



Year Before Last

Kay Boyle

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Kay Boyle's second novel, *Year Before Last*, was first published in 1932. Against the background of the French Riviera we watch the unfolding of the story of a young woman who has left her husband for another man, a poet of compelling personality. Their love affair is complicated by the insane jealousy of an older woman which leads them to acts of desperation. This novel of love and hate moves forward in swift incident and action to a dramatic end.

Year Before Last Details

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Author : Kay Boyle

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From Reader Review Year Before Last for online ebook

Pat says

Originally published in 1932, *Year After Last* by Kaye Boyle is a fine example of modernist writing with its first person nuanced expression of the thoughts and feelings of Hannah, a twenty three-year old American woman who leaves her caring but dull academic husband Dilly to live with Martin Sheehan, a literary magazine editor and poet. She walks out of her comfortable home in Paris with her three dogs and only enough money for her train fare and travels to Nice in the south of France to be with Martin.

Hannah quickly finds that she is part of a triangular relationship. His aunt Eve, who actually introduced the couple, is wildly jealous of Hannah and refers to her as a harlot and a whore. Although Eve has been a suffragette and an activist on various issues she has never had a relationship with a man because she is convinced they are after her money. Martin, her nephew, is 'safe' and she maintains her hold on him by providing the money to fund his highly intellectual literary journal.

Martin is very self-involved and is better at taking love than giving it. His only source of income is a disability pension he receives from the government for being gassed in WWI. His refusal to come to terms with reality is evidenced by the way in which he squanders that pension putting himself at the mercy of Eve's wishes. One monthly check is used to buy lobster and champagne and a dozen pairs of silk stockings for Hannah. He hints at having only a short time to live but Hannah never really comes to grips with his tuberculosis until his condition worsens and becomes very apparent. The couple set off to live at various places near Nice staying mostly just ahead of bill collectors and then later driven from pillar to post as his TB becomes obvious to inn keepers and landlords who are very aware of the infectious nature of the disease. It is a very unequal relationship. Martin stays connected to Eve but is enraged to find that Hannah still feels she must help her Dilly deal with their separation. He describes Hannah as just existing "on the brink of what I am." What Boyle paints is an intense picture of why such a relationship happens, the intensity of Hannah's physical passion for Martin which ignites from just looking at him, "his hair as tender as a child", is just one of the references Hannah makes to his physical beauty. From time to time, when he is sick or out of money, Martin suggests she should leave him and go back to her husband so that Eve will take him back, but then he accuses her of being "as hard as flint" for being willing to let him go back to Eve.

Boyle's prose is exquisite, particularly her descriptions of nature. Hannah's moments of freedom and self-realization really only occur when she walks into the country with her dogs.

"The soil was burdened and rich with the rains and the warmth of the summer that was dying; the cattails weighted the tubes of the grasses, the lavender was at its ripest, and the patches under the fir trees were richest loam".

Boyle lived in the South of France herself and mixed with the literary leaders of the modernist movement of the 20s, the likes of Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes and James Joyce. This makes the section of the book where they dine with a prolific best-selling writer particularly interesting. Duke, who has made a small fortune tailoring his writing to the popular book-buying market, pours scorn on poets such as Martin who, Duke feels, won't acknowledge that the only reason to write is money, "there is not any idea going that will put four walls around you". Martin counters that "poetry is where the search for literature begins.

The book is pretty autobiographical according to Doris Grumbach whose excellent afterward was written for my Virago edition published in 1985. You don't need to know that to enjoy the book, but Grumbach does provide some excellent background to the time and environment that was the genesis of the book.

Juliet says

Interesting, and with some memorable passages but not as good stylistically or in readability as her previous novel, plagued by the nightingale. Very evocative though, especially regarding the chaotic nature of the life of Hannah and Martin. I also really liked the portrayal of Hannah's loping dogs.

Stephen P says

I do not understand why this ultimate 5 star book is not more frequently talked about and reviewed.

Boyle speaks quietly while stringing together her small gemmed pearls leading to moments of stinging drama. They push the narrative forward while developing breathing, sweat-driven characters. These are people I could not live without as they were caught within their own webs of conflict, solidity, passion, and in the moment of art.

My words fall short of what this work is. So be it, I won't say anymore.

Theresa says

Guess I'm in the minority on this one. The writing was excellent, but I just couldn't muster any liking for the characters, and was glad to be finished with it.

Troy Alexander says

I wonder why Kay Boyle is not more well known. This is a great book.

Bill FromPA says

This is a moving story of a love affair told with cool, modernist detachment. The author manages to persuade the reader to love Martin as well, and to understand and ultimately excuse his faults. She also presents a complex character, simultaneously admirable, hateful, and comic, in his Aunt Eve, the jealous and possessive patroness who controls the financing for the literary magazine that is Martin's main reason for living.

Hannah, the point of view character and, according to the afterword by Doris Grumbach, barely fictionalized stand-in for the author, is almost an embodiment of moral conflict: whether to stick with Martin and live out their love, knowing this deprives him of essential economic support, or to cede him to his aunt, breaking two hearts in the process, but granting him a longer, if less happy life.

I never quite got an understanding of Hannah. There seemed too much not told about her: her American past, her relationship with the French husband she quickly abandoned at what might have been (but wasn't) a whim of Martin, or exactly why she felt it necessary to except her three dogs, only one of which seems to have a name, in entirely abandoning everything else about her past life in order to live with Martin.

Wanda says

22 APR 2017 - Dolors' beautiful review convinced me to add this one. Thank you, Dolors.

Marita says

A celebration of life, love and literature.

