

The Other Walk essays by Sven Birkerts

"This morning, going against all convention,
I turned right instead of left...."



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Other Walk is a series of autobiographical pieces by the master of reflection and slow time

Throughout his life, Sven Birkerts, one of the country's foremost literary critics, has carved out time for himself--to walk, to swim, to read, to contemplate. Now in his late fifties, he has clocked up many thousands of hours of reflection. It shows in his prose, which proceeds at a refreshingly deliberative pace as it draws the reader into his patterns and rhythms.

In this deeply appealing and engaging collection of essays, Birkerts looks back through his own life, as well as at the generations before him, and ahead at the lives of his children. We read how the writer witnesses his son's frightening sailing accident, how he feels when he encounters his own prose from many years ago, how finding a cigarette lighter or a lost ring releases a cascade of memories. The objects he sees around him--old friends, remembered places--are excavated, their layers exposed.

But most winning of all is the emerging character of Birkerts himself. We come to have great respect for this competitive but deeply loyal friend, the caring father who respects his children's independence even as he tries to connect with them, the traveler, the onetime bookseller, the writer at all stages of his writing life, and throughout it all, the attentive, passionate reader.

The Other Walk: Essays Details

Date : Published September 13th 2011 by Graywolf Press

ISBN : 9781555975937

Author : Sven Birkerts

Format : Paperback 175 pages

Genre : Writing, Essays, Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Travel, Walking

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From Reader Review The Other Walk: Essays for online ebook

Waven says

This collection of finely crafted essays explores life in various ways and from various points. Each builds on the one preceding it, revealing a bit more but from a different angle, and each angle revealed only by degrees, like one's view rounding the corner of a building. They are deeply autobiographical - memories of Latvia, young friends and lovers - but also universal: judgments, memory, aging, lost things. The scenes feel chosen, the points and intersections placed with purpose - pointing forward - but these essays also carry an undercurrent of confusion, a fumbling *for* purpose and point in a sea of uncertainties. The last essay, possibly my favorite of the lot, helps bring them full circle ... or as near as the gestalt of life allows. And while the collection lags in places, overall it offers a very enjoyable journey - a pleasant walk, if you will, alongside the author. And a walk I will likely enjoy again.

Dewitt says

Sven Birkerts's THE OTHER WALK is exciting in its complex, elegant sentences and meditations on domestic objects and occasions, climaxed by a masterful essay on fathering, "The Points of Sail." Here Birkerts frames memories of parenting with his watching from shore as his two sons sail out of sight, and the youngest nearly drowns. In the aftermath, Birkerts reflects with a clarity worthy of Alice Munro, "about how it is between parents and children—between any people who are close, really—how it snarls up together, all the vigilance and ignorance, luck and readiness, love and fear. We know nothing."

Amy says

My review is published at the Kenyon Review Online: <http://www.kenyonreview.org/kr-online...>

Laurie Neighbors says

I like Sven Birkerts and respect his cultural criticism, but the majority of these essays were unappealing to me, felt trivial in comparison to his other work. They read more like a writer's notebook of exercises than a coherent, well-considered work. If it's well-constructed essays you're craving, try Zadie Smith. And if it's Sven Birkerts your craving, read anything else of his, particularly his book on time in memoir.

Casey Eccles says

Great essays. Strong writing and wonderful description.

Jessica says

I really enjoyed this collection of reflective, calming essays. Each wrapped around something very simple: a moment, a thought or an object and the memories and thoughts stemming from their humble beginnings. The author's writing style is a real treat; it was the perfect bit of fresh, beautiful air.

Bryan Parys says

Thoroughly intrigued by Birkerts' voice here. While I'm typically on the John D'Agata/Maggie Nelson end of the nonfiction/memoir spectrum in terms of emphasis on imagery and lyrical cadence, there's something not only refreshing about Birkerts no-nonsense style, but sublime as well. The events and recollections are written in an informal way ("casual" isn't the right word, as I can only imagine the sweat that someone like Birkerts wrings into his prose, but the effect comes off feeling conversational--maybe what Montaigne would sound like after just the right number of beers), but there is a created presence that transcends the prose into territory that is anything but trivial, quotidian. Whenever I sense that my own artistic vision is getting too lofty or disconnected, I'll return to the Other Walk to get me back on the path.

Skyqueen says

Rich. Very rich. His essays get inside you and rattle around touching areas that are uncommon. Or at least you thought they were...that no one else thought or felt the same thing you did. Confirms once again that we are more alike than UN-alike. And that there really are other people who think deeply, although to look at them on the street you would not know. He somehow manages to choose just the right word or sequence to capture the nuances of emotion, fully and completely. A very refreshing book for me to read and will read again. I could hear his voice telling his stories. And would be very disappointed if ever I DO hear his voice and it doesn't match my fantasy. Thank you Sven.

