



The Late Mr. Shakespeare

Robert Nye

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From the pen of the writer whom Peter Ackroyd called "one of our best living novelists" comes a work that is rich, strange, and wonderful. Welcomed in Shakespeare's own land as the most original, exciting, and provocative novel about the playwright since Anthony Burgess's classic *Nothing Like the Sun*, Robert Nye's *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* is a literary event.

Our guide to the life of the Bard is an actor by the name of Robert Reynolds, known also as Pickleherring. Pickleherring asserts that as a boy he was not only an original member of Shakespeare's acting troupe but played the greatest female roles, from Cleopatra through Portia. In an attic above a brothel in Restoration London--a half century after Shakespeare has departed the stage--Pickleherring, now an ancient man, sits down to write the full story of his former friend, mentor, and master. Ancient he may be, but fond, faithful Pickleherring has forgotten not one jot, and using sources both firsthand and far-fetched, he means to set the record straight. Gentle readers will learn much that will open their eyes.

One by one, chapter by chapter, Pickleherring teases out all the theories that have been embroidered around Shakespeare over the centuries: Did he really write his own plays? Who was the Dark Lady of the sonnets? Did Shakespeare die a Catholic? What did he do during the so-called lost years, before he went to London to write plays? What were the last words Shakespeare uttered on his deathbed? Was Shakespeare ever in love? Pickleherring turns speculation and fact into stories, each bringing us inexorably closer to Shakespeare the man--complex, contradictory, breathing, vibrant. Robert Nye has given us an outrageously bawdy, language-loving, and edifying romp through the life and times of the greatest writer who ever lived. *The Late Mr. Shakespeare* proves how alive he was.

The Late Mr. Shakespeare Details

Date : Published January 23rd 2001 by Allison & Busby (first published May 5th 1998)

ISBN : 9780749004958

Author : Robert Nye

Format : Paperback 400 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction

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Buford says

What more can I say? I love just about everything Shakespearean, and am always looking for new ways to appreciate the Bard. This was an interesting take on Shakespeare for sure and certainly not for everyone. It is "written" by a older man nicknamed Pickleherring who played many of Shakespeare's heroines when he was a young man. So the premise is that he intimately knew and associated with the writer through his professional life. Robert Nye--through the persona of Pickleherring--invents other details about Shakespeare's parents, friends, rivals, and members of Stratford and London society that round out the story, while also telling his own bawdy experiences as he lived in the attic of a London whorehouse with a peephole. It is this section that may not be for everyone, however some of the most popular parts of Shakespeare's plays including bawdy and dirty jokes written for the illiterate groundlings, so it is not entirely amiss in a "biography" of Shakespeare. There are plenty of beautiful and lovely tributes to the man and the myth of Shakespeare though that any lover of the Bard would appreciate.

J. Dolan says

Both bawdy and beatific, opinionated and objective, The Late would shine a light on not only one of history's most renowned if enigmatic artistic talents but the discipline in which he labored. It is not just a tale of a writer and his writing, however, but the world of the theater that brought (to its fullest effect, and still brings) that writing to life.

It is this, Mr. Nye's approach to his subject, that makes his novel the gem it is. Through the recollections of the aged Pickleherring, a boy-actor in Shakespeare's original troupe, the man and the stories behind his plays are illuminated, yes, but also the nuts and bolts of the dramaturgy of those times, its personalities and peccadilloes, and in many ways (unexpected, some of them), that of the Elizabethan Age in which it and they flourished.

An intimate romp through an era so different and distant from ours it seems a fiction itself. The Late is so true to human nature and its timeless quirkiness, so boldly penned, one can't help feeling the Bard wouldn't have only approved but saw little need to improve.

Fionnuala says

Robert Nye's Mrs. Shakespeare sounds great - the Bard as seen by his razor-sharp nearest and dearest - but The Late Mr. Shakespeare reads like scraps from that table. Nye plods through the Stratford Tourist Board highlights of Shakey's life, never giving us any insight into the man or his work or his times (why else are we reading a historical novel about WS?). The void is filled by a clichéd narrator, the kind of jokes that were out of fashion even in 1600 and a couple of keyhole-peeped sex scenes that reminded me, unhelpfully, of American Psycho. Worst of all, it has the air of thinking itself terribly clever and modern. I found it neither.

Emily says

i think i like novels about shakespeare as much as the plays themselves - which is to say, quite a lot. it's like anglican choral music: i grew up with it, and it's an aesthetic i've come to feel immensely comfortable with. (not that i'd lead you to believe this book bears any resemblance to an anthem by stanford ...)

irreverent, chaotic, just barely hanging together at the seams and full of random, crunchy oddities. certainly not tame, definitely not boring. includes one of my favourite quotes about religion: 'there is no rule on how to talk to god.'

