



# A band of merry widows

After terrible loss, a group of women choose happiness over wallowing

**SATURDAY NIGHT WIDOWS: The Adventures of Six Friends Remaking Their Lives**, by Becky Aikman. Crown, 337 pp., \$26.

BY MARION WINIK  
Special to Newsday

About a year and a half after Becky Aikman lost her husband, Bernie, to a protracted struggle with cancer, she felt ready to emerge from her shroud of sorrow. Looking for inspiration, she attended a widows' support group. The facilitator started the evening by distributing handouts on Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' stages of grief. "Not these again — the Holy Grail of Pathos!" she thought, having had the Big Five foisted on her by everyone from her landlady to the cashier in a taco truck.

When Aikman, a former Newsday reporter, made the mistake of blurting out that what she really wanted was not Anger, Denial, and Bargaining, but to cheer up and be happy again, the other widows turned on her with a vengeance.

Abandoning the unsupportive group, she looked to see if there was anything new on bereavement since Kübler-Ross. Aikman's intuitions were on target. As Columbia University psychiatrist George Bonnano explained, the five stages were never meant to apply to a bereaved person but to those facing their own deaths. And, he said, new studies indicate that rehashing tragic events and "taking time to grieve" are counterproductive. Human beings are designed to be resilient. So grief is not the act of wallowing in misery but "a process of finding comfort."

Freed from preconceptions



After being disappointed with a traditional support group, Becky Aikman, left, gathered with fellow widows Marcia Wallace, Tara Nicholson Olson, Dawn Jiosi, Lesley Jacobs and Denise Roy to find community, comfort and adventure.

about what she should feel and do, Aikman met a man and remarried. She acquired a new home, a new stepdaughter, and a new project: Aikman decided to start a different kind of widows' support group, one based on the idea that girls, bereaved though they may be, just want to have fun. She found a group of relatively young women who were six months to two years out from losing their husbands — to suicide, to alcoholism, to cancer, to an accident in an ATV, to a heart attack. Once a

month, she brought them together for a good time — a cooking class, a museum visit, a spa weekend, a shopping spree. At the end of the year, she hoped they would take a group trip to somewhere exotic.

The book's subtitle, "The Adventures of Six Friends Remaking Their Lives," is a bit misleading: None of the women knew each other when the experiment began. But these friendships end up working as well as the spontaneous kind. The women — a rich blonde one, a randy outgoing one, a quiet yoga lover, a serious lawyer and a skittish loner — come to seem more like a group of reunited college suite-mates than a cohort assembled for a research project.

The reader, however, never feels quite as close to the other widows as to their leader. Aik-

man's memoir is an "Eat, Pray, Love" for widows, and her voice is as companionable as Elizabeth Gilbert's. The group's get-togethers are less fun to read about than sections where Aikman tells her own story.

A few of the group sessions are fascinating. The Blossoms, as they call themselves (over Aikman's objections), spend an evening comparing experiences with a group of widowers. While they have been struggling with the issues raised by intimacy, the men have been guiltlessly enjoying sympathy sex. A man's widowed state makes him super-attractive, a guy named Toby explains, moving him "way up on the hierarchy of singles." As another points out, "for a woman, being called a widow is kind of a negative. It's a stereotype that makes you sound a little older, sort of *used*,

to be crude."

The widows are impressively tactful in response. "Your perception is . . . interesting," says one.

In the final chapters, the Blossoms take off for Morocco, where they ride camels, bathe at a hammam, and meet with a group of local widows whose tragic and constricted experiences underline just how lucky they are. "Lucky" is not a word any would have applied to herself at the start of their year together. Now it is inescapable.

For those who are ready to emerge from the darkness of bereavement, Aikman's book defines five new phases — Bonding, Laughing, Dating, Traveling and Buying Lacy Underwear. "Saturday Night Widows" should become required reading at support groups everywhere.

**NOW ONLINE**  
Read an excerpt from  
"Saturday Night  
Widows"  
[newsday.com/books](http://newsday.com/books)