Willing to share my book with anyone else who was also registered in the Giveaway. Just contact me.

Oh, and P.S. The story of Rufus and Lenny is Laugh-Out-Loud!

Andrea says

From my blog post, "All Souls Essay," which features a few paragraphs of me ruminating on this book.
<http://thegreatramble.wordpress.com/2...>

Last night I gave my Short Story students their paper assignment for the semester and induced a class-wide panic attack. It was kind of fun, especially since I know they are up to the challenge. What caused such panic? My resurrection and reinterpretation of the "All Souls Essay," except that my students can choose from 4 words, and have 2 months to write the paper. I look forward to the results.

I assigned them this paper because I loved writing papers as both an undergraduate and graduate student. Papers were the chance for me to throw off the bonds of class and really engage with an idea. I loved class

discussions, but sometimes I just wanted to be alone with an idea. For that matter, I loved taking tests as well, as long as they were essay exams, because facing a four or five prompts, and knowing you had just three hours to write your answers, was a thrill I can only compare to sports. I used to be a fast pitch softball pitcher, and facing the essay exam, or paper assignment, is akin to standing on the mound, entirely alone and dependent on your own skill. Once I released the pitch, I had a great team to back me up in fielding any hits, but for that moment of delivery, everything depended on me, on my athleticism and training, and I feel the same way about writing. In writing papers, essays or even creative work, when it comes down to it, it is just me in a room with a blank sheet of paper, and it is up to the athleticism and training of my mind to do something with that opportunity.

I like that thrill and challenge, but I also loved papers because they gave me ownership of my education. No matter what my teachers or professors thought was important, I could write an essay that would teach me something. I am constantly exhorting my students to own their papers, to seize them as a chance to learn things that they may otherwise never learn. I want them to get lost in an idea and chase it to fruition. And I think that this “All Souls” essay may be a way in for them to do that.

I recently finished reading a Sven Birkerts collection titled, *The Other Walk*. I’ve had a writer’s crush on Birkerts for almost twenty years, ever since I read the *Gutenberg Elegies* back in 1995. In that book, Birkerts grappled with the Internet, which was just beginning to gain real popular momentum. He recognized it as an inevitable force, and oceanic wave of change, but also sounded the warning call that while things may seem inevitable, we also have the rights, and indeed the responsibility, to be conscious in our choices and how we spend our lives. The thing that hung with me for years after that book was his warning that while our access to knowledge was certainly on the rise, he feared for our loss of wisdom, because wisdom required knowledge and time. Wisdom requires space for quiet reflection. In the twenty years since then, that Internet wave has come and washed over all of us, transforming the world. I am writing these thoughts in a wholly electronic medium, and yet, at least right now, for the moment of this writing, I am alone, in the quiet of my apartment, carving out space for reflection and writing in my day. But I also worry if that is enough. I battle with this electronic writing, the unpolished nature of blog posts. I read many blogs now as part of my regular reading life, and many of them are beautiful and thought-provoking and I think they enrich my intellectual life. But then again, I pause, because I also love the careful craft and polish of Birkerts’ essays, which is writing that lasts, that hangs around in my mind for years.

I think the difference is, maybe, that well-written blogs are my reading equivalent of the traditional All Souls Essay. These blogs are all the work of writers seizing upon a thought, idea or word, and writing about it in a rush. And in that rush comes emotional resonance, humor, and often surprising insights. But then books like *The Other Walk*, are the product of time spent in the quite, in getting lost in ideas and problems for days, or even years. That is the writing that likewise stays with me. There are some writers whose books I read slow, whose writing I live in for a week at a time, and other books, no matter how dense, that I can read in a day or two. Without question, I prefer the books that take the time to read. And often I discover that the books that read fast were likewise written fast. The books that resonate for me are the ones that were the product of years of labor. That is just the kind of reader, and writer, that I am.

The Other Walk is a series of essays, essays I imagine that were written over the course of at least several years, but maybe I am wrong in that. The essays are short. Many are barely two pages long. Some stretch to six or seven pages, but few wander past that mark. Many of them are essays about writing, others are essays about family, and self, and about the work of thinking, reflection and memory. The book very much seems like Birkerts “All Souls” essays, especially in that so many are inspired by a single object. Essays like “Head,” about a small ceramic head, “Cup,” “Postcard,” “Ladder,” “Apple,” “Stone Shard,” “Archive,” and “Papa.” He takes us into that image, and then, invariably, takes us someplace even greater. Through the

specificity of his writing, Birkerts approaches the universal, which is, of course, what all great literature does. As Aristotle wrote, "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." Of land that he grew up on, that his grandfather painted, Birkerts wrote, "I crisscrossed that land so often in those years that I have stitched it shut in my memory. Nothing can break into what I remember." Of fury he writes, "Fury is the point past which reason cannot intercede." And near the end of the essay "Postcard," of returning back to a place of his youth, he wrote, "I stood there, pulverized. Pulverized and rearranged." In each of these moments, he was writing about something specific in his life, and yet he transcended to the universal experience.

