



LYN HEJINIAN

My Life

GREEN INTEGER 39

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Recognized today as one of the great works of contemporary American literature, *My Life* is at once poetic autobiography, personal narrative, a woman's fiction, and an ongoing dialogue with the poet and her experience. Upon its first publication by Sun & Moon Press (the edition reprinted here) the publication *Library Journal* described the book as one that "is an intriguing journey that both illuminates and perplexes, teases and challenges, as it reveals an innovative artist at work."

Lyn Hejinian is the author of *The Cell*, *The Cold of Poetry*, *Writing Is an Aid to Memory* and *A Border Comedy*. She lives in Berkeley and teaches at the University of California.

My Life Details

Date : Published May 1st 2002 by Green Integer (first published 1980)

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Author : Lyn Hejinian

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From Reader Review My Life for online ebook

Emily says

Hejinian is a master poet. You must go into this collection with zero expectations, she is a Language Poet and writes emphasizing the reader's role in interpreting and bringing meaning to what she has written.

Sean says

If reality is trying to express itself in words it is certainly taking the long way around.

In 1978 at age 37 Lyn Hejinian first built this autobiographical structure in 37 sections of 37 sentences, with each section running parallel to the specific year of her life. Eight years later Sun & Moon published a second edition for which Hejinian added 8 new sections and 8 new sentences to each previous section. Hejinian is primarily a poet and *My Life* reads like an extended work of prose poetry, for the focus here remains almost exclusively at sentence level, with word choice and juxtaposition being paramount. Amidst the presumed memory fragments and repeated anchor phrases, pithy statements rise from the text:

The fear of 'losing' ideas objectifies knowledge.

A person is a bit of space that has gotten itself in moments.

One begins as a student but becomes a friend of clouds.

At just over 100 pages one could call this a short book, and yet the density of Hejinian's prose defies that characterization. It's as if each sentence contains a story, many of which will remain mysteries due to their opacity. Still, even floundering as a reader in the waters of this text is pleasant, for the muscularity of Hejinian's sentences demand an attentive audience and one can certainly still marvel without a requirement of full comprehension.

Canova says

I had to read this book for a poetry class; at first it struck me as nonsensical and too unique for its own good. However, I must say that this is a book that will stay with me forever. I can keep reading it over and over, each time with a different reading. This is a text that is "open" in the sense that it acknowledges so much more than the words with which it is written. A beautiful and poetic exploration of self, memory, process, and language...

Mike Lindgren says

It's difficult to make an evaluation of this book. Perhaps the way to approach it, at least right now, is through a simple list of pros and cons:

PRO:

- Unique
- Evocative
- Poetically charged
- Unsettling

CON:

- Impenetrable
- Self-absorbed
- Willfully opaque
- Nonsensical

Cf. review of Susan Wheeler, *Assorted Poems*. Both are overtly "poetic" documents that force the reader to make judgments regarding the value of highly associative / subjective verse.

Chris Schaeffer says

I really like Hejinian but this book is hampered by a comfortable middle-class sense of continuity that ughhh arghh I can't even finish it, she HAD HORSES, SHE HAD HORSES. If you're tacky enough to have had a happy childhood, leave it out of your books. I can't believe this predates 'The Guard.' Don't give your children horses.

Michael says

A work of slow art, as well as one of the few collections of Language poetry that has aged well, *My Life* in its original form consists of 37 sections, 37 sentences each, that condense the first 37 years of the life of avant-garde poet Lyn Hejinian into verse. But the poem-memoir is far less interested in fleshing out Hejinian's life story than in experimenting with the ways in which self-representation might occur in the absence of narrative. Each section corresponds to one year of the poet's life; instead of the sections tracking that year's major events, though, they include impressionistic sketches of setting, leitmotifs, fragmented recollections of emotion, and disjointed family history. First published in 1980, the work's a far cry from the aesthetic of the personal that characterized much of midcentury poetry: it's also a great deal less stimulating and engaging to read.

Bunnyhoopla says

I love the sheer imagistic and synesthetic beauty of the first sentence,

"A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he had left, was purple--though moments are no longer so colored."

Karen says

Each sentence is a dissertation. Thought provoking, inspiring, and a resource of meditation.

