



Sleepless Nights

Elizabeth Hardwick

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In *Sleepless Nights* a woman looks back on her life—the parade of people, the shifting background of place—and assembles a scrapbook of memories, reflections, portraits, letters, wishes, and dreams. An inspired fusion of fact and invention, this beautifully realized, hard-bitten, lyrical book is not only Elizabeth Hardwick's finest fiction but one of the outstanding contributions to American literature of the last fifty years.

Sleepless Nights Details

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Author : Elizabeth Hardwick

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From Reader Review Sleepless Nights for online ebook

Jonathan says

So this is some breathtakingly good writing. Distilled, focused and filled with some of the most unexpectedly perfect analogies/metaphors/similes I have read.

Aubrey, Brian and Garima have written wonderful reviews already, and there is much out there in the WWW to give you more details about this slim little novel. However, I find the best way to decide whether or not I want to read someone is to have a sampler, a taster.

So, with that in mind...

Read. Listen.

"Photographs of marriage. records of blood, decisions, sacraments observed. In my apartment, around us, in the old fading red-pine chest, in the mahogany desk, in the Swedish desk too, in the fumed oak blanket chest, in manila envelopes marked "trip to Europe" are my own photographs, three hundred or more, that bear witness to form; pictures in the drawer, in the old box, photographs that make one his own ancestor. Of others I have cared about, cared for years - not a trace, not a fingerprint. As it should be. Those who leave nothing behind cannot be missed for long. "

"How pleasant the rooms were, how comforting the distresses of New Yorkers, their insomnias filled with words, their patient exegesis of surprising terrors. Divorce, abandonment, the unacceptable and the unattainable, ennui filled with action, sad, tumultuous middle-age years shaken by crashings, uprootings, coups, desperate renewals. Weaknesses discovered, hidden forces unmasked, predictions, what will last and what is doomed, what will start and what will end. Work and love; the idle imagining the pleasure of the working ones. Those who work and their quizzical frowns which ask: When will something new come to me? After all I am a sort of success."

"Tickets, migrations, worries, property, debts, changes of name and changes back once more: these came about from reading many books. So, from Kentucky to New York, to Boston, to Maine, to Europe, carried along on a river of paragraphs and chapters, of blank verse, of little books translated from the Polish, large books from the Russian — all consumed in a sedentary sleeplessness. Is that sufficient — never mind that it is the truth. It certainly hasn't the drama of: I saw the old, white-bearded frigate master on the dock and signed up for the journey. But after all, "I" am a woman."

"At our high school dances in the winter, small, cheap local events. We had our curls, red taffeta dresses, satin shoes with their new dye fading in the rain puddles; and most of all we were dressed in our ferocious hope for popularity. This was a hot blanket, an airless tent; gasping, grinning, we stood anxious-eyed, next to the piano, hovering about Fats Waller, who had come from Cincinnati for the occasion. Requests, insolent

glances, drunken teen-agers, nodding teacher-chaperones: these we offered to the music, looking upon it, I suppose, as something inevitable, effortlessly pushing up from the common soil."

"I like to remember the patience of old spinsters, some that looked like sea captains with their clear blue eyes, hair of soft, snowy whiteness, dazzling cheerfulness. Solitary music teachers, themselves bred on toil, leading the young by way of pain and discipline to their own honorable impasse, teaching in that way the scales of disappointment."

"I am alone here in New York, no longer a we. Years, decades even, passed. Then one is out of the commonest of plurals, out of the strange partnership that begins as a flat, empty plain and soon turns into a town of rooms and garages, little grocery stores in the pantry, dress shops in the closets, and a bank with your names printed together for the transaction of business."