Kristen McDermott says

Robert Reynolds, alias Pickleherring, narrates this memoir of his life as a boy actor in Shakespeare's troupe, hoping to dispel the many rumors and lies about his older friend and mentor's life. Robert Nye has based this fictional biography on a variety of legitimate sources, but relies most on a healthy dose of sheer tall-tale-telling and bawdy reconstructions of Elizabethan London. His reconstruction of Shakespeare's childhood and the infamous "lost years" in particular abound with rich detail about life in suburban Stratford. Pickleherring also offers provocative theories about the sources for Shakespeare's greatest characters and speeches, and gossipy commentary on other luminaries of the Elizabethan stage, like Kit Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and the mysterious Dark Lady of the sonnets. Take this sometimes silly but immensely entertaining story for what it's worth -- and be prepared for some pretty raunchy scenes -- and you'll have a great time. You'll have an even better time if you know a little about Shakespeare and his world before you read the novel. Nye also subtly interweaves quotations from the plays into his narrative, so real Shakespeare devotees will enjoy this book most of all -- if, of course, they aren't offended by a portrait of their idol that sometimes exposes his all-too-human nature.

Kimberly Lewis says

I am a great fan of Shakespeare. I read this book strictly on the strength of the enthusiastic reviews on the back cover. It is very different. I'm no prude and I don't mind "bawdy" terminology, especially if it is descriptive of the times (as in Elizabethan England)...but I must say, it goes beyond bawdy in a few parts--especially in the chapter about Shakespeare's mother, where the playful tone of conjecture becomes outright revolting. It is true that the scholarship involved is amazing at times; there was obviously a lot of effort put into the research- yet, at times, the author's decision to make this a fictional work almost seems to debase the value of the material. Yes, I comprehended early on that this entire tome was meant to be tongue-in-cheek, lyrical, nonsensical and full of literary devices- and that it was meant to bring the iconic worship of Shakespeare down to a more earthy level- an exploration of the experiences and ambiance of the time that shaped the man. BUT, gossip and innuendo have never been anything anyone should judge another human being by- and I would say that half of the book could have been torched and it would have done the reader a great service. I endured it to the end because I cannot stop reading something I started...I gave this book every opportunity to redeem itself and it failed. Entire paragraphs dedicated to demonstrating the author's comprehension of Shakespeare's literary devices seemed loose and out of context and incredibly boring. The phrase that kept coming to mind was "intellectual drivel"- and I suspected that this book was highly praised because intellectuals were afraid to call it a waste of scholarship and be accused of "not getting it".

Sammy says

An absolute delight, I adore Robert Nye. This is one of a trilogy of Shakespeare novels he published, the others being Falstaff and Mrs. Shakespeare: The Complete Works.

It's interesting to look, many years later, at the elements of Nye's story that have become part of the standard Shakespeare narrative by 2016 (Lucy Negro? good pull, Mr Nye!) but must have been far more speculative when this was written. Many chapters of this book will be enjoyable to the average reader but only take on resonance if you are a Shakespeare fanatic, with seemingly hundreds of quotes from the plays often well hidden in the text, plenty of factual information as well as plenty of hilariously made-up business, and a fair number of astounding suggestions as to the relationship between Shakespeare's life and his work. I have to say, in all my years, I have never read a series of theories so completely believable. Nye is right on the money, I would argue, but he's built himself an (obscene, so very obscene!) elaborate narrative justification for any of the times that he is completely wrong. We'll never know most of the answers to the questions Nye asks, so I'm happy to take his answers. An hilarious, filthy, lived-in, mournful novel.

Rick says

Nye is a poet and novelist who has written a number of works of historical fiction, including two related to William Shakespeare. This bawdy yet erudite tale purports to be a biography of the playwright by one of the actors in his troupe of players, written some decades after the master's passing. Robert Reynolds (aka Pickleherring, apparently stage names weren't what they would become once studios and press agents took charge) is an entertaining story teller whose notion of biography (and history) includes facts and documents, eyewitness accounts, rumors, legends, slanders, inference, myths, fancy, lies, and truth in its most generous and inclusive sense.

Like the Bard, Reynolds is from the country and prefers country history to town history. "Country history is faithful and open-ended. It is a tale told by various idiots on the village green, all busy contradicting themselves in the name of a common truth. It exaggerates and enflames what it talks about. It delights in lies and gossip. It is unwise. Wild and mystical and passionate, it is ruled by the heart. Beginning by the glow of the hearth, at the end of the night your country history tends to pass into balladry and legend—it becomes poetic. Country history is fanciful and maggoty. Easy to mock, it always strains belief. But sometimes it catches the ghostly coat-tails of what is otherwise ungraspable." By contrast, town history is "cynical and exact. It is written by wits and it orders and limits what it talks about. It relies on facts and figures. It is knowing... [it:] rests on the premise that the facts tell the truth."

Nye's narrator/biographer insists country history is the only way to capture someone like William Shakespeare and he is pretty convincing, though sometimes digressively wearying, on the point. I liked the book much more in the early going, when it was freshest, than over time as its premise wore a little of its welcome out. But it remained brisk (nice short chapters), witty, unseemly and oddly reliable despite all the tall tales, lies, and gossip, fictional and nonfictional—that is, stuff that was truly gossiped about and stuff Pickleherring introduces on his own. It also motivated me to consider reading The Complete Plays, a nice reading project I thank Pickleherring and Nye for prompting me to undertake.

