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From Reader Review Private Demons: The Life of Shirley Jackson for online ebook

Pamfrommd says

This was a wonderful biography, satisfying in all ways. I've been reading lots of Shirley Jackson in the last year or so and have enjoyed all of it, if "enjoyed" is the right word. She writes about disturbing and disturbed people in such ordinary settings that I am always a bit off center for weeks after I finish a novel. This biography helps explain her dark mind, and it gives a very intimate look into her marriage and childhood. It felt almost voyeuristic, which I guess is the point of a biography. My only qualification is that the author seems to attribute almost mystical powers to Miss Jackson, powers that I'm not totally sure I believe are likely or possible. But I suspect Miss Jackson would approve of all of it.

Aida Ghazar says

Private Demons is a well balanced biography of Shirley Jackson.

Shirley Jackson was a very gifted writer. As a child she was domineered by her mother, who saw a Victorian style of life, ideal for her daughter and this attitude of hers towards Shirley was continued for the rest of Shirley's life. Through letters she sent Shirley, she tried to impose her ideas and criticized her constantly over her obesity and other aspects of her life.

Then it was her husband Stanley Hyman, the literary critic, who "was also horrendously domineering, even tyrannical and worst of all an inveterate, incorrigible flirt", which hurt Shirley and caused her too much pain. There was also the very rigid, conservative neighborhood of North Bennington, New England where the Hymans were living in, who looked with contempt and as outsiders, at Shirley, her husband, and their four children. Their leading a bohemian style of life, was not acceptable in the 50s and 60s America. Not only the Hymans were not believers; moreover Stanley Hyman was a Jew and they had a very close black friend writer, Ralph Ellison among others, both issues were not acceptable in the domineering white America of the time. Moreover Shirley Jackson was not an average American Housewife: "In her memoir, a clerk asks Jackson, as she arrives at the hospital to give birth to her third child, to state her occupation "Writer", she says. "I'll just put down housewife." The clerk insists".

Shirley was angry, sad and helpless and most of all felt lonely.

Being very sensitive, she felt imprisoned in the layers and layers of all those cruelties aimed at her. On the one hand, she was desperate to gain her parents approval even when she was a mother of four, and already a distinguished writer "being Shirley, she wanted it with an intensity that did not fade with time, unfortunately it was the one thing she could not get". On the other hand there was her husband's infidelities she was to bear and tackle with.

"Lonely, unhappy, Shirley, turned to the one place she felt comfortable and powerful—the fascinating country of her own mind".

The author of Lottery and We Have Always Lived in the Castle among others, used her strong imagination, and claiming herself to be a 'psychic' and having the ability to see beyond reality, she turned to writing as a relief, and thus created the most beautiful, 'suspense and psychological horror' books of all time. At least she could take her revenge in this way. The protagonists in her books were the people she dealt with and herself.

Shirley Jackson died in 1965 when she was only 48 years old.

Judy Oppenheimer had portrayed a very colorful picture of Shirley Jackson, the era she lived in, her literary works and the influences she had, but I believe the author could have written more on her literary works. This book was a good read, though very sad.

Shaun says

An amazing and tragic woman who led an amazing and tragic life.

I have become a huge fan of Shirley Jackson, so much so, that I decided to read this, her only biography, and I am happy to say I was so not disappointed.

A philandering husband with a complacent if not accepting wife, witchcraft, voodoo, frequent and lively drunken parties, prescribed amphetamine and tranquilizer abuse, an overbearing and disapproving mother, weekend front-yard ballgames with J.D. Salinger and Ralph Ellison, a haunted old farmhouse, a brilliant and prolific writer and her brilliant albeit acerbic husband who share a deep and profound connection and mutual admiration, mental illness, a house filled with cats, dogs, and children, culminating in the all-too-soon death of a gifted mind, all this and more, for the most part, set in a small Vermont town abound with anti-Semitism.

Though it's not always easy to tell where fact ends and speculation begins in this very sensationalized recount of Shirley Jackson's life, I think anyone familiar with her work will connect with Judy Oppenheimer's portrayal of Shirley Jackson.

While there is some analysis of Jackson's writing and discussion of her writing habits, this isn't a book simply about Shirley the writer, but also about Shirley the woman, mother, and wife.

The bottom line: Shirley Jackson was a fascinating and complex person who lived a conventional life unconventionally, and left a wonderful legacy in the form of her writing, which likely served as a means to exorcise her many private demons. If even a fraction of this biography comes close to the reality of her life, I am even more wowed and impressed by her than I was before.

Would definitely recommend this to Shirley Jackson fans who are interested in the woman behind the writer and are willing to read it with a grain of salt, although, I'm not sure you have to be a fan to be drawn into this intensely captivating story of a life that ended way too soon.