This eloquent review by Dolors inspired me to read 'Year Before Last':
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

If you do read this novel, be sure to read the Afterword.

Tony says

There's the obligatory disclaimer on the copyright page: *Author's Note: None of the characters herein depicted have any connection with actual people, dead or living.*

Don't believe it.

Kay Boyle married in 1923 and expatriated to France where she left her husband and lived with Ernest Walsh, a magazine editor and poet of less than modest repute, who was afflicted with tuberculosis.

In this book, Hannah expatriates to France where she leaves her husband the very night she meets Martin, a magazine editor and a poet of less than modest repute, who is afflicted with tuberculosis.

So, except for that, no connection with actual people. Dead or living.

It serves as a template for the first novels by Boyle that I've read, this and *1939* and *Gentlemen, I Address You Privately*. A storyline of a woman dumping her husband for an unlikable artist and then suffering privation for his imaginary talent is not really something I need to read more than once. And, the other two novels were superior artistically.

That said, there was a scene at the midpoint which demonstrates the gift Boyle has. After getting kicked out of one hotel after another because of Martin's palpable sickness, the couple meet up with Duke and Phyllis. Duke and Martin engage in a dialogue about literature while the women, as was the fashion, half-listen and half-observe two caged marmosets.

Duke proclaims: *Writing's not the place for fanatics. We haven't room.* And he dismisses poetry, with contempt: *But poetry!*

But poetry, Martin answers. . . . Poetry is where the search for literature begins.

Duke: I don't know what you're talking about when you say you're searching for literature. . . . If a man's a good writer, then he's a good soldier, he's a good swimmer, a good dancer. . .

Martin: As for literature . . . it is not a vocabulary. Literature is a taste, and if you can give someone else a taste for it, then you are a writer.

The women shift their focus, from the boys to the marmosets. *What do you feed them?* asks Hannah, as she hears Duke speaking.

Duke: I wrote a little story the other day and I brought three different dialects in.

Phyllis: *Bananas.*

Then . . . Martin opened his mouth to speak, but a clock in some other part of the house began to strike . . . They all sat around the table in silence while the deep dooming strokes fell.

. . .

Duke: You'll change your tune when you're forty-odd!

Martin: Then I'd rather die young.

Characters sometimes get what they wish for, even if there's no connection to actual people. Dead or living.

Dolors says

I don't know exactly what Boyle's style provoked in me that it disturbed my sleep. Maybe her vast vision of a crude reality that she describes without averting her eyes, taking in all the foreboding, all the fear and all the unfairness that abounds in life and calmly waiting for the storm to break loose without missing a beat. Maybe the poetic candor or the innocent faithfulness that pulsates underneath her carefully crafted sentences that sound like an ode to bygone times when youth and promise were still within one's reach. Maybe the voice at the back of my head that detected truth and personal experience behind Boyle's fictional work and my suspicions confirmed later by Doris Grumbach's afterword enclosed in this beautiful edition of a book that has been overlooked for too long.

A story about love, art and loss delivered in no particular order because Boyle's point is precisely that one cannot exist without the other.

How to disentangle one's passions from what originates them?

Hannah is a twenty-four years old American married to a Frenchman and living in the north of Paris when she crosses paths with Martin, an editor and poet from Ireland, whose adoration for words is so boundless that it makes up for his poor health and limited financial means. Defying convention and dodging all kind of practical reasons to ignore their feelings, the young couple elope together and embark on a journey in the France of the twenties that brings them to meet other expatriate artists under the close surveillance of Martin's possessive aunt, the person who threatens to unbalance their still fragile but deeply felt commitment.

Far from the insipid cliché of mixing literary rhetoric with the predictable tale of a doomed love affair, Boyle's novel rises above narrative conventions and it reaches an unprecedented clarity of expression that vindicates her ideals as a woman and a writer.

Her painstakingly accurate choice of words paints an all-embracing landscape that acts like a mirror for her characters' inner struggles, although it's Hannah's viewpoint that acts like the leading voice in the canon of interior monologues that fuse in the vulnerability of adverse circumstances. Boyle's perspective is absolutely feminine and for once, the male is the object of her meticulous observation.

As whimsical as Martin's outbursts in frustration and impotence might be, it's Hannah's silent strength that carries the novel to a heart-stirring culmination.

Even though the world depicted in this delicate piece is often a sinister, cold and unforgiving place, Boyle's genuine prose acts like an antidote against the cynicism and the vanity that jeopardizes the belief that true love is the natural way to protect the invisible ties that makes us human, the only authentic emotion that ignites the empathy that can transform the world for the better; and that art is the only possible channel to give form to such an unstoppable force.

Jonathan says

Beautiful. Devastating. Builds to a powerful gut-punch of sorrow and loss, made more profound by the fundamentally autobiographical nature of the text and those elements from Kay's own experience which are passed over in silence (her pregnancy in particular). This is her second novel and I felt as though I could actually feel her growing in confidence as it progressed.

lyndel says

This is a really enjoyable read and if you are interested in the women writers from the 20s and 30s then this is one I would recommend . The story is an auto biographical account of the love affair that the writer kay boyle has with the carismatic irish poet she meets while she is married to another man. I love the desccriptions of their travels through France of the late 1920s as they fight with "poverty" (money mysteriously arrives in envelopes from some where!) and the fact that he has actually fallen victim to tuberculosis. It sounds sad but really its about courage and the will to live despite everything . I loved the whole expat scene that she illustrates full of people living in hotels in french villages , drinking copious cocktails and writing avant garde magazines !
