



An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir

Lillian Hellman , Wendy Wasserstein

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Caustic, brilliant, uncompromising, accomplished, Lillian Hellman, one writer noted, can "take the tops off bottles with her teeth". Her career as a playwright began in 1938 with *The Children's Hour*, the first of seven plays that would bring her international attention and praise. Thirty years later, Hellman unleashed her peerless wit and candor on the subject she knew best: herself. *An Unfinished Woman* is a rich, surprising, emotionally charged portrait of a bygone world -- and of an independent-minded woman coming into her own. Wendy Wasserstein's introduction to this new edition provides a fascinating literary and historical context for reexamining Lillian Hellman's life and achievement.

An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir Details

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From Reader Review An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir for online ebook

Gregory Knapp says

Looking back on the Mary McCarthy/Hellman feud one is left to say, (1) Hellman was *a playwright* for decades before she wrote her "Memoirs." Why would anyone look to a brilliant literary artist for factual truth??? And, 2) *WHO CARES* if the Memoirs are factually correct? They are BRILLIANT stories!!!

Donna says

First read 2/7/13 - 2/10/13

Fascinating and tough lady...

Now the film fest follows..The Little Foxes, Watch on The Rhine, and I tracked down a made for tv movie Dash & Lilly.

Maureen says

Lillian Hellman did not mince words. Not in her plays, and certainly not when it came to writing about herself. Her candor is probably what makes this book a bit of an uneven read, because topics she chooses to immerse herself in may not always be of as much interest to the reader. Hellman is a very fine writer, and this is a compelling biography.

Charlaralotte says

Thank you, Brother Ben, for giving me this book at Xmas. Incredibly incisive autobiography. Reminds me of when I read her "Pentimento" while at Nana's house in Denver during one arduous summer vacation. I was maybe 11, and I thought, "Good God! Adults really are as passively vicious as I think they are. I'm not crazy after all!" Hellman has a way of explaining very complex relationships in about two sentences, where most authors never get a handle on the causes of the complexity for entire novels.

Okay, now I've finally finished reading it. I've knocked a star off. Her diary entries from the Spanish Civil War aren't as well written as her writing about her childhood. But then when she relates the gruesome details of her trip to Moscow during WWII, it picks up again. Then it just turns depressing, what with her living with Dashielle Hammett, not the most likable guy in the world. But then neither was she. They were both tough.

The saddest scene is of her sailing back to the island with groceries. She sees Hammett standing at the dock & is overwhelmed with how beautiful a figure he is. And she lets go of the sail. He laughs. She yells angrily, "You're a Dostoyevsky sinner-saint!" They don't speak for several hours. That's pretty much real life. You're

full of love, lost in a reverie, and you do something without thinking & then the person you love acts like an arrogant asshole & then you get very bitter that you ever felt love for this jerk & then the whole thing devolves into a vicious fight.

Also good is when Hemingway is being a prick, as usual, declaiming opinions, etc. She says to him, "I don't give a damn what you think," and leaves. That was good to read.

The part in Moscow is very upsetting. She writes of visiting a concentration camp on the way to the Front, and man, is that some kind of description. She's haunted by those images, and I am now too.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir, Lillian Hellman

Lillian Florence Hellman (June 20, 1905 – June 30, 1984) was an American dramatist and screenwriter known for her success as a playwright on Broadway, as well as her left-wing sympathies and political activism. An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir (Originally published: 1969) is a rich, surprising, emotionally charged portrait of a bygone world -- and of an independent-minded woman coming into her own. Wendy Wasserstein's introduction to this new edition provides a fascinating literary and historical context for reexamining Lillian Hellman's life and achievement.

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Sketchbook says

The Communist Donald Trump ! ~~ A belligerent, lying Commie who wrote crummy plays. Her most famous (unactable today) - "The Little Foxes" - succeeded solely because of Tallulah Bankhead. ~~ Happily, Trump doesn't "do" plays.

Signe M says

Amazing book about an amazing life. I am glad I did get to know Lillian Hellman by reading this book first. Master of language, she is transferring her messages and feelings through beautifully constructed sentences. Was more than impressed by their "out of the ordinary" life with Dashiell Hammett.

And then there was her journey in survival mode to Moscow 1944 - the trip that took fourteen days. And as Ms Hellman says "Those two weeks were, physically, the hardest time of my life."

Maria says

This says "reading for the second time" - it's more like reading for the 10th time - I've read all Ms. Hellman's memoirs (*An Unfinished Woman*, *Pentimento*, and *Scoundrel Time*) many, many times over the past 40 or so years. I love them!

11/7/12: I really LOVE this book, as well as the rest of Ms. Hellman's memoirs. I've read them all many times and always love to go back and read them again. She was a modern woman back when there weren't that many modern women around.

