In 2010, shortly after two of her friends had killed themselves, Jennifer Michael Hecht urged her readers not to do the same, in a blog post on The Best American Poetry’s website. “So I want to say this,” she wrote, “and forgive me the strangeness of it. Don’t kill yourself.”

I’m issuing a rule. You are not allowed to kill yourself. You are going to like this, stay with me. When a person kills himself, he does wrenching damage to the community. One of the best predictors of suicide is knowing a suicide. That means that every suicide may be a delayed homicide. You have to stay. The reason I say you are going to like this is twofold. First of all, next time you are seriously considering suicide you can dismiss it quickly. Second, and this one’s a little harder to describe, if you are even a tiny bit staying alive for the sake of the community, as a favor to the rest of us, I need to make it clear to you that we are grateful that you stay. I am grateful that you stay alive....

Don’t kill yourself. Suffer here with us instead. We need you with us, we have not forgotten you, you are our hero. Stay.

Three years later, we have Stay, a book that draws out her arguments against suicide and that surveys the history of ideas, from philosophy to art to modern social science, for reasons to believe her thesis that we shouldn’t kill ourselves because of the harm we would do to survivors. This, she thinks, is in contrast to the prevailing dogma at least among the secular that killing yourself, while perhaps a bad decision, is morally permissible, a matter of personal choice. “Outside the idea that God forbids it, our society today has no coherent argument against suicide,” and she means to provide one.

The importance and ambition of her project should be obvious to anyone who’s thought about suicide for more than a moment, as should how hard it would be to accomplish. This raises some obvious questions. Is the book a considered study of millennia worth of arguments and evidence for and against suicide, does it reconcile the tensions in so many cases (such as that between social obligation and personal pain), and will it seriously help to establish the “logical, coherent antisuicide consensus” she thinks that we need? To answer in turn: it isn’t, it doesn’t, it probably won’t. The book displays almost no interest in challenging or complicating the ideas she began with, and with few exceptions doesn’t even explain or argue for her ideas in any more depth than she did in her blog post. The book is a blog post, dressed up with lazy summaries of art and ideas. (“Religion’s claim that God rejected suicide clearly had influence on people”; “A profoundly mistaken pair of suicides in
Shakespeare is that of Romeo and Juliet.”) In her unwillingness to question herself, Hecht tells an unphilosophical history of philosophy, a non-intellectual history of ideas. Nothing disturbs the premise of her own pain: that suicide is immoral because of the pain it causes survivors. This makes for an unconvincing argument, which is not to say that it’s useless. To the contrary, the failures of Stay show the difficulties and urgencies of resolving the issues it takes up, even more clearly than a better book would, because her book so fully embodies the confusion it diagnoses about the ethics and nature of suicide.

Hecht is at her most convincing on the ways suicides hurt their survivors. The damage is not just emotional. You’re far likelier to kill yourself if you know a suicide, especially if you were close to her, especially if you’re under eighteen, especially if the death was your parent’s.¹ Intuitively, killing yourself often helps normalize it. Horribly, this sometimes leads to groups of people killing themselves at very high rates, so-called “suicide clusters,” such as the United States army now.² Fictional suicides kill people too.³ The surgeon general agrees. I’d help pay for billboards that read, “EVERY SUICIDE MAY BE A DELAYED HOMICIDE,” as Hecht puts it without the text screaming.

Nearly a million people kill themselves in a given year, 40,000 or so in America. The numbers are rising, but a number of policies have slowed them, as Hecht shows: targeted counseling, broadcast standards, journalism standards (if that’s not an oxymoron), barriers that make it hard to throw yourself off high objects, like the Golden Gate Bridge.⁴ By analogy, Hecht wants to offer “conceptual barriers” to hold possible suicides back, as if her readers were students at New York University in the library whose high walkway you used to be able to jump from. This is laudable and beautifully put, but the problem’s severity makes it all the scarier when the barriers are weak, in stone or in concept.

