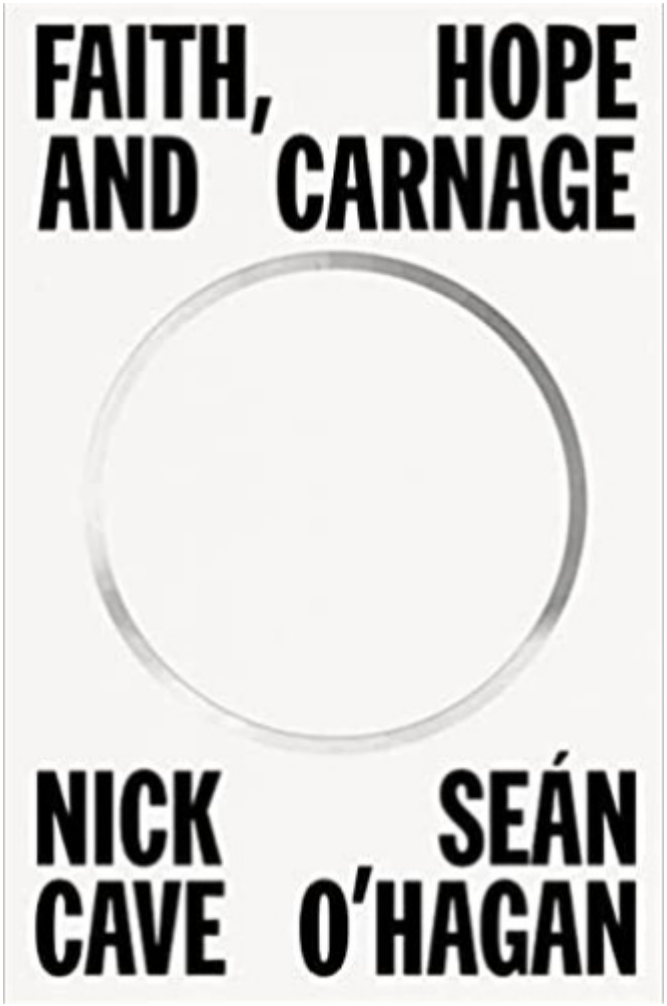
Missionary of grief

Musician Nick Cave talks to journalist Seán O’Hagan about his son’s death and the pull of love.

by Curtis Ramsey-Lucas in the February 2023 issue

In Review



Faith, Hope and Carnage

By Nick Cave and Seán O’Hagan

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
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“I became a complete person after my son died.” The spirit of singer Nick Cave’s 15-year-old son Arthur, who died in a fall from a cliff in the British seaside town of Brighton in 2015, animates the space between the lines of *Faith, Hope and Carnage*, Cave’s book-length interview with journalist Seán O’Hagan.

The shattering experience of Arthur’s death changed everything for Cave, “on an almost cellular level.” It made Cave a religious person—although not a traditional Christian or even someone who necessarily believes in God. Rather, he says, “I felt on a profound level a kind of deep inclusion in the human predicament” and “an understanding of our vulnerability and the sense that, as individuals, we are, each of us, imperiled.”

“Anything can turn catastrophic at any time,” Cave says. “Each life is precarious, and some of us understand it and some don’t. But certainly everyone will understand it in time.”

Created from more than 40 hours of conversation with O’Hagan, the book examines questions of faith, art, music, freedom, grief, and love. Although it is not a memoir, fans of Cave’s music and the uninitiated alike will find sufficient discussion of his past—including his childhood, mother and father, struggle with heroin addiction, and work fronting the band Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds—to understand what makes the man tick.

As Cave discusses the writing and recording of his 2019 album, *Ghosteen*, his first since the death of Arthur, he shares insights into his creative process and his compulsion to create. He expresses appreciation for the ability of art, the “most significant or consequential of gestures,” to transform thinking. He believes that the purpose of music, which he calls “one of the last great spiritual gifts,” is to repair the heart.

These insights are fascinating, but what really stopped me in my tracks were Cave’s thoughts on grief, suffering, and trauma, both personal and collective, in our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. For Cave, grief draws us close to the

fundamental essence of things, a place where “the idea of a God feels more present or more essential. It actually feels like grief and God are somehow intertwined.” Perhaps for this reason, “suffering is, by its nature, the primary mechanism of change.” Though not something we seek out, such “change is often brought to bear upon us, through a shattering or annihilation of our former selves.”

This shattering of our former selves may result from a traumatic event such as the death of a loved one, the dissolution of a marriage, or a betrayal. Whatever the proximate cause, it will happen to all people, according to Cave. He adds,

> And it shatters them completely, into a million pieces, and it seems like there is no coming back. It’s over. But in time they put themselves together piece by piece. And the thing is, when they do that, they often find that they are a different person, a changed, . . . more realized, more clearly drawn person. I think that’s what it is to live, really—to die in a way and to be reborn.

Cave continues, “It seems, for some of us, the religious experience awaits the devastation or a trauma, not to bring you happiness or comfort, necessarily, but to bring about an expansion of the self—the possibility to expand as a human being, rather than contract. And, afterwards, we feel a compulsion, too, a need to pass the message on like missionaries of grief or something.”

Like Jacob wrestling the angel, Cave contends with God. He leans into intimations of the Divine and grasps for the ineffable. While he is not prepared to give himself over to the idea of God without continuing to have room to question and space to doubt, he also wonders if he would be happier if he “stopped window-shopping and just stepped through the door.” This too, it seems, is part of the human predicament in an increasingly secular world in which traditional institutions have eroded, taking with them the capacity to impart meaning.

“What we think of as bad, or as sin, is actually suffering,” Cave says. “The world is not animated by evil, as we are so often told, but by love.” Following Arthur’s death, Cave and his wife, Susie, “instinctively understood that we needed to move towards this loving force, or perish.” This impulse to move toward this loving force—even by way of stumbling, hesitant steps—and the urgent need to love others recur in Cave and O’Hagan’s conversation.

“Arthur showed us that—the necessary and urgent need to love life and one another, despite the casual cruelty of the world,” says Cave. “Love, that most crucial, counter-intuitive act of all, is the responsibility of each of us.” That casual cruelty was visited on Cave again when his oldest son, Jethro, died in Melbourne as the book was going to print.

In the epilogue, O’Hagan notes “the word ‘hope’ has not featured very much in our conversations, even though it’s in the book’s title.” To this, Cave replies, “Hope is optimism with a broken heart.” A fitting coda for a man whose heart has been broken by life’s hard edges, this missionary of grief who teaches us much about the endurance of hope and love in the face of death and despair.