Sarah says

"Thirty years is a long time, I guess, and yet as I come now to write about them the memories skip about and make no pattern and I know only certain of them are to be trusted. I know about that first meeting and the next, and there are many pictures and sounds, but they are out of order and out of time, and I don't seem to want to put them into place." This is a great passage about looking back back on a relationship (in her case, a long-standing affair with Dashiell Hammett). I love how Hellman's book examines memory itself. She makes no pretensions to analyze herself comprehensively - although the sharp lady is most talented at making fun of herself. One of the most outstanding episodes is of her trying to run away from home as a girl, though her travels in Civil War Spain and Soviet Russia are also fascinating.

John Curley says

Let me start by saying that I have been obsessed with Lillian Hellman since I first read *An Unfinished Woman* in college. I've read everything she ever wrote--every play, every memoir. I've watched the movie version of *Pentimento* about a hundred times. I've sought out every biography on her, authorized (*Lily* by Peter Fiebelman) and unauthorized. Mary McCarthy's famous remark about Lillian Hellman ("Every word she writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the'") is maybe only a slight exaggeration. She was not well liked, even by her friends.

But her spare, bull's-eye writing resonated with me. Her terse mannerisms and way of confronting people and issues compelled me. I recognized the intense passion and sentiment beneath the anger and bravado. And her cranky gyrations made me laugh until I choked.

Karen Mardahl says

[The worst example came at the

Tex says

A memoir from an era when writing seemed to have more meaning for daily life. And, a glimpse into the mind of someone who made her living at it, but didn't seem to be consumed by it. Contrarily, she seemed to need the stories around her from all sources as much as she had the talent for writing them. It was certainly a different age, but the memoir does show how celebrities have always congregated amongst themselves. We just don't happen to have folks like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Parker, Murphy, or Hammett around--Kardashians and Tom Bradys and A-Rod don't seem to be in the same universe.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"I would say I wanted to get everything straight for the days after his death when I would write his biography and he would say that I was not to bother writing his biography because it would turn out to be the history of Lillian Hellman with an occasional reference to a friend called Hammett."

Lillian Hellman with her lover Dashiell Hammett.

Dash called it.

I picked this book up to read because I'd heard good things about it and was reassured by the fact that it had won the National Book Award. As a bonus, I was hoping to learn more about the enigmatic Dashiell Hammett. Fortunately, there were a few good stories about Dash confirming some of my own ideas of what kind of man he was. As I read more about their relationship, it became more and more baffling to me as to why Hammett was with her. For someone who had such access to brilliant, interesting people, Hellman seemed too self obsessed to really observe the world around her or really show much interest in the fascinating people she had the opportunity to meet. Why was Hammett so interested in her?

One of her nannies said to her when she was just a child, *"Don't go through life making trouble for people"*... because I'm sure they could tell that she was going to be one of those people who created turmoil and strife for her own amusement. She seemed rather proud of her prideful "I'll do and say whatever I want whenever I want" attitude. Here is a scene from a fight she was having with Dash that will give you an idea of what it must have been like to deal with her on a daily basis:

*"Many years later, unhappy about his drinking, his ladies, my life with him, I remember an angry speech I made one night: it had to do with injustice, his carelessness, his insistence that he get his way, his sharpness with me but not with himself. I was drunk, but he was drunker, and when my strides around the room carried me close to the chair where he was sitting, I stared in disbelief at what I saw. He was **grinding a burning cigarette into his cheek**.*

I said, 'What are you doing?'

'Keeping myself from doing it to you,' he said."

The always dapper and elegantly dressed Dashiell Hammett

Now, I'm not saying Hammett was a choir boy to live with either. He did drink to excess, possessed acerbic wit, and had women fawning all over him. There was a scene where a woman prostrated herself before him and insisted on kissing his hand. He was highly embarrassed. Hellman flew into a rage later about the fact that he allowed that woman to do that to him. There were a mixture of things at play here: a smidge of jealousy, a bit of her own pride that she could never show him any reverence, and a dash of Dash not seeing what the big deal was. He wanted to forget about it, and she wanted to dig into it with a fork and knife until the plate was clean. Whenever she would find herself in a rage with someone, a lover, a friend, or even a woman who worked for her, she would run away for a week only to return to find that the world kept spinning just fine without her.

The best thing to come out of this relationship with Hammett is the book *The Thin Man*, which I started reading again to clear the taste of this book out of my mouth. I had to laugh, almost maliciously, over what he said about her role in the book, because hearing more about Hellman from Hellman was starting to sound like Freddy's fingernails on a chalkboard in my head.

"So it was a happy day when I was given half the manuscript to read and was told that I was Nora. It was nice to be Nora, married to Nick Charles, maybe one of the few marriages in modern literature where the man and woman like each other and have a fine time together. But I was soon put back in my place---Hammett said I was also the silly girl in the book and the villainess."

