



What Narcissism Means to Me

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An eagerly awaited new collection of poems by contemporary favorite Tony Hoagland, author of Donkey Gospel

*How did I come to believe in a government called Tony Hoagland?
With an economy based on flattery and self-protection?
and a sewage system of selective forgetting?
and an extensive history of broken promises?
--from "Argentina"*

In *What Narcissism Means to Me*, award-winning poet Tony Hoagland levels his particular brand of acute irony not only on the personal life, but also on some provinces of American culture. In playful narratives, lyrical outbursts, and overheard conversations, Hoagland cruises the milieu, exploring the spiritual vacancies of American satisfaction. With humor, rich tonal complexity, and aggressive moral intelligence, these poems bring pity to our folly and celebrate our resilience.

What Narcissism Means to Me Details

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Author : Tony Hoagland

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From Reader Review What Narcissism Means to Me for online ebook

Michael Meyerhofer says

I had the wonderful pleasure of seeing Tony Hoagland read at a conference in Austin, TX, and I can say without exaggeration that it was one of the most inspiring events I've ever attended. It's a sad truth that at many writing conferences, one can experience almost as much disappointment as they do elation. With Hoagland, though, there's no need to worry.

Hoagland's work is gutsy, comical, dark yet hopeful, accessible, and tenacious in its quest to clarify the human experience. I immediately purchased all of Hoagland's books, and read each one almost straight through. While I'll admit that the first section of "What Narcissism Means to Me" doesn't, in my opinion, equal the poems in the three sections after, many of the poems in this book--especially "Suicide Song", "Windchime", and "Man Carrying Sofa"--are honestly some of the best poems I've ever read, bar none.

Like all of Hoagland's work, I highly recommend this book!

Armand Cогnetta says

Phone Call

Maybe I overdid it
when I called my father an enemy of humanity.
That might have been a little strongly put,
a slight exaggeration,

an immoderate description of the person
who at the moment, two thousand miles away,
holding the telephone receiver six inches from his ear,
must have regretted paying for my therapy.

What I meant was that my father
was an enemy of my humanity
and what I meant behind that
was that my father was split
into two people, one of them

living deep inside of me
like a bad king or an incurable disease—
blighting my crops,
striking down my herds,
poisoning my wells—the other
standing in another time zone,
in a kitchen in Wyoming
with bad knees and white hair spouting from his ears.

I don't want to scream forever,

I don't want to live without proportion
Like some kind of infection from the past,

so I have to remember the second father,
the one whose TV dinner is getting cold
while he holds the phone in his left hand
and stares blankly out the window

where just now the sun is going down
and the last fingertips of sunlight
are withdrawing from the hills
they once touched like a child.

Tina says

Why am I the only person who doesn't like this piece of crap collection? It only got two stars b/c there were a few poems I liked, or liked parts of. But overall, I think the title goes beyond just being clever and really says it all: this collection is obnoxiously self-centered and self-indulgent. And I don't find the commentary on America particularly intelligent, considering that what he basically says is we're materialistic (no, really?) and like drama and pity parties. There's also some subtle sexism here, and some not-so-subtle racism (particularly in a poem where he likens Venus Williams to a giant black beast), and while I'm sure Hoagland will claim irony, I call bullshit. It's extra upsetting to me, b/c I thought *Donkey Gospel* was a brilliant collection and I know Hoagland is capable of great poetry. But this is a lousy, clumsy, arrogant collection that proves once more that well-known poets can get anything published. Shame on you, Tony.