¹ How much of that link is biology? It’s hard to say precisely, but Hecht cites a large study from Johns Hopkins in which children whose parents killed themselves were three times as likely to kill themselves but only if the children were young when their parents died.
² The rate is worst among veterans, twenty-two of whom killed themselves on an average day in 2010. But the rates are also awful among active-duty personnel—and not just due to war trauma, it seems. “Nearly a third of the suicides [among active-duty soldiers] in the five years from 2005 to 2010 were among troops who had never deployed.”
³ A number of teenage boys in 1981 threw themselves in front of trains after a teenage boy did on a miniseries. This is all well-documented and part of broadcast standards.
⁴ Even surmountable barriers help: only a small fraction of the people who got on the bridge wanting to kill themselves went through with it after seeing the barriers, as against many more who did before there were barriers.
The failure to find the right barrier is often the fault of pity, as Hecht shows with an apposite quotation from Nietzsche:

> It is the very essence of the emotion of pity that it strips away from the suffering of others whatever is distinctively personal... The “religion of pity” ... commands them to help, and they believe that they have helped most when they have helped most quickly.

Pity is sympathy that risks nothing. It shares no suffering, whether in empathy or from sitting with the bitter victim. It never shows up after the funeral. It never questions itself.

In the case of Stay, I began to worry that the book was an act of pity for and on behalf of her readers before I had finished the preface. We learn that “the essay drew a large response on the Internet, prompting an editor of the Ideas section at the Boston Globe to contact me and ask to publish it in the Sunday paper.” “The Globe” then “printed it on a lovely blue background over a half-page,” prompting “a lot of email from people who had read the essay,” thanking her “for saying what they hadn’t been able to say: ‘Stay.’ They had not known how to ask.” One can be happy for her “significant positive response,” and even happier for the people who told her that her “word and ideas got them through a bad time,” and still wonder what kind of author introduces her book by congratulating herself on her blog post.

I’d find the gesture less worrisome if it were less representative, if, for instance, when she tells us that it’s been “difficult ... to think so deeply and constantly on such a painful topic,” there were much evidence of depth or immersion elsewhere in the book. But there isn’t: most of the book reads like a term paper from high school. “Shakespeare seems to be warning us that we can misinterpret our situations just as his characters do.” “Hamlet’s ‘to be or not to be’ soliloquy... is among the most beautiful, sad, and intellectually quixotic passages in the English language.” “Plato, who lived from around 424 to 348 B.C.E., wrote about society, government, and morality, but also thought about the true nature of the world.” “Hume was a bold and original thinker.” “For Dante, suicide was very wrong indeed.”

You could fill a pillow with the fluff in this book. The Renaissance: “Whole new worlds had been revealed to Europeans, and in those worlds were new plants, new animals, and new peoples with entirely different cultures.” The Enlightenment: “The philosophers of the Enlightenment advanced many of the ideas that are now the cornerstones of modern life... [Their] agitations influenced contemporaries and the generations that followed.” In the course of three paragraphs on John Henley, who argued against Cato’s suicide, in 1730,^5 we learn that “Henley knows well that the ancients did not uniformly side with Cato’s action”; that “Henley emphasizes that the

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Try to imagine someone in her demographic, someone who comes across her blog post and tears up at the end of it, like I did, and picks up her book, wanting to see her elaborate, and is not at all let down to read that “Socrates questioned every aspect of life in his contemporary world of ancient Greece,” is intrigued that “His death ... has been remembered as a model of poise and resignation,” is excited, so excited that she says, to anyone who’ll listen, “Hey! Listen to this: Socrates ‘famously said that he knew nothing but had more wisdom than most because at least he knew that he knew nothing. Eventually, he was charged with corrupting youth.’” How could this person exist? Hecht is writing for an audience drawn to the prestige of “philosophy” and secretly relieved that instead of thinking themselves they can skim her summaries of Great Minds or just skip to the words of encouragement at the end of most chapters. This sort of thing is usually harmless, albeit dumb. The problem with a book on suicide premised on the promise of maximal benefit with minimal effort is that it encourages the reader to feel good about what he’s thought about suicide even when he hasn’t at all challenged himself. This is the bad faith of pitying.