Michael Farrell says

once i was photocopying this for a class, but there was a sheet of labels in the machine, so i had a page of labels with text from my life - i put them on my current exercise book for writing poems, which i took to the us in 2004. i hardly wrote any good poems tho - & i was sick! but i had a dream run of meeting people, including lyn.

unf i seem to have lost my copy of this book

Cole says

Many people, in my experience, will come up against this book (because you don't merely read it--you come up against it) and say that they find it impenetrable or heavy-handed. For me, it is exciting and intriguing and the perfect overlapping of prose poem and autobiography.

For those who crave linear narrative, you can definitely find it here if you want it. For dorks like me who love to wrestle with literature and walk away a little bit frustrated, this is a brilliant work.

Jackie says

this little booklet is so brilliant that i feel the intense urge to underline everything...or place a remarkable indication dot on the ends of each beginning and end...as i do for only certain portions of other works i read. these are the ways in which i dream of writing...

Jessey Nickells says

A truly unique autobiography in which each sentence stands as its own poem without detracting from the book as a whole. I could read this book once a year and love it for something new each time.

Steve Morrison says

A beautiful autobiographical prose-poem, and, like any life, a continuous work in progress and revision. The original book, written when Hejinian was 37 years old, contains 37 chapters of 37 sentences each. The

revised edition (which I read) was written when she was 45, and contains 45 chapters of 45 sentences each. So not only are there 8 new chapters, but there are also 8 new sentences added within each of the original 37 chapters. A wonderful way to depict the way life expands forward and backward at the same time, and written with luminously evocative wordcraft.

Such a lovely and odd book. I love the representations of revisionary memory and the idea of life as a continual work in progress. A favorite.

MJ Nicholls says

An excellent “poetic autobiography,” told in lyrical, repetitious, elliptical prose, slowly passing through a life with baffling clarity, bamboozling starkness and confuddling honesty. The chapter headings usually reappear embedded in the subsequent chapter text, hinting at mathematical structures or arrangements between chapters (or even sentences?). As a non-poet and rare poetry reader, I’m rarely impressed by this sort of high modernist plate-spinning trickery, unless it’s purely prose, but this book impresses by its emphasis on the word over the world (thanks Gass), which Hejinian’s bourgeois book-driven upbringing would have inculcated in her from the off. All that matters is what the artist committed. The rest are citations and footnotes.

Heather says

This is one of my favorite literary treats that I return to when I want perspective, when I want to be lifted out of the linear and escape into freewritten bliss. It feels like a stream-of-consciousness Woolfian-Kundera daydream.

Anthony says

"it seemed we had hardly begun and we were already there"

a wonderful autobiography in the form of a prose-poem. like nabokov's autobiography, it is as much concerned with the nature of memory itself as with the story of the writer's life. apparently there are 2 editions of this work, the first written at age 37 in 37 segments of 37 sentences each (this is the edition i got my hands on) and a second edition rewritten at age 45 with 45 segments of 45 sentences each. this expansion suggests that this is probably an ongoing life-project and i would love so much to read it if it gets up to, say, 74. hejinian is often associated with the language poets but this work is much more accessible than anything i've read in that genre. recommended!

vi macdonald says

I don't have the words to adequately describe what Lyn Hejinian has achieved here. I am speechless. Her writing has nourished me.

Renee says

The most stunning piece of LANGUAGE poetry I've ever read.

The incredibly dense ideas about the fabrications of words and the fabrications of identity are made all the more profound through parataxis and repetition.

I honestly spent hours highlighting and breaking this poem apart. It's a genuine work of art. Hopefully she releases a third edition of the poem.

I honestly think that people who dislike this book really don't understand the context of LANGUAGE poetry or what the whole genius point of this "autobiography" is. So if I can say anything to anyone before they decide to pick up this poem, do a little research first.

Christine says

if you don't like postmodernism, you'll be annoyed. if you do like postmodernism, you'll fall in love.

this little, litte, little book is amazing, but it is not for the faint of heart or mind.

Meredith says

"Only fragments are accurate."

Like a stereoscope of images upon images, creating scenes strange with dissonance, or scenes at ease with coming home.

What else could I possibly say?