James Murphy says

I came to Tony Hoagland in February snow. He's warmed my reading since. Discovering the work of a writer new to you--here a poet--is thrilling. Like new love. Returning each day to *What Narcissism Means to Me* was to quench the impatience felt before picking it up again, then to be relieved in its pages as it once again both satisfied and became the target of my devotion. Time after time, poem after poem, my affection for Hoagland and his poetry proved to be warranted. Too, like new love, his poems become celebrations. That's not to say he doesn't recognize dark in the world. But he uses humor and his quirky take on what he sees as the whetstone on which to sharpen the sensibilities of his vision and therefore to trim the shadow of what's askew in the world, so that silence is always a clever thing to say, or a woman hanging a windchime in nightie and work boots still has a kissable mouth, even if it has a nail in it. His silk and silver language has an edge as sharp as a rainbow's arc. If the pot at the end is overflowing and sticky with the grim grit of reality, it's not as if we didn't already know it. And we don't care, anyway, because the crackle of his words bring electric colors that dazzle the mind and illuminate the world we live in. Excellent poetry does that, and Tony Hoagland writes it.

Ken says

At this point I've read more of Tony Hoagland the Essay Writer (about Poetry) than I have Tony Hoagland the Poet. Of this collection, I can vouch for one poem most of all -- a poem I enjoy sharing with my students.

As it is commonly available on the web, I'll add it here:

"America"

*Then one of the students with blue hair and a tongue stud
Says that America is for him a maximum-security prison*

*Whose walls are made of RadioShacks and Burger Kings, and MTV episodes
Where you can't tell the show from the commercials,*

*And as I consider how to express how full of shit I think he is,
He says that even when he's driving to the mall in his Isuzu*

*Trooper with a gang of his friends, letting rap music pour over them
Like a boiling Jacuzzi full of ballpeen hammers, even then he feels*

*Buried alive, captured and suffocated in the folds
Of the thick satin quilt of America*

*And I wonder if this is a legitimate category of pain,
or whether he is just spin doctoring a better grade,*

*And then I remember that when I stabbed my father in the dream last night,
It was not blood but money*

*That gushed out of him, bright green hundred-dollar bills
Spilling from his wounds, and—this is the weird part—,*

*He gasped "Thank god—those Ben Franklins were
Clogging up my heart—*

*And so I perish happily,
Freed from that which kept me from my liberty"—*

*Which was when I knew it was a dream, since my dad
Would never speak in rhymed couplets,*

*And I look at the student with his acne and cell phone and phony ghetto clothes
And I think, "I am asleep in America too,*

*And I don't know how to wake myself either,"
And I remember what Marx said near the end of his life:*

*"I was listening to the cries of the past,
When I should have been listening to the cries of the future."*

*But how could he have imagined 100 channels of 24-hour cable
Or what kind of nightmare it might be*

*When each day you watch rivers of bright merchandise run past you
And you are floating in your pleasure boat upon this river*

*Even while others are drowning underneath you
And you see their faces twisting in the surface of the waters*

*And yet it seems to be your own hand
Which turns the volume higher?*

I like the images and the imagination in this poem. It seems... dense with ideas. I wish all of the poems in this collection were this way. Trouble is, only some are. Others are, I don't know, rather pedestrian. Here's a stanza, for instance, from the poem "On the CD I Buy for My Brother":

*"...and the singer is a loner with a boner
and he's a Gomer and a moaner and a longtime roamer
and the moon in his rearview reminds him of a redhead
in Natchez with a little anorexia problem
who danced the hooch coochie clad in just a green bandana.*

Well, OK. Kind of conversational stuff at times. And you wish for a bit more on the concrete side and you hope for a lot more on the figurative side but it's only sometimes there.

That said, isn't it the nature of collections to be uneven? Are there ever "Greatest Hits" collections, where you get America-d to death, cover to cover? Rhetorical questions, of course.

James says

Here rests another instance where comedy reveals itself to simply be just sentimental realism; not that there is something that is "just" comedy. Despite what you might take the title to suggest, Hoagland tempts fairness, picking on himself as well as others: family, friends, popular music, enemies, trains. Regardless of whether narcissism is in fact "a heroic achievement in positive thinking," Hoagland's voice reads triumphant.