T for Tongue-tied says

Sleepless Nights unfolds in the rhythm of the loosely connected paragraphs that bubble and float, turning into vignettes of uncertain but fine texture — subtle, unpolemical, neither quite defined nor finished. It feels surprisingly real — all these people who have lost their splendour and turned into shells filled with erratic pulse of their half-forgotten stories. Wandering through the pages in their sore purity, sculpted by chiaroscuro lighting of Hardwick's lyrical narrative, they've become *a memory recorded in twilight, a certain sadness, a gasping for breath.*

Using stylistic freedom of a literary essay, the author oscillates between the fictive and the actual. She creates and dismantles at the same time, leaving us with the omnipresent sense of evanishment, whispering her memories and little stories, woven of daily inconsequences, delusions and persistent habits. Love like sharp scissors cuts through this ever so fragile reality, unveiling the world of moderate, well-nourished egotism, hard-earned fatigue from life, limpid boredom of the new and what Hardwick defines as nervous alliances and peculiar fidelities. Her narrative is fragmentary and ambiguous and although some parts of it resemble what I tend to see as peripheral storytelling, the others are led by the inner cadence of thoughts rather than clear coherence within their sequences.

These self-contained miniatures braid their own pattern — scattered over decades and places, delicately formed into a meditative mosaic, they resemble hazy phantasmagoria of sleepless nights, gathering agreeable lies and self-invented truths in this slow-paced chronicle of the present and past. Above all, what I've found and truly appreciated in this fusion of brief encounters and blurred relations is the unfailing common denominator of being identically human despite individual differences. The way I see it, this reassurance alone is well worth a generous rating.

Jimmy says

A serious, melancholy book about memories, of people and places passing through the night. Sad lives. Excellent language, at times a little on the cerebral side, sounding almost like a series of prose poems, or personal essays.

Lee Foust says

The first cliché that came to mind was "a writer's writer." Which is true in the sense that, as a writer, I appreciate more than anything else an amazing sentence. *Sleepless Nights* is one of the finest wrought collection of sentences ever put together by a writer and is therefore more than remarkable. Because an amazing collection of sentences is perhaps a greater achievement than those endlessly well plotted 18th and 19th century novels, those fat, meandering medieval Romances, or even the 24 books of a stately classical epic poem. But it's more, I think, than each sentence in its exquisite and charming singularity, but also the images they collectively create, the links between them, the artistic non-sequiturs, the meanderings of the mind and its associations--the most overlooked (in my opinion) aspect of artistic mental organization.

So many here have written terrific reviews about the novel's plotlessness... Let me argue that *Sleepless Nights*'s plot is the working of association, categorization more than anything, a kind of chapter by chapter series of themes. Two different--both rather unwitting--ladies men, 2 women who serve, Billie Holiday, a house... I don't remember the theme to each of the ten chapters, still, I believe there is a theme to each if I really wanted to dig them out, order them and see exactly what the text were up to. The fact that chapter 5 opened almost exactly at the novel's center made me pause to consider that Hardwick was writing a considerably more controlled text than most of us readers have realized, that it's simply a kind of control alien to the traditional a to b of a plot. It allowed her to free the writing up, I imagine, to omit all of that filling in of the spaces between key events that most authors struggle with.

So, while I haven't the time or inclination, at the moment, to dissect the novel like a cadaver, let me just suggest you jump in and swim through it's exquisite prose--you could hardly do better.

Lee says

A respectful three stars. Some really strong moments but overall it felt too privileged, a sense that grew and grew until it overwhelmed my appreciation of the strong, smart sentences, like they were too tasteful. As with *Speedboat*, which I read before this and very much preferred, too much of a good thing became -- by about three-fourths through -- not enough for me. A great few pages about Billie Holiday but that section seemed like the climax of my interest and the rest went downhill. Glad I read it -- a good book to read with brain scattered by mid-July heat -- but I'm not sure I'll remember it by the fall.

Daniel says

Four stars tells you it's good. Let's move on.

I start with an image, perhaps of a chair, and slowly enlarge it in your mind, pulling one by one, word by word, its features out of my hat, a green cloth seat and wooden legs and arms. Something happened in this chair, but that something has become so much a basic fact of my life that its repeating here will do no good or bad. I shall pass over it completely.

What I may provide you, however, is a fiction. My name is still Daniel L (or Elizabeth Hardwick, I haven't fully decided), but we are now fictitious selves. This chair I will now describe to you, yellow leather, may be just as real. I can tell you now that they are both real, just like they are both not. If I can build it in my imagination and in your imagination, it exists.

