



Against Joie de Vivre: Personal Essays

Phillip Lopate

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By turns humorous, learned, celebratory, and elegiac, Lopate displays a keen intelligence and a flair for language that turn bits of common, everyday life into resonant narrative. This collection maintains a conversational charm while taking the contemporary personal essay to a new level of complexity and candor.

Against Joie de Vivre: Personal Essays Details

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Peter Weissman says

My daughter bought me this book for my birthday, and I'm glad she did, as was she, since she has a hard time finding things a curmudgeon like myself will appreciate (see the essay "Against Joie de Vivre," which led her to believe I'd enjoy this book).

Given the nature of the personal essay, which the author discusses in "What Happened to the Personal Essay?" there were of course some pieces I preferred to others. He stirred my interest, for example, in Montaigne and William Hazlitt, as progenitors of the personal essay, and reminded me of the pleasures I've gotten from Edmund Wilson, George Orwell, Seymour Krim, Norman Mailer, Joyce Carol Oates, Calvin Trillin, Albert Camus, E.M. Cioran, Milan Kundera, C. Wright Mills, and Susan Sontag, to name a few of the other "personal essayists" he cites.

On a more personal level--that is, having experienced similar situations and states of mind--I enjoyed "Never Live Above Your Landlord" and "Upstairs Neighbors" (living in Manhattan), and "... The 'Heroic' Age of Moviegoing" (the adventure of discovering, as a young man, foreign films when so-called art houses were in vogue). Other particular pleasures were Lopate's reflections upon "Modern Friendships," appearances ("On Shaving a Beard"), and the vulnerabilities of an author "Waiting for the Book to Come Out." And perhaps the most riveting piece: the author's experiences as a teacher, in "Chekhov for Children."

Lobstergirl says

I bought this a long time ago, when I was essay-obsessed and would read any one you stuck under my nose. I bought those "Best American Essays" collections like they were candy. This title was compelling because I myself, going through a long surly phase, was also taking a stand against *joie de vivre*. Now, it seems bizarre to me that a person could or would make a living writing essays, and I picked up the unread book, skeptical that Lopate would be able to impress me.

But he does. He often has a particularly well-crafted sentence, and in a good number of these pieces, his ideas are insightful. In "Suicide of a Schoolteacher," he writes about the 1979 death of an Upper West Side sixth-grade teacher he worked with (he worked at the school for ten years as a writer-in-residence). What gives him special insight into this fairly unlikeable teacher's actions is that Lopate himself had tried to commit suicide as a teenager:

Though this was my only bona fide suicide attempt, it began in me a lifelong relationship with that temptation. It seemed to me I had a "virus" inside me like malaria that could flare up at any moment, and I needed always to be on guard against it. On the other hand, I would court it, even in times of seeming tranquillity. I seemed to derive creative energy from the assertion of suicide as an option. This morbidity left me freer to act or write as I wanted, as much as to say: No one understands me, I'll show them. It also became my little secret that, while going about in the world, and functioning equably as expected, several times a week I would be batting away the thought of killing myself. How often have I thought, in moods of exasperation or weariness, "I don't want to go on anymore. Enough of this, I don't want any more life!" I

would imagine, say, cutting my belly open to relieve the tension once and for all. Usually, this thought would be enough to keep at bay the temptation to not exist. So I found myself using the threat of suicide for many purposes: it was a superstitious double hex warding off suicide; it was a petulant, spoiled response to not getting my way, and it was my shorthand for an inner life, to which I alone had access - an inner life of furious negation, which paradoxically seemed a source of my creativity as a writer.

...after they released me from the psychiatric ward and people said to me, "Now wasn't that a stupid thing to do?" I swallowed my pride and nodded yes; in my head, however, I swore allegiance to the validity of my decision. If nothing else, I vowed that I would always respect the right of an individual to kill himself. Whether suicide was a moral or immoral act I no longer felt sure, but of the dignity of its intransigence I was convinced.

...I had started seeing a look of constant pain in Jay's eyes; I knew more or less what the look meant. I think because he could not bear to have another person see him that way - hunted from within - his eyes fled mine. Whenever our gaze did lock for a moment, it was odd and unbearable. A sympathetic vibration exists between "suicide-heads" that is dismaying, to say the least.

...Let me add that barely a day goes by without my picking up uncanny hints of someone's urgent misery beneath the social mask. I am never sure how much of this "intuition" is trustworthy and how much is projection, a distortion for the sake of promoting melodrama or feelings of superiority. I have sniffed suicide in the air a dozen times or more and been proven wrong. This time, however, I was right, and it spooked me.

...Most suicides have people around them who do say a kind word, offer a helping hand, but it seems to come from a great distance away, and they don't know how to read the gesture. Often they don't want to. The suicide has to screen out or misinterpret a great deal of kindness that comes his way if he is to get on with the business at hand. He must concentrate all his energies on keeping the tenuous flame of suicide alive inside and feeding it day by day. Sometimes it is not loneliness so much as the need to act decisively, for once, in one's uncontrolled, errant life.

...I believed it was possible to live without love. Many do in this world, and we mock their endurance by pretending otherwise.

