns to the biology and spirituality of the heart.

Doyle's greatest gift may be the quiet wisdom that grows out of his senses of humor and humility and gratitude. This is most poignant for me in his writing about fatherhood. In another of his river-like sentences, he frames a moment with his young children in the middle of the night:

> So as I trudge upstairs to hold Lily in my lap, and rub my old chapped hands across the thin sharp blades of her shoulders, and shuffle with sons on shoulders in the blue hours of the night, waiting patiently for them to belch like river barges, or hear Joe happily blow bubbles of spit in the crib simply because he can do it and is pretty proud of himself about the whole thing, or hear Liam suddenly say *ho!* for no other reason other than Liamly

> joy at the sound of his own voice like a bell in his head, I say *yes* to them, *yes yes yes*, and to exhaustion I say *yes*, and to the puzzling wonder of my wife's love I say *O yes*, and to horror and fear and jangle joys I say *yes*.

This is only part of a longer sentence, which comes near the end of an essay titled "Yes"—a word that sums up the stance behind Doyle's persistent humor and gratitude.

Remarkably, even on his deathbed, in a final essay titled "Last Prayer," Doyle somehow still manages to say *yes*:

> I could complain a little here about the long years of back pain and the occasional awful heartbreak, but Lord, those things were infinitesimal against the slather of gifts You gave mere me, a muddle of a man, so often selfish and small. But no man was ever more grateful for Your profligate generosity, and here at the very end, here in my last lines, I close my eyes and weep with joy that I was alive, and blessed beyond measure, and might well be headed back home to the incomprehensible Love from which I came, mewling, many years ago.

Reading this collection of essays will awaken readers to the everyday wonders of saying yes.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Brian Doyle's rivers of words."