Enough of that, though. You ask me, but what about the chair, what about real life, how much of Daniel L and Elizabeth Hardwick are in Daniel L and Elizabeth Hardwick--but not even "I" know the answer. Memory above all things is deceitful and yet it is the basis of our entire selves, or at least our perceptions of ourselves. I am me because this chair is in me, this chair has altered me and it lives within me, together--me and the chair and Elizabeth Hardwick--we make up myself. Of course there is more to myself than these parts. I may tell you about them sometime.

While your perception of "Daniel" may be built upon this asinine review and some images of chairs, "Elizabeth Hardwick" is built upon memories of an entire life, images of streets from bedroom windows, various living spaces, drunk doctors, Billie Holiday, all fragmented, filtered through memory and the accumulation of sleepless nights, forming a patchwork quilt of moments rather than any cohesive storyline. Why have a chapter about watching Billie Holiday croon at nightclubs? Let's take a look at "Elizabeth Hardwick" finding the magic:

My friend and I, peculiar and tense, experienced during the quiet nights a tainted joy. Then, showing our fidelity, it seemed that a sort of *motif* would reveal itself, that under the glaze ancient patterns from a lost world were to be discovered. The mind strains to recover the black spaces in history and our pale, gray-green eyes looked into her swimming, dark, inconstant pools--and got back nothing.

The mind strains to recover the blank spaces in history. Only fiction can come of this. Indeed, there was *nothing* to begin with. My own chair story is bullshit. But we try so hard to imagine that there was some guiding storyline in our lives, some beautiful theme foreshadowed throughout with subtle motifs that make every step, every mistake and meaningless moment of the way important to ourselves; we try so hard to imagine that the things we have lived through actually make us who we are. But can we really say that? "Hardwick" seems curiously detached from all these things she gives us, perhaps because they really do mean nothing at all. Or rather, they all mean *everything* equally.

It's so hard to tell you the important things, reader, when they are all important to me. *Everything* makes me who I am. May as well tell you the things as they come to me. Each new memory may not build me any more than the last, but they are all within me, and that's real enough for me. And as William Gass once wrote, "If it suits me in my heart to say that it went this way, then why not say it went this way, says I."

Aubrey says

This is the sort of book that I would like to write one day. While I do enjoy works of great length, this is due more to my own mulling processes than any real dislike of shorter pieces. I prefer to read, ponder, read, ponder some more, allowing subconscious faculties to leisurely sample the intake over the course of days; when the book has finally ended and the review awaits, much of the thoughts are there to meet them. What I remember of the days before, I use; what I don't was fit to be filtered out. It makes for a far denser result.

His curiosity flamed over a word, an adjective, over the seductiveness of the fact that I was taking down a volume of Thomas Mann from the library shelves. Eros has a thousand friends.

I previously compared this work to Rhys, Colette, Frame, for svelte and shining style that captures the soul in a few short shifts, but the middle stands out for her casual relations with time. Others flit and weave and encircle like she does, but the barest trace of narrative remains, unlike Hardwick's enrapturement with persona and place and prose that forgoes any trace of linear plot beyond what vignettes fail to belie. It is as dense as *Women and Men* in a far more contemplative sense of the word, it is as succinct as the success of succulence, its thin handbook cover is as treacherous as a spiderweb, that common nuisance of deadly efficiency which pound for pound is stronger than steel. If all shorter works were of this style, a grasping at the complexity of crystalline growth set in the snow globe of memory, every shake eliciting the sort of multifarious perfection found only in the biology of closed systems, I'd have no use for the likes of *War and Peace*.

Many are flung down carelessly at birth and they experience the diminishment and sometimes the pleasant truculence of their random misplacement. Americans who are Germans, Germans who are Frenchmen, like Heine perhaps.

There's an upper class bookish feel to it all, but of the transitional kind, as the variety of women encompassed by a matching variation of lengths can attest to. The poor are strong in dirt and drugs and grit without a trace of sentiment, the rich are parodied in their panderings and pride, the in-between delve into sex and politics in however a manner is their custom. Men appear, but as accessory to the fact, and whatever fascination they provoke is often a desire for transience, exhilarated and on edge. While male authors litter the references in a pleasing shape and heterosexuality's a definite thing, female solidarity runs the roost.