With the exception of suicidal depressives, whose self-involvement goes along with their loneliness, is there anyone to whom it wouldn’t occur that killing herself would hurt the people who care about her and that this is a good reason for her not to kill herself? I doubt it, but Hecht says again and again that we need to rediscover this bit of common sense. “Generally, we ask people not to do it, for their own sake, but we do not say that they must not do it.” “No one [who isn’t religious] actually insists that suicide is wrong.” The problem with arguing against this straw man, this society of strawpersons, is that it won’t help her reader to think through most of the cases that are actually hard to think through.

There are any number of cases in which someone clearly shouldn’t kill herself, and on the other hand many cases in which it’s plausibly not wrong for someone to, such as some cases of “end-of-life management.” Hecht makes it clear that she isn’t writing about the quadriplegic centenarians constantly in pain. But how firm is the barrier? Quoting Rousseau, Hecht asks, “Have you not learned that you could not take a step on earth without finding some duty to fulfill, and that every man is useful to humanity, by the very fact that he exists?” What about the people who’ll never move again, or the people not only useless to society in general but a serious drain on its resources? Hecht tells us again and again that “it is the nature of existence that ... happiness will return,” that “even depression is not permanent,” that “there is always hope for a better life in the future,” but what if there actually isn’t? These
cases may be the exception, but isn’t it the nature of someone suicidal to think of her pain as exceptional, to think that her suffering outweighs the harm she’d do to others by killing herself? What could we say to her? How could we save her?

To the extent that ethical theory can help, which may be limited, Hecht grossly distorts the conceptual options. This goes beyond using the term “suicide” imprecisely, ignoring questions over whether Socrates’ killing himself from coercion was bona fide suicide and whether his concept of suicide was the same as ours (which it wasn’t). More importantly, she presents all the views she considers as alternatives within her own unstated framework, in which the basic criteria of value are the extent to which something helps or hurts people, whether an act or an idea or whatever else. On this framework, a species of what philosophers call “consequentialism,” we should treat our lives as sacred because it would help to keep us alive, not because they’re actually sacred. This hardly helps someone thinking of killing herself, who’s already doubting the value of staying alive, the value her sense of her sacredness depends on.

Hecht’s consequentialist bias helps to explain her thorough misreading of a philosopher who actually offers reasons not to kill yourself that don’t depend on the balance of pain: Kant. She begins by misstating the cornerstone of Kant’s moral philosophy, the categorical imperative, as “the maxim ... to act in ways that would be fine if everyone behaved the same.” The maxim, which is really complex, actually has to do with your reasons for acting, not just the act itself, but, missing the distinction, Hecht mistakes Kant’s most famous argument against suicide as an argument about the harm suicide would do to society:

In some ways [suicide] is the perfect example of the categorical imperative, because the crux of the categorical imperative is that true morality is to be judged on the basis of whether an action writ large would enhance or undermine society, and nothing can provide a more unambiguous answer than the actual survival or death of society’s members.

This is very wrong, college-freshman wrong. The actual argument depends on the contradiction Kant sees within the reason for suicide as evaluated according to the categorical imperative. One doesn’t need to see the whole wooly argument\(^6\) to see

\(^6\) Very roughly: 1) If someone were to kill herself, her reason would be that “from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life when its longer duration threatens more troubles than it promises agreeableness”; 2) her reason could be moral only if it could be a non-contradictory law of nature that all things acted according to her reason, shortening their lives out of self-love in the right cases; but (3) self-love is the feeling that keeps things living; and (4) a nature would contradict itself if it were to destroy life by the feeling that keeps things living; so (because [5] a nature that operated according to her reason for suicide would destroy life by the feeling that keeps things living, and [6] a nature that operated according to her reason would
that Hecht has not explained its ideas well. Her muddled distinctions have not taught us philosophy, and, worse, give her readers the false impression that the problems are easy. They are anything but.

A barrier needs no complexity. It can be simple and solid. In this it is the perfect opposite of the suicidal mind—and of the best models I've found for thinking about it, philosophers and writers and artists (whom Hecht mentions many of). One would do much better to stomach the models’ tortuous feeling and reasoning than to consume their digestible versions in Stay. Read Infinite Jest or “The Depressed Person.” Read Rousseau or the entry on suicide in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Read the original blog post. Don’t waste your time with this book.

contradict itself) (7) it is not moral to kill yourself. I don’t find this especially plausible. The point is that Hecht was way off.