Carrie says

Interesting for fans of Jackson, but I'll look forward to the new biography this fall and hope that it's more insightful. Oppenheimer's style is oddly gossipy and judgmental, hammering on the fact that Shirley was unattractive, and the text meticulously tracks her weight gains and losses through different parts of her life. We're left in no doubt that she was "dumpy," "ugly," and a poor housekeeper, and that these things are major flaws. It takes a conscious effort when reading to at least partially set aside one's feminist horror (truly, Stanley sounds an insufferable boor) and look at their life together for what it was. There are loads of interviews with friends and family, credible in some ways, but many events are presented as vaguely remembered years later by whoever was around, drinking with the Hymans till the alcohol ran out. Shirley, though, was still at a distance. Something felt missing - perhaps a more critical look at her writing and some of the influences that are described here with an almost condescending wink to the reader.

Carol says

I found this a moving, fluent account of writer Shirley Jackson's life. I've always been interested to understand the intersection of her life and her fiction. What I got was a sense of her feeling like an outsider in small town, 1950s Bennington and as an "academic wife." I loved the description of her walking back up to her house from a day shopping with one of her small children, composing "The Lottery." I also found moving her struggles with mental illness which she eventually combatted with writing. I would have liked more of a critical analysis of the novels and I'm surprised there hasn't been a more recent biography. This is a good one, though, and I'd recommend it to anyone who loves Jackson's work or who's just interested in the creative process.

Ellen says

I really enjoyed this book. Even if one hasn't read her work, I think anyone interested in reading about writers or anyone who is empathetic with those that are struggling with demons, feel like an outsider, or are trying to get out from under a highly critical mother will find this interesting. I highly recommend it for those who have read her work as it explains a lot. Reading the description of the San Francisco suburb where Jackson was an adolescent you know before you are told that this is the setting for "The Road Through The Wall". Oppenheimer had access to Jackson's papers in the Library of Congress and, in this case, it was a good thing that she was a hoarder. It seems like family and friends were very open during interviews, especially her children with their thoughts and feelings about both their parents as well as their own lives.

Lee Anne says

A well-researched biography, from the 1980s, about one of my favorite authors. I learned a great deal, and it led me to buy a few Jackson short stories I didn't yet have. I'd love to know more about what her children are doing now, though, as when they're left here, they still seem to be figuring things out.

Anyway, this book is the perfect antidote to the horrible fictionalized suspense novel that was written about Shirley Jackson a year or so ago. I was going to mention it by name, but it doesn't deserve it.

Paul Bryant says

Advice to women, 1933:

*Keep young and beautiful
It's your duty to be beautiful
Keep young and beautiful
If you want to be loved, dah-dah-dah-dah*

*Don't fail to do your stuff
With a little powder and a puff
Keep young and beautiful*

If you want to be loved

*If you're wise, exercise all the fat off
Take it off, off of here, off of there
When you're seen anywhere with your hat off
Have a permanent wave in your hair*

*Take care of all those charms
And you'll always be in someone's arms
Keep young and beautiful
If you want to be loved*

Advice to women 1963 :

*Hey, little girl, comb your hair, fix your make-up.
Soon he will open the door.
Don't think because there's a ring on your finger,
You needn't try any more*

*For wives should always be lovers, too.
Run to his arms the moment he comes home to you.
I'm warning you.*

*Day after day, there are girls at the office,
And men will always be men.
Don't send him off with your hair still in curlers.
You may not see him again.*

Shirley Jackson was born in 1916 and died at the age of 48 from a heart attack brought on by obesity. She didn't keep young and beautiful and she didn't fix her make-up or comb her hair a great deal, and our author is keen that you know about these transgressions – never have I read a biography which has such a fascinated horror in its subject's outward appearance :

A woman who wore no make-up, rarely combed her hair, and gave a clear impression she had put all personal physical vanity behind her

Or

At the time, Shirley was overweight, as usual, but far from enormous. She had not yet begun – as she would later – to let herself go.

Or

She was fat, she wore no make-up, and her hair was held straight back from her face with a rubber band. The face itself, with its square jaw and heavy jowls, was severe, almost masculine in its lines. It was an arresting face, a face that radiated intelligence, but it was not a pretty one

Shirley got married to the one and only love of her life and this excellent no-nonsense biography is almost as much about him as it is about her.

SHE MIGHT HAVE BEEN FAT BUT HE WAS A NIGHTMARE

Stanley Hyman was a total nightmare in every way except one – he was her biggest fan, thought she was a genius, never stopped being in awe of her, praised her to the skies everywhere he went. That sounds pretty supportive, right? What female writer wouldn't want to be married to a guy like that? He was one of those Saul Bellow types – loud, boorish, militantly atheistic Jewish (which freaked her wasp parents right out) intellectuals who read everything, eat everything, drink everything, know everything, party every night, and of course want to sleep with everyone. He was a college lecturer. He had advanced views. He was homely but exciting.