*Some men define themselves by women although they appear to believe it is quite the opposite; to believe that it is **she**, rather than themselves, who is being filed away, tagged, named at last like a quivering cell under a microscope.*

Very New England, very Europe, the essence of the efforts of *The Goldfinch* and a smack of postmodernism to boot, judging by the indictments below. The dregs of dreams' remains, spun into existence incarnate with all its spans and gaps.

Time—that is something else. With the hesitant intellectual years fly by like the day; life is shortened by the yellowing incompletes. The "book"—a plaguing growth that does not itself grow, but attaches, hangs on, a tumorous companion made up of the deranged cells of learning, experience, thinking.

Bree Hill says

A tad bit dense but well worth it. There isn't really a story line but an older woman reflects on her life. Each

“story” is in a way a reflection or meditation. You witness events and meet people who shaped her life. I? love this kind of thing, it was well worth the read.

Brian says

Sleepless Nights is the literary equivalent of a Gryphon: it has the head of a memoir, the body of a novel and the tail of an epistle. The constructs of what constitutes a novel do not apply. Trying to explain Hardwick's style, her talent, is like trying to answer the question "How long is a piece of string?" For example, here are two sentences taken from the last page of the novel:

Mother, the reading glasses and the assignation near the clammy faces, so gray, of the intense church ladies. And then a lifetime with its mounds of men climbing on and off.

There's poetic and haunted pinions keeping those words aloft. The entire novel is like this - I'm not certain I understood even half of what I read and how it related to the rest of the text, but does that matter? It just so happens that I'm traveling alone right now; last night I read about thirty pages of the book in a dark hotel room. I felt like I might have been missing too much of what I was reading, so I went back and started re-reading - this time speaking the words as I read them - and ended up scaring the holy bajesus out of myself. I can't tell you what happened, or why it had the impact it did, but Hardwick's prose spoken aloud felt like an incantation from a book of the occult. Was this what was intended by the title?

This is the only book I have reviewed without an accompanying star rating. That choice-and-click is arbitrary anyway, and of everything I've read this year, this is the book that should have an ink-dark sky, devoid of stars but filled with readers.

Are you ready for this?

Diane Barnes says

This felt like a series of articles for the New Yorker magazine, that might be more appreciated by those more intellectual than me. Disjointed and hard to follow. I was able to isolate a few brilliant passages, but not worth the trouble.

Mikki says

If this book were a work of art on canvas, it would be a collage by Romare Bearden -- its subjects layered in thick coats of paint, scraps of newspaper, bits of textured fabric, and torn photographs (particularly of eyes and ears). Or maybe it would be a quilt.

Here is a book unlike any that I've ever read before. No real story with plot, no timeline. It's more like

reading random pages torn from a journal or sitting at a kitchen table flipping through pages of a friend's scrapbook in no particular order.

Part fiction and part autobiography (one guesses at the percentages), these are the memories of an aging woman in a nursing home told through story, letters, quotes, literary passages and dreams of missed opportunities.

"If only one knew what to remember or pretend to remember. Make a decision and what you want from the lost things will present itself. You can take it down like a can from a shelf. Perhaps."

But, of course, the mind doesn't release our past in neat orderly fashion, so here we have slices of life shared in poetic, non-linear, stream of consciousness writings. Tales of travel, failed relationships, communists, cleaning ladies, lovers, befriending Billie Holiday -- "...she was glittering, somber, and solitary, although of course never alone, never" -- and New York.

All told in the most beautiful lyrical voice. On every page there are two, three, maybe four descriptions and truisms that will catch you suddenly and make you smile, sending your heart in cartwheels.

Asya says

Joan Didion doesn't lack attention, neither does Sontag. MFK Fisher is making a comeback in the context of both memoir and food writing. Annie Dillard has had a steady sort of recognition. So what happened to Hardwick and why have so few read her brilliant hard essays, her insightful bio of Melville, and above all, this hybrid memoir/novel/lyrical essays collection? Perhaps because Hardwick's life overshadowed her work (that is, her role as troubled wife to troubled poet overshadowed both her life and work), or because she was not terribly prolific, esp not in book form, or because her topics were never flashy or head on. This book blows me away and if Hardwick had written nothing else, this book alone would suffice. For what? Well, if that bit about every great book inventing its own form were to be invoked as the standard, *Sleepless Nights* is a great book. Hard, hallucinatory, multi-faceted, lyrical without being nostalgic, poetic while still narrative, narrative without chronology or character, teeming with character without being a novel, a novel without telling a story, and telling stories while still being true, and being true while never adhering to fact -- this book lives because of its contradictions, and somehow still comes together because of them.

