Night Falls Fast
Understanding Suicide
by Kay Redfield Jamison
Knopf, 432 pp., $26

Orthodox opinion will hold that Kay Redfield Jamison’s Night Falls Fast is the most compelling discussion of suicide in many years—though not because of the book’s more obvious virtues. One can hardly fail to notice that Jamison possesses a talent for synthesis as well as a gift for prose that appeals to a broad readership. Nor can one doubt that the book addresses an urgent issue, for suicide is threatening to acquire epidemic dimensions. More than 30,000 Americans die by their own hand every year. Another 500,000 make an attempt serious enough to require hospitalization, Jamison reports. No one knows how many additional lives are shadowed by the ambivalence that characterizes the psychology of would-be victims.

For its lucidity and relevance Night Falls Fast promises to gather luxurious praise indeed. (The book has already received an advertisement chocked as a review in The New York Times, and its

faith in biological explanations of human behavior—or, for that matter, in the collective judgment of the psychiatric establishment—are permitted a measure of skepticism before being drugged senseless. Jamison too often conflates causes with treatments, for example. Even if suicide does result from some deficit in brain chemistry, why not try to remedy the imbalance through psychological mechanisms that are known to have the desired neurological effects? She likewise endows clinical research into prescription drugs with far too much authority. Consider, in this respect, the November 10 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, wherein an editorial lambastes researchers for a longstanding pattern of “deliberate” duplicitousness. Authors who publish the results of drug trials habitually exaggerate their efficacy in an effort to please “commercial interests,” i.e., profit-hungry pharmaceutical companies.

Unlike Howard Kushner’s American Suicide (1989) or Tat Hacking’s fascinating Mad Travelers (1998), Jamison’s programmatic analysis of mental illness does not leave much room for historical or philosophical reflection. Indeed, she seems only to imagine benign therapists and researchers pursuing objectively scientific solutions in the most noble, disinterested manner. No surprise, then, that she regards the civil liberties of patients as little more than a nuisance.

—John Summers