Kristen Hair says

I was expecting a general romp through the life of Shakespeare, kind of like King of Shadows. What I received was a dirty, sexual romp with some documentary-like analysis of some of the passages of Shakespeare. Nye dwells too much on the conception and childhood of Shakespeare, and not enough on his LIFE. Disappointing.

Emily-rose Guillebeau says

This is one of those books that I have a hard time assessing after I've read it. Undoubtedly, TLMS is brilliantly written. It revels in puns and word-smithery. I acknowledge all of this. It's a great book, clever and well-constructed. But I didn't like reading it for the same reasons I dislike books like Catch-22. Eventually, novels as extended jokes wear me out, and I ultimately find them dull. meh. But I did enjoy the bawdy narrator's literary criticism of Shakespeare's plays. Most of his readings had a nice ring of truth about them, found in the best "real" criticism.

Sarah Reason says

Part fact, part fiction, part fable, part fantasy, The Late Mr Shakespeare is a must-read for all who like me worship at the feet of the Bard. Because for those of us who admire the great enigma, there is much truth to be found in this rollercoaster-ride of stories, anecdotes, rumours and just plain lies, beginning with the narrator's childhood meeting with an on-tour Shakespeare to the death of much of what remains of Tudor London in the great conflagration of the Restoration period. This is not Bardolatry - Shakespeare is shown as a real man, with not a few unlikable traits. It evokes wonderfully the atmosphere of the city, of the theatre and of the circles Shakespeare moved in. Pickleherring is a shamelessly unreliable and obscene storyteller, and thus this novel is not for the easily offended, but if like Will himself, you did not object to a bit of smut, then I urge you to seek this out. Finding the path of truth within the labyrinth of obfuscation and occasionally Fibonacci complexities is very much part of the fun of reading this beguiling book. Sadly, it is out of print in the UK, but I found my second-hand copy in - appropriately enough - an Oxfam shop in Stratford-Upon-Avon.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

David says

I must admit that I'm coming at that book as a bit of a Shakespeare know-nothing. For years, the only Shakespeare I've been able to quote has been "If music be the food of love play on. Give me excess of it that surfeiting my appetite may sicken and so die". And I only remember that because I'm a huge music geek, and I studied "Twelfth Night" in school. It's probably even wrong. Anyway, this was on my radar because I

thought Nye's take on "Faust" was rather magnificent, I thought he might grasp my attention through use of language alone. And he sure does. For the most part.

You see, even though this is a hugely well researched piece of writing, from a man who clearly loves Shakespeare, it's at its best when he's not really writing about him. At its best, this is a scurrilous, debauched piece of unreliable (or even duplicitous) narration, which conjours up all the sights, sounds and smells of the era. There's set-pieces present here that were clearly based upon scant evidence of ludicrous rumour, and you get the feeling they've only been included to amuse the author. These bits, unlikely as it sounds, are the best bits. The more scurrilous, the more scandalous, the better with this work, as the author clearly loves letting his imagination run wild (incidentally, Robert, I've got worries about your state of mind, considering some of the filth on display here, but that's an aside), which he does most freely in the early chapters, as he sets the scene and introduces characters.

Later, after Shakespeare starts to become if not the central character, then the enigma around which the writing revolves, the tone of the book settles down, and the narrative occasionally even becomes scholarly. These bits were interesting, but rarely entertaining, and never as vivid as the codswallop put forth by Pickleherring. Very good, but not quite consistent enough to be on my favourites shelf.

Ed says

This delightfully irreverent book offers the biography of Shakespeare, written many years after the fact by someone who actually knew him, which real-world history has been denied. That dry description aside, the writing, scenes, and situations are lively, witty and unforgettable. Where else can you find an imagined sex scene between a foul-mouthed Queen Elizabeth and the crude John Shakspere in the woods?

Bob says

Finding myself at a store (the excellent Mercer Street books), that did not have Nye's 1976 *Falstaff* (from the Burgess *Ninety-Nine Novels* list), I settled for this (plainly) similarly-themed book. This might be called historical fiction, but it very freely adapts anything resembling fact, starting with the narrator, an actor known as Pickleherring, who is writing many years after Shakespeare's death from the perspective of an old man who had joined the troupe as a boy. Hence enough years had passed that he could already start reporting on how Shakespeare's posthumous reputation was shaping up, including the many myths and rumors that evolved.

There is no pretense at verisimilitude, so I don't even know which of the stories were current in the late 17th century, but every question of authorship, speculation about where and how he spent the undocumented years, every interpretation of his will and so forth, is present - plus a good deal more; retellings of stories from *The Mabinogion* with Shakespeare's mother as a witch, clever nods to Dylan Thomas - a Joycean farrago, one might say!