Jenna says

This book is $n\%$ fiction and $(100-n)\%$ straight-up memoir, where the exact value of n is trickily concealed. No matter. "Sleepless Nights" is a highly readable potpourri, deliciously aimless, like a pink-purple zinnia whose multitude of petals ray out in every direction at once: well, every direction except straight down toward the earth (that's where the stem is) or straight up at the sun (that's where the anthers go, bristling and manly). The book's idiosyncratic structure, its insistence on formlessness and on not being enslaved to the rise-and-fall of a traditional plotline, allows Hardwick to bathe the entire book evenly in the Stygian waters of poetry, leaving no Achillean heel neglected. Hardwick uses language more beautifully than many poets do; her forceful intelligence is apparent in her many delightful turns of phrase, little curlicues that pop up on every page like kittens' tongues. As a consequence, "Sleepless Nights" is rich, nourishing, and, perhaps most gratifyingly, wise. Listen, for example, to what Hardwick has to say on the subject of love:

"Of course these things are not *mine*. I think they are usually spoken of as *ours*, that tea bag of a word which steeps in the conditional." (page 6)

"I slept with Alex three times and remember each time perfectly... I was honored when he allowed me to go to bed with him and dishonored when I felt my imaginative, anxious, exhausting efforts were not what he wanted. His handsomeness created anxiety in me... In those years I did not care to enjoy sex, only to have it. This is what seeing Alex again on Fifth Avenue brought back to me---a youth of fascinated, passionless copulation. There they are, figures in a discolored blur, young men and not so young... So many are children who from the day of their birth are growing up to be their parents. Look at the voting records, inherited like flat feet." (page 55-56)

Edit: If you want some more biographical background on Hardwick, Edward Byrne has written a succinct summary of the relationship between Hardwick and poet Robert Lowell here:
<http://edwardbyrne.blogspot.com/2007/...>

Christopher says

A life in fragments, a masterclass of concision. This speaks to the artifice of unbroken narrative that convention sees us superimposing on ourselves in the light of day, and how that quality of time passing can become undone in the solitary night.

Troy says

There are parts of this book that are stunningly beautiful. And vignettes that stick with me days after I've read them. A story about a friend, the daughter of servants, who grew up with the rich, corrupted by hate and resentment. The mysterious and inscrutable Billy Holliday and the authors time with her in her hotel. A tiny Dutch doctor and his doomed, bourgeoisie, and complacent love affairs. A laundry lady, large and unrepentant and hooked up with a devious lecher.

But as amazing as aspects of this book can be, it is also an endless succession of vignettes with little to

nothing to tie everything together. And although I love experimentation, it often felt like I was tied to a fantastic story teller who also had extreme ADD. Some sketches were amazing, but many were not. If I had read this as a book of poetry, or as a collection of aphoristic stories, it might have rated higher, but instead I wanted a contained whole, which this book is not.

Vipassana says

The torment of personal relations. Nothing new there except in the disguise, and in the escape on the wings of adjectives

One of the consolations that literature provides is a sense of belonging, for those who may lack it in the real world. I've been able to reason to myself that my eccentricities are not really odd, but it is truly gratifying to find them in others. To feel social and affable toward others, even if they are dead.

This sense of belonging is the kind of relationship, when carefully fostered, can attain an immortal condition. The perception of the forever. Without the nurturing, this relationship might *slip away to the cemetery*. Dying slowly, with a rot so putrid that it is impossible separate the part that lives, from that which is dead. By the very definition of the word relationship, it fails to accommodate a bond of this nature. Yet, for the lack of a better phrase, I shall call it the relationship with yourself.

In Sleepless Nights, we go through the places and people in Elizabeth's life with the same perplexing anachronous clarity, that we find in our own lives. As time passes by, events of the past appear to develop more detail. Whether this perspicuity is real or imagined, one cannot tell, yet it is prevalent in many.