In "What Happened to the Personal Essay", he "longs for a Hazlittian shadow of misanthropic mistrust to fall between reader and writer." While admiring E.B. White's graceful essays, he nonetheless "can't quite forgive his sedating influence on the form." "When White does speak out on major issues of the day, his man-in-the-street, folksy humility and studiously plain-Joe air ring false..." "And you would never know that the cute little wife he describes listening to baseball games on the radio was the powerful New Yorker editor Katharine White." At that magazine, "the preferred [essay] model seems to be the scrupulously fair, sporting, impersonal, fact-gathering style of a John McPhee, which reminds me of nothing so much as a colony of industrious termites capable of patiently reducing any subject matter to a sawdust of detail."

I've never been good at movie-watching, but found his essay on "the 'heroic' age of moviegoing" (the 60s) compelling.

My own disappointment with Antonioni came later with *Blow-Up*, though that derived partly from a misunderstanding, having wrongly elevated him to the level of philosopher in the first place...Even his interview silences were reported as evidence of deep thought. It was partly the burden placed on Antonioni to be the oracle of modernity that forced him into ever more schematic conceptions...It took me years to figure out that most film directors are not systematic thinkers but artistic opportunists. Maybe thanks to

Coppola, Cimino & Company, we have reached a more realistic expectation of directors today; we are more used to the combination of great visual style with intellectual incoherence. But at the time we looked to filmmakers to be our novelists, our sages.

I enjoyed his essay "Only Make Believe: Some Observations on Architectural Language," although it was strange that someone who makes his living writing, and thinking about various arts, didn't understand, or rather pretended not to understand, literary criticism's influence on architecture writing, the use of terms like "narrative" and "scenario" to describe places and structures. This stance would get you laughed out of the room today. He also feigned confusion about the commonly used term "human scale," then proved he knew exactly what it meant when he invoked the World Trade Center towers as examples of buildings that weren't built with a human scale in mind.

Vanessa says

I go back and forth between three and four stars, but a few of these were really good. Some I could have done without, but the momentum picks up in the middle with Chekhov for Children and Houston Hide-and-Seek.

Alex says

He's got a good turn of phrase and the brutal honesty of a strong memoirist, but his occasional choice of boring or repetitious topics knocks it out of classic status. Write about more interesting subjects, Phillip Lopate!

Ann says

I read this book because I was attracted by the title- in this happiness-obsessed culture, it seemed a refreshing idea. And I did enjoy the essays, some more than others. Phillip Lopate writes very well, even if some of his subjects are of little interest to me, such as the eulogy he delivered for a deceased movie critic friend of his, or his sexual history during the sixties and seventies. The essays that will stay with me the longest are the one about his dislike of "joie de vivre", the organized upmanship of dinner parties, and a sensitive essay about how the suicide of a teacher at a school where PL was a writer-in-residence affected the teachers, the principal, the children and the parents. That essay was written around 1987 but is still very readable today.

Tim says

Enjoyed Lopate's essays, long and short, especially the ones on essay writing and on friendship. Found his longer essays on teaching in public school - putting on Chekhov's Uncle Vanya with young kids and the suicide of a teacher - to be thoughtful and moving. All of the essays were good, even if a few were more personal than I might have needed, at least about his sexual life. But then, I am against joie de vivre myself.

Amy says

Phil Lopate writes about some pretty normal things - getting into film, being a downstairs neighbor, his relationship with his landlord, teaching, moving, and the deaths of a couple friends. I had no problem with this being a collection of "personal essays" with the small caveat that I probably wouldn't want to hang out with Lopate (a bit too pretentious and at least at the beginning of the collection, too concerned about his sexual history). That being said, this collection was totally pleasant to read.

jen8998 says

Quite a range here in this collection of personal essays. Slow to start, the author hits his stride with an essay about teaching and another about living in Houston.

Mike says

I liked some of these, especially "Chekhov for children," which was my favorite, and "Suicide of a teacher," which was very powerful. Others I liked were "Never live above your landlord," "Modern friendships," "Upstairs neighbors," and "Reflections on subletting." I didn't find any of the others all that interesting, at least not that I recall now looking back over the table of contents at their titles. (There are 19 essays in here.)

One thing that kept striking me as strange while I was reading these was that two out of the five back-cover blurb suppliers chose the same phrase to praise the book, namely "a joy to read." That struck me as kind of an odd way to describe the experience of reading these essays. The very best ones, I thought, were at least a little bit depressing to read, if not downright disturbing or even painful sometimes. There's nothing wrong with that in my book (which is why those are probably my favorite essays in here), but these essays were almost never exactly a "joy" to read, at least for me, and describing them that way seemed to me like a strange reaction to them. The good ones were good because they were insightful and well written and often moving.

Jessica says

Been awhile since I've read these essays. But he's good.
I'd place him alongside Anne Fadiman, also MFK Fisher, as among my favorite essayists.

Luis Reséndiz says

la mayor parte del tiempo es una gran cosa, montaigneano y todo, pero al final, creo, durante el ensayo dedicado a la cuestión del sexo, se torna un poquitín demasiado autoalabatorio, como del peor woody allen (uno del que el autor, por cierto, dice despreciar el culto a su alrededor). igual es una cosa menor.

Paul says

Personal essays, that's what the cover says. Good writing equals good reading, that's what I say. Funny, insightful, profound. Highly recommended.

Philsy Denofrio says

A collection of perfectly personal essays.

Deonne Kahler says

I liked most of the essays in this collection, and the title essay is terrific - especially if you're a closet curmudgeon like me. Recommended.

Angelica Melendez says

I am inspired by this new way to write in a confessional mode.