Wahaha!! Yes, I could almost see the look on her smug face as she realized that Dashiell didn't just see her as Nora but also saw her as the immature Dorothy and her odious mother Mimi. I know I'm being almost unreasonable in my dislike for Hellman, but her flippant style of writing was also becoming wearisome. By the later third of the book, I was skimming ahead for the brief moments when she allowed Dash to at least be on stage, even if he was well away from the bright lights of center stage.

Hellman was somewhat redeemed in my eyes when she took Hammett in to take care of him in the last days of his life. He had cancer of the lungs and had so much trouble breathing that he couldn't even read books, an obsessive pastime he enjoyed and indulged in usually late into the night every day. They had been apart for a while, but she still had feelings for the elegant thin man and showed some humanity that I frankly wasn't sure she was capable of.

I've never read any plays by Hellman. I'm not even sure if they are performed anymore. Hammett often tinkered and helped with her plays. One was so bad, he ended up staying up all night trying to fix her dreadful prose. He found the play insultingly badly written. He wasn't really a play writer, but it made him suffer to see words so misused. Many have tried their hand at playwriting only to fail miserably. (Henry James was always mystified that his success with writing novels did not transition to writing successful plays.) Hammett, though, was a notable screenplay writer and has 33 writing credits in movies. One of his gifts as a writer was his ability to write snappy, fresh dialogue.

Lillian Hellman

I've never met a big Hellman fan, but if you are, then you probably need to read all three volumes of this memoir. If you are a big fan of Dashiell Hammett, I'd just skim for his name and read those few juicy moments when he flashes through her memories. I won't be reading the other two volumes. I think I have

had quite enough of Hellman from the first volume.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Christian Engler says

A life where no living is done is a life not worth living. Like O'Neil, Shaw, Williams and Isben, Lillian Hellman (1905-1984, scriptwriter, playwright, social and political activist and critic) wrote some of the most enduring and thought-provoking drama for the theatre in the 20th century, and the above 'proverb' could very easily have been her epitaph. *An Unfinished Woman* (Winner of the 1969 National Book Award for biography/Autobiography), the first memoir in her autobiographical trilogy (the two others being *Pentimento: A Book of Portraits* and *Scoundrel Time*), showcases a woman who had a 'steel rod' for a spine, a woman of stark liberty who would not compromise her beliefs nor truckle in the presence of those political, military and literary higher-uppers (Hemingway is a case-in-point) whom she encountered who expected a cowering reaction due to their 'clout.' But that was something she never offered, for as Lillian Hellman said of herself when asked the question, "What are you made of, Lily?" Her cool response was, "Pickling spice and nothing nice." This 'confession' of glued-together memories and eloquent journal entries shimmers with quiet, concentrated reflection and introspection. Each chapter gleams and flashes like a beacon, slowly proffering insights into not simply a remarkable life but a frozen portrait of a bygone era - a period of class, dignity, wisdom, self-learning, an endless stream of wonderful things that are presently no more. She hobnobbed with the best and brightest, luminaries like: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Dorothy Parker, John Hersey, Averell Harriman, and of course, above them all, her true love and literary confidant, Dashiell Hammett. As a globe-trotting cultural attache' to Russia, France, Germany, and other European lands, she lived and saw intrigue with those of her like mind. She was on the front lines (or very close to them) during World War II. She witnessed bombed out villages and destroyed lives, all the emotional and physical calamities that the horrors of war can funnel forth, broadcasting them for all to hear and imbibe. She participated (with some trepidation) in the PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Essayists and Editors and Novelists) Center Conference, conversing with intellectuals on the pressing issues of the time, but her reluctance was most unequivocal, for intellectual chitchat can, and for her, did quickly evolve into a bombastic mess on hyperbolic, pretentious proportions. She saw B.S., and she saw truth, not hesitating in the least to speak her mind or to write about it. From her reminiscences of her New Orleans girlhood with her beloved caretaker Sophronia, to her shuffling to New York, to her failed marriage and her father's infidelity, Hellman's life only crescendos. With corrosive verve, 'salty' wit and profound insight, Lillian Hellman lets the past truly come alive. In the end, she showed one and all that she was an 'empowered' woman before many thought that could ever be possible.

Tristy says

It's no secret that Dashiell Hammett based the character Nora Charles (from "The Thin Man" series) on Lillian Hellman, and reading her memoir is like getting to see a deeper, more complicated side to the witty, tough-talking lady of Hammett's stories. Reading about Hellman's life in her own words is a delicious treat that I want to taste over and over. I so wish she had written more stories about her life, because her authentic, fearless re-telling of the past is consuming and fascinating. She can really immerse you in an experience (much like the writing of Hammett) and just when it feels like too much, she buoys you back up again with

some smart, sharp humor that reminds you that we are all just trying to get through life the best we can.