Portraying life in 128 pages sounds like a joke, and yet Hardwick accomplishes that. Presenting the reader with vignettes of Elizabeth's life has an effect that isn't apparent when one discusses the form of the novel. It creates a device for one to extrapolate by revealing the open ends life's events. In this manner, Sleepless Nights captures life in its entirety, by allowing the fragmented narrative to serve as a metaphor for the unresolvable nature of life.

Hardwick's unadorned prose makes it easy to connect with the people in Elizabeth's life, to turn them into people in our own lives.

She lowers her eyes, this thing with him is never going to be over, never. - Of course, the weary relationships. The ones that can't end. The mother, father, sister, wife, ex-husband, who weave their way so tightly into one's psyche, that they appear to have colonized part of one's own identity. Or do we readily sacrifice part of it in hope to gain something from our captors?

There are some who choose to tackle this self-sacrificing behaviour of mankind in the way parents and governments choose to deal with problems, they prohibit it. These are the bachelors and bachelorettes, whose choices may not be as rational as they lead you to believe.

I often think about bachelors. A life of pure decision, of thoughtful calculations, every inclination honoured. They go about on their own, nicely accompanied in their singularity by the companion of possibility. For cannot any man, young or old, rich or poor, turn a few

corners and bump into marriage?

Sleepless Nights could be read in several ways. An amusing imaginary journal, a study of relationships, a study of the self or a device for thought experiments, but for me it asked a very important question - What is it that we do, and what is it that we bump into?

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March 7, 2015

Garima says

*I heard the sounds of sorrow and delight,
The manifold, soft chimes,
That fill the haunted chambers of the Night,
Like some old poet's rhymes.*

~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Hymn to the Night

A book written in the form of life. So concluded Geoffrey O'Brien in the brilliant introduction to this distinguishing literary feat. To narrow down that observation a bit, I'll say that this is a book written in the form of 'Sleepless Nights'. You know the kind of nights that opens up the reluctantly closed doors of mind and heart and let everyone and everything enter without any bias. The things we once loved, the people we still hate and regrets we are no longer regrettable about comes rushing through those nights and mischievously replace the idea of a peaceful sleep. And when that happens, there's a kind of rebellion on part of words to let themselves wander in any direction they feel like as if they are not going to be judged by the inquisitive stares of daytime verbs or adjectives.

Tell me, is it true that a bad artist suffers as greatly as a good one?

What can one say to that or numerous other thoughts like that one? A breakdown of that deceptively simple question gives us intense words like artist, suffering, good, bad and truth. And that's what I kept doing while reading this mighty little novel. Here a woman has decided to live her life through the strength and weakness of her labyrinthine memory and what follows is capable of leaving a reader awed at the soft swirls of beautiful prose and baffled by the honesty of a daring voice. Hardwick writes from the middle ground that emerges between indifference and compassion and gives voice to the unheeded reflections around us. Reflections which are personal, poetic, critical and to some extent, incomprehensible.

Well, it's a life. And some always hung about, as there is always someone in the evening leaning against the monument in the park.

To understand the Sleeplessness of these Nights in its entirety would mean to understand Elizabeth, which is quite impossible so one can take comfort in the fact that she has given us something which can be savored on a daily basis. Whenever you'll open a random page at any random moment, there will be a wondrous sentence or two to send you on an unusual sojourn of a fragmented past or an invisible present. So I admit that I'm not finished reading it yet because like life, this book also goes on.

Tristan says

“Tell me, is it true that a bad artist suffers as greatly as a good one? There were many performers at the Hotel Schuyler, but they gave no hint of suffering from the failure of their art. Perhaps the art had changed its name and came to their minds as something else – employment. ”

- Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*

Sleepless Nights is one of those -far too rare- works of literature which unmercifully teases its audience with its non-normative, plotless, collage-like, amorphous storytelling. Part memoir, part fiction, its middle-aged author offers a revealing look into her (reliable or not?) experiences of a life richly lived, the cast of characters she encountered and her frankly stated observations associated with it.