Helen says

Hoagland's poetry reaches across many topics, from the AIDS epidemic to race to the Station fire in Warwick Rhode Island, which killed 100 people in 2009.

You'd think that with such heavily weighed topics that Narcissism would be a serious, quiet tone. You'd be incorrect in that thinking. There are tough questions asked by these poems, but there is also a keen sense of humor, alighter touch of hope. The last poem, The Time Wars, ends with the lines:

We ourselves aren't thinking about the future anymore.
What we want is to calm time down, to get time in a good mood,
to make time feel wanted.
We just want to give time many homemade gifts,
covered with fingerprints and kisses.

And by this time, after analyzing throughout the book the mistakes of the past and the troubles of the present, the reader is ready to do the same. To let time take care of itself, but to give time a little nudge in the right direction, with love.

Taryntaryn says

I've always been overwhelmed by poetry, unsure of where to 'start', and the poetry I have been exposed to has been so overwrought and self-conscious that I foolishly dismissed the medium.

Tony Hoagland has been a great introduction.

On one page his piece might be playful, reworking cliques about American identity, and then turn to personal, heavier material like "Suicide Song". His ability to span such a wide scale with such simple language is irresistible.

Tony Hoagland makes poetry seem easy.

Melting Uncle says

21st century poetry..... Tony H is incredible!

Carmyn says

I've read some pretty amazing poems by Hoagland and so I had big hopes for this book. What I discovered is something I already knew: when I read poem after poem by the same author they have less impact, less punch. Yet, I believe if I'd read one at a time, savoring each over my morning coffee, perhaps I might have fallen more deeply in love with them all.

Still I enjoyed this book. I wasn't sure at first. It occurred to me that I probably should have read Donkey Gospel first, but I'd already started my journey into Narcissism. The book is divided into four sections: America, Social Life, Blues, and Luck. I thought some of the America poems struck a chord. There is always a nugget -- a tangle of lines -- that speaks to me in nearly every poem and that is how I know I love Tony Hoagland. Yet, I haven't found a poem that reads like "Jet" did when first it was thrust into my world. By the time I got to the Blues section of poems I decided I loved this book after all.

Some specifics from the America poems...

"Commercial for a Summer Night" -- ultimately I didn't love this poem. I could see it and hear it. The images resonated and made me smile. What I did like was the turn at the end... how they were actually a commercial for THEIR lives.

"America" -- I liked what I thought was the "message" of this poem. But, it took me awhile to get there. The bit that did it for me were the lines about his dream from the night before:

...And then I remember that when I stabbed my father in the dream last night,
It was not blood, but money

That gushed out of him, bright green hundred-dollar bills
Spilling from his wounds, and--this is the weird part--,

He gasped, "Thank god--those Ben Franklins were

Clogging up my heart--

And so I perish happily,
Freed from that which kept me from my liberty"--

Which is when I knew it was a dream, since my dad
would never speak in rhymed couplets,

Tony Hoagland's poetry in this volume and in this section is heavy on the use of proper names--Larry, Greg, Alex, Susan, Sylvia, Ann, Peter, Carla, Jerry, Neal.

Some specifics on Social Life ...

Of course it only stands to reason that poems on social life would also feature plenty of folks like Carrie, John, Cynthia, Richard and Ann.

"Social Life," the first poem in this selection captures how I often feel at parties:

... whereas I prefer the feeling of going away, going away
stretching out my distance from the voices and the lights
until the tether breaks and I

am in the wild sweet dark
where the sea breeze sizzles in the hedgetop,...

In "A Color of the Sky" I love this bit of imagery:

...Outside the youth center, between the liquor store
and the police station,
a little dogwood tree is losing its mind;

overflowing with blossomfoam,
like a sudsy mug of beer;
like a bride ripping off her clothes,

dropping snow white petals to the ground in clouds,

so Nature's wastefulness seems quietly obscene.
It's been doing that all week:
making beauty,
and throwing it away,
and making more.