LIFE WITH STANLEY

His advanced views did not extend to the marital sphere. He had very exacting views on the duties of a wife.

Her department : all cooking, shopping, chauffeuring, cleaning, child and pet care. (Shirley had many many cats).

His department : making sure she kept up her departments; thinking great thoughts; chasing young women; playing poker with the boys.

We used to think What kind of dope is she? She's the one making money, and so brilliant, and she's saying "Yes, Stanley" and shivering over everything he said.

For anybody other than Shirley, Stanley would have been absolutely impossible to live with. I remember sort of resenting the fact that she would comply with outrageous demands he made.

Oh, what could be so bad? I hear he was never violent. True, but what about a life like this:

A neighbour was out on his porch and saw Shirley, hugely pregnant, struggling up Prospect Street, carrying mail, newspapers and two bags of groceries. He was about to go down and offer a hand when Stanley burst out of the house and ran down the street to meet her. But to Fred Welling's horror, instead of relieving her, Stanley carefully removed the mail from her hand and trotted back up the street. Shirley, still clutching her bags, continued to trudge up the street.

A friend commented:

I'm not sure she minded. She was so used to Stanley doing things like that.

Shirley : *Whenever I am very mad at Stanley, I go into his study and move one of his ashtrays a quarter of an inch to one side.*

Note : there was always a room in each house they lived in called Stanley's study. Not one called Shirley's study, even though she was the best selling author.

Both she and Stanley were able to stay up later than anyone, drink more, play more games [poker, bridge and Monopoly were the big ones], yet still get more work done. And Shirley was also running a house, cooking, cleaning, entertaining, handling the kids, scurrying around to serve Stanley. "Shirley!" he would bellow from his study. "I have no ink in my pen!"

Not to mention the perpetual hanky panky.

Stanley was a steamroller. He'd try something with every woman, every which way. He wasn't seducing

women so much as knocking them down with heavy blows.

Judy Oppenheimer gives us to understand that most of these liaisons happened in Stanley's imagination, but still.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BRITAIN AND AMERICA

When Stanley got a job at Bennington College in Vermont they moved from an apartment in NYC to a FOURTEEN ROOM HOUSE in Bennington which they rented for \$50 a month which the internet tells me is the equivalent of \$730 now, i.e. amazingly cheap. I have never been in a house with fourteen rooms! Unless you count the stately homes of England. America – it's a crazy place!

SHIRLEY WASN'T SO PERFECT EITHER

No, quite so! Apart from neglecting her appearance, she was a poor 14-room-mansion-keeper.

Her own house was the filthiest place I have ever seen, rolls of dust. I remember once at a party getting tired and trying to fall asleep on Shirley's couch – the smell of cat pee would wake you up, it was incredible. And in the refrigerator, nasty little jars of stuff that had been there for three months, mould on top.

THEY ENTERTAINED ALL THE TIME

In the midst of producing four kids, six novels, umpteen short stories, memoirs, a book on witchcraft, etc etc, and the cooking cleaning, etc, they threw house parties night after night. Even reading about this stuff makes me feel tired.

A WAY OF LIFE

They smoked and they ate and they drank – they both said “We want to live this way.” The doctor implored them to lose weight. They just said “We know we're going to die at the age of 50 – and we're going to live this way.”

ANOTHER CREEPY ANECDOTE

She would come to New York with him and we'd go to lunch, maybe four or five times a year And he would encourage her to eat, urge food on her. Thick cream pies. She was very fat, maybe 250 pounds. I had to watch him stuffing her like a goose.

THE LOTTERY

“The Lottery”, published in The New Yorker in June 1948, was the literary equivalent of “Heartbreak Hotel” by Elvis.

Nothing in the magazine before or since would provoke such an unprecedented outpouring of fury, horror, rage, disgust and intense fascination.

SJ : *The number of people who expected Mrs Hutchinson to win a Bendix washer at the end would amaze you.*

ONE ORDINARY DAY WITH PEANUTS

Here's one of my favourites by Shirley:

<http://locustforkhs.blount.k12.al.us/...>

HEALTH WARNING :

This book is not recommended for feminists with high blood pressure.

Terry says

Shirley Jackson has always been a favorite author, so I thought I'd check out her autobiography. I'm pretty sure this is the only one out there, so definitely worth the read for Jackson fans. While a very good read, with photos of Jackson and her family, there's something about Oppenheimer's writing style I didn't like. And I can't even explain what it was. As far as biographies go, this is a good one, just not one of the best. It does give a great peak into the life and mind of Jackson, drawing comparison between what she was experiencing in real life and what she was writing about at the time.