As a result, it does not constitute a novel (*Ceci n'est pas un roman* wouldn't look half bad as a blurb) as such, but rather a playful *mélange* of literary genres, which at times makes for a slightly confusing reading experience (while not detracting from it).

However, an argument must be made this is exactly its intended effect. The reader is actively encouraged to re-read parts (or the whole) and piece the various temporally and geographically disconnected narrative strands together. In the truest sense of the word, it is a constantly evolving work of fiction, depending on the reader's effort. I'm sure I personally haven't fully grasped all that is contained within, which is assuredly a positive.

One would almost be tempted to describe *Sleepless Nights* as Hardwick engaging in an exercise in stream of consciousness, but the prose is too well-considered, exact, and luxuriant for that. For such a seemingly innocuous looking book, it's unbelievably dense, powerful, and emotionally resonant. I'm keeping to a four star rating for now, but I easily see it climbing to a five on a second reading. Utmost recommendation.

Rebecca Foster says

Hardwick's 1979 work is composed of (autobiographical?) fragments about the people and places that make up a woman's elusive remembered past. Elizabeth shares a New York City apartment with a gay man; lovers come and go; she mourns for Billie Holiday; there are brief interludes in Amsterdam and other foreign destinations. She sends letters to "Dearest M." and back home to Kentucky, where her mother raised nine children. "My mother's femaleness was absolute, ancient, and there was a peculiar, helpless assertiveness about it. ... This fateful fertility kept her for most of her life under the dominion of nature." There's some astonishingly good writing here, but as was the case for me with Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation*, I couldn't see how it was all meant to fit together.

Some favorite passages:

“Looking for the fossilized, for something—persons and places thick and encrusted with final shape; instead there are many, many minnows, wildly swimming, trembling, vigilant to escape the net.”

“The stain of place hangs on not as a birthright but as a sort of artifice, a bit of cosmetic.”

“The bright morning sky that day had a rare and blue fluffiness, as if a vacuum cleaner had raced across the heavens as a weekly, clarifying duty.”

“On the battered calendar of the past, the back-glancing flow of numbers, I had imagined there would be felicitous notations of entrapments and escapes, days in the South with their insinuating feline accent, and nights in the East, showing a restlessness as beguiling as the winds of Aeolus. And myself there, marking the day with an *I*.”

s.penkevich says

Novelists tell that piece of truth hidden at the bottom of every lie.

-Italo Calvino in an interview with *The Paris Review*

Memory is a sly kitten, darting to and fro through the living room of our mind, appearing in flashes here then there, never in an orderly fashion and rarely giving us a perfect still-frame to assess all the details. Elizabeth Hardwick’s astounding ‘novel’—or should modern times brand it with the now-popular ‘creative non-fiction’ label—*Sleepless Nights* is a brilliant blending of fact and fiction that assesses the ‘I’ at the heart of her story as it harnesses memory into language, language that blossoms and blooms on the page like the most gorgeous of gardens. Often paralleling her own life (‘a well-traveled and intensely insightful writer and teacher from Kentucky who married for a time with poet Robert Lowell’ may suffice as a brief biography for the uninitiated), *Sleepless Nights* takes dozens of brief reflections across the narrator’s timeline spent loving, losing and living to create a poetic mosaic of a life, wielding ‘fiction’ like a box of crayons to color in the black outlines of memory. ‘*If only one knew what to remember or pretend to remember*, writes Hardwick, ‘*make a decision and what you want from the lost things will present itself*.’ There is a truth in every fiction, and fiction in every truth. In a montage investigation of the ‘I’, Hardwick reveals that the self cannot be separated from the places and people that color their days, and that one person is in fact the collision of many others all believing in their self-isolation as they move from cradle to grave in the beautifully tragic story of what it is to be human, all delivered through an impressive blending of fact and fiction.

Alas, the heart is not a metaphor, or at least not always a metaphor.

Elizabeth Hardwick steals my heart with every page, every perfect poetic sentence. If *Sleepless Nights* is a mosaic, each tile is a perfect prose poem that captures the essence of existence in like the best of poets. Her descriptions are utterly serene in their use of language to penetrate right to heart of a person or a landscape.