"Phone Call" is a poem about a conversation with his father. It's clear that it's a complicated relationship. This poem certainly resonates and I think explains something I find difficult to explain, that in the midst of anger, hatred, disappointment with someone we have to acknowledge something else.

...and what I meant behind that
was that my father was split
into two people, one of them

living deep inside me
like a bad king or an incurable disease--

blighting my crops,
striking down my herds,
poisoning my wells--the other
standing in another time zone,
in a kitchen in Wyoming,
with bad knees and white hair sprouting from his ears...

Some specifics on The Blues section...

"On the CD I Buy for my Brother" is a poem I loved, not at first, but after about 1/2 the poem it all started to come together for me.

Here is a poem that once again demonstrates how Hoagland has a wonderful ease with metaphor.

... I mean this guy is always rowing upstream on the Bad Luck River
with a rusty hubcap for a paddle

or looking downward from the precipice of I'm No Good
at the base of which an ocean of whiskey and beer
has been performing erosion for years,

so it's possible that I am doing my brother no favor
by appealing to certain tendencies already in his disposition,

but then, why should I try to improve him on his birthday?
when at this stage of our lives what we are and what we aren't
is so very apparent...

"Two Trains" is also a wonderful poem about how people will interpret things--songs and poems--differently
and are they really right or wrong?

In "Poem in Which I Make the Mistake of Comparing Billie Holiday to a Cosmic Washerwoman" he
describes her sounds, her singing:

... she was singing a song I never heard before,
moving her voice like water moving
along the shore of a lake,
reaching gently into the crevices, touching the pebbles and sand...

...But here in the past of that future,
Billie Holiday is still singing
a song so dark and slow
it seems bigger than her, it sounds very heavy

like a terrible stain soaked into the sheets,
so deep that nothing will ever get it out,
but she keeps trying,

she keeps pushing the dark syllables under the water
then pulling them up to see if they are clean
but they never are

and it makes her sad
and we are too...

"Suicide Song" is a poem which explains so well my own thoughts on the issue. I think this is great pleasure in poetry, songs, stories--when we see ourselves reflected back--a thought or a feeling that is stated better than we could ever state it ourselves.

Some specifics on Luck...

"The News" explores a lot of different topics and is an example of a poem I'm not entirely sure I "get" still I can appreciate the bits and pieces... the part about health and tattoos are my favorite bits.

..This year illness just flirted with me,
picking me up and putting me down
like a cat with a ball of yarn,
so I walked among the living like a tourist,
and I wore my health
like a borrowed shirt,
knowing I would probably have to give it back...

I think "Narcissus Lullaby" is clever and lovely. And I did it too, midway through the poem I softly said his name...

And "Physiology of Kisses" is wonderful. It makes me thirsty for a few kisses of my own.

And finally in "The Time Wars" I loved this last bit...

...On June 14th, 1940, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal,
"Windy day. I am the hare, far ahead of my critics, the hounds."
Something endearing about the mixture of weather report and vanity.
Something lonely about this image of success...

Check out Tony Hoagland. If you enjoy contemporary poetry, he's surely worth a read. I may have to add this volume to my collection after all.

Steven says

Before reading this book, I had only encountered a few of Hoagland's poems individually and read an essay he wrote about metaphor. One of those poems, "America," was so moving to me that I decided to pick this collection up, as it includes that poem. Fortunately, it did not disappoint. Hoagland's friendly tone and geeky straight guy persona make him a direct descendant of John Berryman and in a class with contemporaries such as Billy Collins and Dean Young. Like the aforementioned, his poetry drifts from commenting on his life and the life of an intimate group of friends and colleagues around him to pulling apart pop culture (the serious parts of it as well, with a few poems taking a direct but naïve approach to racism). He is also adept at

pulling off extended metaphor poems, such as the seethingly funny “Hate Hotel” (51-52). His only fault is one he shares with Young, which is that some of the poems meander a bit too much and never connect or make a strong point; there are still plenty of vivid images and fresh language, it just doesn’t build to anything. Despite this, Hoagland’s aw-shucks philosophizing won me over in the end and made me read several of the poems multiple times. I’ll be interested to check out his earlier books and see how they compare to this one.