What those short quotes fail to do is demonstrate the difference between Birkerts writing and Internet writing. I would need to retype the entire essay to reproduce that. But then again, also part of the pleasure of reading his book is the being unplugged, of retreating into myself with no other distractions to pull me away from the reading I am engaged in. In the end, there is room for all types of writing. I am glad for the sprints and displays of mental and emotional agility in the blogs I read, but I am also glad for the books that are products of long hours of unplugged solitude, where metaphors are crafted, hammered and polished.

I am not sure what my students will write for their "All Souls Papers," but I'm looking forward to reading the results. I do not expect any one of them to be Birkerts, but I do expect them to surprise me, and more importantly, for them to surprise themselves. I want them to take that plunge into their intellect and stretch themselves beyond what they thought was possible. I believe that is what the original "All Souls" essay really did – it demonstrated the limits the mind could go when tested, and the result is that our minds, really, are limitless.

BW Diederich says

I enjoyed about 80% of these, and didn't really hate any of them. I said to a friend that it's the sort of essay collection where I wasn't quite sure why I was reading them beyond just thinking Birkerts seems interesting. He tends to start off on thing A and meanders a bit, before finally settling in to thing Y and really narrowing in. The best essays are the ones that don't meander too far from the start and, to be honest, tended to be the shorter ones. I liked how he wrote about poetry even if I don't think I agreed with what he was writing.

False says

I had this book on my "to read" list for a long time. I don't know why I had such a hard time finding a copy of these essays, but it took a good four years to finally unearth one at the library. Highly personalized essays about the author's past and current life (family and friends.) In one essay (Blue Melody) I was interested to find mention of someone I know personally---wasn't expecting it, and I shared that news with the person. "You're in this book!"

Tim says

To call these short writings essays seems wrong. They are blasts of memory and some feel foreign and taste bad (youth and drugs and excess), but most, about work and writing and family hit close to home, or close to where I want home to be. Such a lingering over small memories that speak a great deal. The writing makes

me want to look at my life with renewed care and resolution.

Matt says

Birkerts reflects on memory through the act of remembering; it's a collection of essays on the borderline of memoir and phenomenology.

This is the sort of book you reread every ten years or so. I have a feeling my experience of the book will only deepen with time. Like most essay collections, there were a few misses, but Birkerts' ever-attentive prose was wonderful throughout. It's a treat to read a living author so skilled at crafting a sentence.

Rick says

Birkerts, a literary critic and teacher of some note, here collects an engaging array of personal essays into a single, thin volume that touch on love, literature, parenting, friendship, mortality, family history, and many other topics that would do Montaigne proud. The book has a wonderful cover photo by Lise Metzger, an individual walking on a sandy path in a dry field. He is walking away from the camera, his arms are raised and his raised jacket covers him like a descending curtain with the bent arms like rabbit ears flopping over. It captures a thoughtful, mysterious playfulness that well represents the essays contained within. Birkerts has a graceful prose style and provides entertaining and thoughtful observations.

Kristen says

Readers read and writers write for a variety of reasons (and actually, most of us read and write for more than one reason). Sven Birkerts's happiest readers will be those with the souls of poets, readers who linger over word choices, and who enjoy small observations, ones that would never be found in a thriller or love story or even a typical memoir.

Consider the beginning of his essay, "Brown Loafers":

Some years ago, before the big operations for heart and cancer that undermined him, long before he took his life, my great sad friend discovered the obsessive pleasures of fine clothing. Shirts, jackets, ties, accessories, shoes... They were his midlife capering, his solace, his way of contending with what all of us at this stage contend with—the profound gut feeling of the ebb. He didn't restrict himself completely to fashion. There was a sporty car, too—he drove it top-down like a pasha, not at all concerned that doing this fulfilled so exactly the cartoon cliché of the male animal's last stand...

This essay, like the rest of the essays that make up the chapters of this book, are the opposite of cliché. They aren't tied up in neat packages for the reader—harsher critics might even question whether they have a point.

They do have a point. But like most of life, they don't have ah-hah conclusions. They are, rather, more humble. Like life.

It's a book for patient readers, who can savor the fineness of the author's saying, "midlife capering" rather than skimming over "midlife crisis." I enjoyed it, in the same way I enjoy letters from my family - letters that give me insight into another person's life. That said, I am a reader who typically expects to be entertained a bit more than this collection of essays entertained. It will never be widely read, for that reason—just like poetry doesn't make the best-seller lists.

Recommended for those readers who don't demand vampires, magic, werewolves, nuclear disaster, or other popular thrills of the day.