Winter came down upon them. The suicide season arrived early. The land, after a snowfall, would turn into a lunar stillness, satanic, brilliant. The tall trees, altered by the snow and ice, loomed up in the arctic landscape like ancient cataclysmic formations of malicious splendor. The little houses on the road...trembling there in the whiteness, might be settlements waiting for a doom that would come over them silently in the night.

Sleepless Nights is the best of both the 'novel' and the 'poem', being both and neither at the same time. The brief, staccato-like vignettes culminate to a portrait of a life, but each individual moment breathes a lifetime of insight on its own. Hardwick delicately condenses a lifetime into each beautifully phrased sentence the way the most skilled of novelists reveal the landscape of a character's nature through small details of mannerisms or anecdote.

Of course these things are not mine. *I think they are usually spoken of as ours, that tea bag of a word that steeps in the conditional.*

So much revealed in so little space, the acknowledgement of a marriage, bringing the connotation of once-happy times and love, and the assumption of a divorce and all the confusion and awkwardness left in the wake of the downfall. Each passage, detailing time spent in Kentucky as a child, time spent in Holland, time spent with Billie Holiday, the lives of maids and the love affairs of friends, manages to construct a universe of ideas and meaning out of the minimal space of prose.

While you are living, part of you has slipped away to the cemetery.

Hardwick chronicles her life, and the lives that have touched it across the slim 128 pgs. Sometimes cynical with repeated reference of our inevitable permanent address in the cemetery, Hardwick reminds us that we are spending our lives getting our affairs and finances in order only to be wiped out of physical existence to only carry on in the memories of others. Hardwick chronicles the trials and tribulations of those around her throughout 'her', immortalizing them in fiction, as much as she investigates the life of the narrator. It seems that the impact of her acquaintances are very much a defining aspect of her, as we are all influenced by those around us, not limited to those we hold most dear. It is the collective experience, the plural of human beings, that define existence and not just the isolated solitude of the singular. A refreshing aspect of the book is that the female is often characterized as the pillar of self-identification. Even the womanizers who leap from bed to bed must inevitably realize that their selfhood is defined by the women that they chase in order to identify as a 'womanizer':

Some men define themselves by women although they appear to believe it is quite the opposite; to believe that it is she, rather than themselves, who is being filed away, tagged, named at last like a quivering cell under a microscope.

However, even the 'I' must confess that '*I have always, all of my life, been looking for help from a man.*' One cannot be a self without the mirror of others; the love, hate, companionship or just mere interaction with the rest of the human race is the experiment of selfhood from which we are able to analyze the date of our identity.

Hardwick also probes the geographical settings through which she traverses, from her home in Kentucky to apartments in Europe, to extract the importance of place on identity. '*The stain of place hangs on not as a birthright but as a sort of artifice, a bit of cosmetic,*' she writes, admitting that place plays a recognizable role but not one that should forever typecast us. Movement is also key to the novel, that one may uproot and take life into their own hands and not be forever a rotting root in the soil.

What began as a green start may turn overnight into a desert filled with alarm, with impossibility. So move on. Try out a similar arrangement on Riverside Drive. But defiantly, as if to say: You cannot destroy a ruin.

We have the ability to make a life for ourselves and must not be afraid of change, as change can lead to great growth or a lifting of burdens. One must not resign themselves to fate, but take fate into their own hands.

Sleepless Nights is a glorious achievement of prose that examines 'the transformations of memory' through its fractured meditation of a life lived. Fact and fiction intertwine towards an exquisite memoir that proves there is no rigid boundary between the two and examines the culmination of experience and how each individual moment in a life is equal and as poignant as the some of its parts. The novel is relatively plotless but, as Hardwick mentions in an interview with *The Paris Review*, 'if I want a plot, I'll watch Dallas'. This book shows the victory of ideas and writing over any necessity of plot and is as engaging and consuming as any of the latter. Hardwick is a master of language and each page waits with a shimmering gem of poetry to dazzle the soul. However, and in the spirit of LeVar Burton helped introduce me to the joys of reading at an early age, don't just take my word for it. I strongly urge you to read this novel and bask in each perfectly formed sentence.

5/5

'The torment of personal relations. Nothing new there except in the disguise, and in the escape on the wings of adjectives. Sweet to be pierced by daggers at the end of paragraphs.'