As I read this book, I thought about how poets such as Hoagland and Collins get labeled “accessible,” which sometimes is perceived as an easy way to write. Certain schools of contemporary poetry, such as the Language poets, continue to write challenging verse that pushes the boundaries of language and meaning, which can show how staggeringly high functioning the human mind can be, but also perpetually alienates all but the most discerning readers from being able to read and process it. I feel that somehow that type of writing gets put on a higher level in the academic hierarchy and poets such as Hoagland are de-valued because more people can pick up his book and feel something. To me, this thinking forgets how difficult it is to write a poem that shows the complexities of human existence in simple, relatable terms. Of course, I understand that the danger in calling Hoagland and Collins “accessible” is that it often becomes synonymous with “universal,” which the straight white males have had the pleasure of being perceived as since the dawn of writing. And I also know that poets who aspire to write in Hoagland’s camp throw just as much fire back at those “academic snobs.” I guess I wish that both sides of this spectrum would recognize the value in the others’ writing and admit what it adds to the rich quilt of American literature.

Reading this book also made me consider the positives and negatives of writing to a specific audience successfully, regardless of whether that audience exists or not. Hoagland’s persona in this book speaks to a group of men that I feel are getting increasingly bigger in American popular culture: the cool straight guy, the metrosexual, the evolved masculinity. He’s comfortable enough to admit he can love a gay man as a friend (“Dear John,” 29-30); he admits to his feelings of racism and prejudice in order to deal with them head on (“The Change,” 11-13 and “Rap Music,” 49-50) and he can show emotional vulnerability to his wife (“Physiology of Kisses,” 70). However, to those of us who have had to face these challenges earlier in our lives (because of NOT being straight, white men), some of these poems come across as precious, as in “isn’t it cute, he’s learning the world is a mighty big place.” Plus, the fact that Hoagland keeps getting published begs the question, have these “new men” evolved so much they may actually be reading poetry? Although I’m doubtful, it’s something to hope for, so I wish Hoagland a long career and along the way, maybe a few not-so evolved men will see his book on their buddy’s shelf, pick it up and be nudged a little closer to the rest of us. We need that in this country right now.

carolyn says

ahhhh I love Tony Hoagland's poetry. It speaks to my bones and makes me laugh and weep. I love the myriad of ways he describes sunsets: a stain of watermelon juice spreading across a blue shirt, like cranberry sauce poured over yellow hills, the sky with its inflamed clouds looking like it's got an infection.

satisfying

Kristin Garcia says

Tony Hoagland’s poems in *What Narcissism Means to Me* shows us that poetry can still be possible during anytime period and enjoyed at any age. He reaches into society’s current topics and ideas and pulls out a real unapologetic interpretation. As the reader and an American, we secretly enjoy him “calling us out”. He brings our unconscious opinions to our attention and by doing this unites the reader to the poem.

Something has to quickly appeal to me at the beginning of the poem to draw me in. In *What Narcissism Means to Me*, I was immediately engaged. Hoagland's passionate waywardness somehow represents the truth. That is what drew me in the most. The fact that I could look at almost every poem and not only be able to relate to it, but share the same opinion, made me crave more of Hoagland's poetry. Furthermore, Hoagland addressed topics that gave me a different outlook that I would have before overlooked.