Claire says

We Have Always Lived in the Castle, has been my favourite book since I read it about two years ago, and knowing very little of its author, Shirley Jackson, I picked up this biography knowing that I was already interested in finding out more about her.

That still doesn't mean that I would like Private Demons, but I did. Comprehensive and well written, I was hooked from beginning to end. Although everyone raves about The Lottery, or at least they did when it was released, I think this is in part because of the date it was published; whereas, I think Jackson was just getting into her stride with Castle, and so it is such a tragedy that she died at only 48, especially when it seems there is much she could have done physically to prevent her own death.

Private Demons was a fascinating insight into her life, family and writing.

noelle says

i don't read a lot of biographies because i don't give a shit about most people, but shirley jackson is unequivocally my favorite author and i want to know everything there is to know about her. this is a fairly well-rounded picture of her life, from her birth until death, her family, and her major and minor works. i wish there was more in depth information about some of her books & stories but unfortunately i guess that doesn't quite exist.

Beth E says

I find this book fascinating, and Shirley Jackson's life is fascinating.

However, there is fat-shaming on nearly every page. There should be a balance between describing Shirley's own reactions to her weight, when it is relevant, and the reactions of everyone else in the world. The book even describes that strangers were horrified at her appearance, because it isn't what they imagined an author should look like!

Terry says

This *feels* like such a complete work that I'm rather surprised there is a new biography of Shirley Jackson in the works, though Ruth Franklin (the new biographer) states in a 2014 interview with *Biographile* that there was a lot of archival material Oppenheimer didn't have access to. I am DEFINITELY looking forward to Franklin's biography. In the meantime, as I said, Oppenheimer's book feels pretty thorough; it does lean quite heavily on interviews with her children, which... I don't know how unbiased such information can be. It was interesting to read this book at the same time I was reading the collection *Let Me Tell You*. Jackson worked in such a huge range of genres and styles--she seemed to move so effortlessly from 1950s/1960s-wry-housewifely observations to chilling mythical allegories to caustic-yet-heartbreaking portraits of weakness--that her achievements seem sadly underrated today despite the continuing fame of "The Lottery". The only downside to this book (aside from perhaps an overreliance on the children as sources) is a bit of a brash, gossipy style that I associate with late 1970s/early 1980s biographies.

For Sylvia Plath fanatics--I'm a bit surprised Plath never seemed to take up Jackson as a model for either her fiction or her "Good Housekeeping"-type essays on parenting--they seemed to have quite a lot in common, including a fiery intellect and wickedly acerbic feelings about co-eds chasing after their husbands (well: wickedly acerbic feelings about just about everyone, really). Hmmm.

Bhan13 says

I enjoy reading an author's work, a memoir or autobiography (I read and discussed a bunch of Shirley Jackson's short stories recently and 'Life Among the Savages'), then a biography to help me understand it all better and I found Oppenheimer's biography illuminating. I'm looking forward to reading a book of criticism and essays on Jackson's work next, then more of her stories.

tortoise dreams says

A biography of Shirley Jackson (1916-65), the author of "The Lottery" and *The Haunting of Hill House*.

The lives of authors aren't always that interesting, but *Private Demons* was definitely interesting, and Shirley Jackson's life was definitely not what I expected. Shirley Jackson is best known for writing "The Lottery," one of the most mystifying and anthologized American short stories, and *The Haunting of Hill House*, as well as other novels. *Private Demons* is a well written and quick reading biography that gives a complete history of Jackson's short life, as well as numerous key insights into her writing. Not that her writing was literally autobiographical, but reading the facts of her life opens up the reader's understanding of her fiction. As Judy Oppenheimer notes about Jackson: "No longer was she simply transcribing from reality ... now she was becoming adept at taking the bare bones of reality and giving them a twist, infusing them with some of the fears and horrors and distortions swirling around in her own mind." Jackson's family took an immense amount of her time: she was not a solitary recluse pounding away at a typewriter in a garret. It's a wonder she

wrote at all. She was surrounded by her four children, who both informed and influenced her writing. She had a lifelong difficult relationship with her mother. Most challenging, however, was her husband, who Jackson credited with enabling her to publish, but readers will make their own conclusions about his complex effect on her writing. Jackson and her family lived in North Bennington, Vermont, and her husband taught at Bennington College. The town was a major element in some of her writing, including the novel *Hangsaman*, which was set at the College (as was Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*; Tartt attended Bennington College). *Private Demons* is an excellent and informative biography, which I strongly recommend to any Shirley Jackson fans -- there are many clues to her writing within, tho I'd caution anyone from taking it all too literally. One caveat: although the book seems open and uncensored, it was written with the assistance of Jackson's four children, and I can't speak to whether that had any limiting influences on the author. [5 Stars]