My first discovery of Tony Hoagland was when I read his poem, "Commercial for a Summer Night". Not only are Hoagland's poem titles inviting, but also they deliver the same attractiveness of the poem. For example his title, "Poem Which I Make the Mistake of Comparing Billie Holiday to a Cosmic Washerwoman" or "Wasteful Gesture Only Not" matched with line: "She knows her mother isn't there but the rectangle of grass/marks off the place where the memories are kept, / like a library book named *Dorothy*. / Some of the chapters might be; *Dorothy/ Better Bird-Watcher Than Cook;/ Dorothy, Wife and Atheist;/ Passionate Recycler Dorothy, Here Lies But Not*".

My four favorite poems out of *What Narcissism Means to Me* are: "Rap Music", "Social Life", "Hate Hotel", and "Impossible Dream". Each of these poems put social norms under a microscope, and then are dissected by Hoagland. His use of imagery in these poems place the reader in the scene. "Twenty-six men trapped in a submarine/ are pounding on the walls with a metal pipe, / shouting what they'll do when they get out. / Or they are rolled up in a rug in the back/ of a rug truck that is wrecked. / No, it's the car pulled up next to me in traffic." This image of two separate situations sets a sarcastic tone that is led up to a honest judgment.

Hoagland's metaphors describe America's personality like an eHarmony application (if America was sincere and desperate to find true love). The certainty of his poems though his use of real issues and taken risks, represent truth. For example, also in "Rap Music", the line "more alarming that going down Niagara on Viagra-" or in the poem "Hate Hotel" with the line, "I sip my soft drink of hate on the rocks" or "Sometimes I like to sit and soak/ in the Jacuzzi of my hate". I don't mean to give away the whole book with quotes, but the words are what draw me in and get me excited to share.

Tony Hoagland's *What Narcissism Means to Me* is one of the few books I can pick up and re-read several times. It brings humor to contemporary issues but isn't just funny. It is the substance and spot on individuality of his poems that truly make for memorable reading.

Nikki says

Liked the funny, conversational tone. Didn't like the weird race shit.

Krzysztof says

Last Review About Race (For Now)

There's a poem here about a big black woman playing tennis with a small white woman and how Tony's friend wanted the black woman to win and how Tony couldn't help but root for the white woman. He's imagining the match as a representation of times past and ends by pointing out that feelings of tribal solidarity have no place in the 21st century.

When I first read it, it made me uncomfortable. I imagined the black woman as a Robert Crumb drawing: all pink lips and gorilla features. I read some reviews here and more than one criticized Hoagland's depiction of the black woman as a "beast" or an "animal".

But the thing is: that never happened.

I went back and looked at the poem, and that description isn't there. It's not even hinted at.

I don't know how to break this to you guys, but this is a problem, and I think it's what Hoagland was trying to get at. We have a host of preconceptions and with them an artillery of side-steps and diversion tactics. I think it's what "white privilege" really is, in that it's white people most often employing the term and if you hint at a "methinks thou doth protest too much", prepare to be eviscerated, because "only a bigot would question another's racial bias."

I belong to a sect of society that would describe Hoagland's poem as "another white guy trying to talk about race" and, while I don't find the poem to be terribly delicate, I am disturbed by my initial willingness to go along with that sentiment.

A couple of days ago, I reviewed Tim Seibles's book "Fast Animal" and the issues with calling Seibles an "African American poet." For different reasons and so for the same reasons, these designations have got to go. Good. Bad. Crass. Understated. Fine. If the author isn't using an Argument from Race, why do we try to attribute everything that way?

I was just reading an interview with Owen Pallett about the Arcade Fire's album Reflektor. If you're not familiar, that album is all kinds of supported and attacked for reasons of "cultural appropriation". But that's just a term bandied about by the paranoid and self-effacing. Pallett says that "talking about people's skin color is a very uniquely American thing." I don't know much about that. Can someone confirm? I can say, though, that it's not *not* an American thing. I think it comes from the right place, but in coming from that place, it takes a hideous detour and winds up in a distorted realm that obscures the path back and where the mere mention of being lost gets you strung up by your toes and lashed with unfair accusations.
