



Dear Evelyn

Kathy Page

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Born between the wars in a working-class South London street, Harry Miles is a sensitive and capable boy who attends school on a scholarship and grows into a thoughtful young man. Full of energy and literary ambition, he visits Battersea Library in search of *New Writing*: instead, however, he discovers Evelyn, a magnetic and independent-minded woman from a narrow, terraced street not far from his own.

This is a love story, albeit an unconventional one, about two people who shape each other as they, their marriage and their country change. From London before the sexual revolution to the lewd frescos of Pompeii, from the acrid devastation of Churchill's North African campaign to the cloying bounty of new-built suburbs, *Dear Evelyn* is a novel of contrasts, whose portrait of a seventy-year marriage unfolds in tender, spare, and excruciating episodes.

Dear Evelyn Details

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From Reader Review Dear Evelyn for online ebook

Selena Soutter says

Raw and complicated. A difficult read for me, see a lot of uncomfortable parallels between Harry and Evelyn and uncharitable impressions I've had through the years of my own parents. My heart aches for them, and for all of us complicated and contradictory meat puppets thrown at the mercy/cruelty of Time.

HOWEVER, some of the writing technique itself got in the way for me and ultimately dropped the rating by a star. I didn't like Page's propensity for shifting perspectives suddenly from one paragraph or even one sentence to the next, particularly when 3 or 4 characters and their thoughts were involved. It upset the flow, muddied things, made the story being told in that moment unnecessarily convoluted. Also came across at least 3 or 4 significant typos/word omissions, which seemed excessive for such a short novel. Overall just a bit sloppy.

Krista says

Evelyn, her spine straight, her shoulders back, strides ahead with the two girls in her wake, Valerie wobbling along on the scooter he made for Lily.

He soon catches up, walks next to his wife. Dear Evelyn, you are the sweetest wife...he used to write her in his letters home. Dear Evelyn. My dearest.

"Oh –" She looks straight ahead as she speaks. "I thought you said you wanted to be left in peace. And frankly, so do I." Touché. He has to admire her skill with the rapier; though at the same time, it brings him to the brink of tears. Why? What are they doing? Such a waste! He walks beside her, but says nothing.

Dear Evelyn is the story of a seventy year relationship – beginning with the birth of Harry Miles in a “sooty little London terrace house” during WWI and ending with some of Harry's last experiences in a comfortable nursing home. Along the way, we meet Evelyn Hill – a spoiled, headstrong, and beautiful young woman from the same working-class neighbourhood whom Harry finds irresistible – and as they marry, have a family, and move firmly into the middle-class, it's aching to watch as happiness never really finds the pair. If I had a complaint it would be that author Kathy Page felt the need to remind me too many times about the childhood forces that made Evelyn who she was, but I can't deny that watching this couple age together tells a satisfying story of the twentieth century, and ultimately, delivers an emotional wallop. Winner of the 2018 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, *Dear Evelyn* is worth a look.

Unreasonable, he felt, put things mildly – truth was, there was a line between strong-minded and outrageous that Evelyn now crossed with increasing frequency. Though sometimes it was his fault, for goading her. Or, according to his daughters, for letting her get away with murder. Or even, as he admitted to himself, because there were still times when he found Evelyn's anger arousing, and enjoyed making up afterwards...

When Harry was at school, he was the only student who responded to the poetry that their WWI veteran

teacher – wounded in body and mind – offered to the boys. Throughout his life, Harry would carry a notebook in his pocket for when inspiration struck, but sadly, he was never able to make words do what he wanted them to. Even meeting Evelyn as he did – bumping into her on the stairs of the local library as he was entering and she was leaving, and then offering to walk her home – shows Harry literally turning his back on the world of books and reading to which he had intended to devote his life. Within two years, Harry joined the army and was shipped off to fight the Axis Powers in North Africa, and when he returned, despite having vowed to himself never to be ground down by routine, Harry's main priority became to give Evelyn everything she desired – which somehow resulted in Harry becoming a municipal beancounter. But none of what Harry provided made Evelyn truly happy: the big house and garden made her obsessive about housekeeping, his attempts to be conciliatory made her furious at his subduedness, and every time she complained to their three daughters over the years, they would always seem to take their father's side in things. It's hard to watch both of these characters as they age – neither is truly happy, yet neither of them considers leaving (even if their more modern daughters think a divorce is in order).

Her hunger for life seemed starker and more desperate without the distracting glow of youth, also less charming, more primitive. It was growing more powerful; as she felt the pressure of mortality, the life force in her, the ego, or whatever you called it, the thing about her that everyone noticed, pushed back harder. This was Evelyn: strong, hungry, wilful, beautiful, sometimes kind, sometimes harsh: completely extraordinary. The woman he had met on the library steps thirty-five years ago had changed only in degree. He had chosen her and continued to do so. What love was had changed to the point that he no longer understood it, though he knew its scale and depths, and knew that it was most of who he was.

The narrative in *Dear Evelyn* can jump ahead years at a time, but the little vignettes are enough to paint a portrait of an entire life. I really enjoyed the bits about Harry's war experience, and also Evelyn's challenges as a woman pre-feminism (how galling would it be to go to the doctor for heart palpitations and have him not only perform a pelvic exam, but recommend volunteer work or hobbies to occupy one's mind?) As uncomfortable as it is to watch the long-suffering Harry squirm under Evelyn's thumb, there are many scenes that make Evelyn's own unsoothable pain apparent; if only love were enough. As the story approaches this pair's elderly years, it becomes nearly excruciating to watch as minds and bodies – and maybe even love itself – eventually waste away. Four stars is a rounding up.

Eleanor says

Kathy Page, like Sue Gee and other writers who've perhaps been longlisted once or twice for the Women's Prize, has flown largely under the radar of publishing journalism while also writing damned good books. *Dear Evelyn* is a novel that takes as its form the study of a marriage, from the bride and groom's childhoods in post-war south London to their eventual deaths in nursing homes. Page is a magician at evoking a sense of past-ness, and her characterisation is extraordinarily skillful and tender: both Evelyn and her husband Harry can be extremely difficult, but the reader understands and feels for them both. Exceptional work.

Originally published [here](#).

Canadian Reader says

Rating: 3.5

“It was not as if he lacked backbone. He had withstood schoolyard bullies, the Germans, and countless liars and fools at work. Evelyn, though, was a different matter. Part of the problem was that he didn’t see it just as giving in. It was doing what he could to make things work. He could bend, she could not.”

Dear Evelyn is the story of the long marriage of Evelyn and Harry Miles, born and raised “between two wars in dense London streets, by a river channelled in concrete and topped with industrial froth, the air thick with the clatter and smoke of the railway, with the smells of the brewery and the factories where most people of their class were expected to work.” On the brink of World War II, the two accidentally meet on the steps of the Battersea Library. Evelyn drops a book; Harry picks it up and, caught almost immediately “in a great tide of longing,” offers to walk her home. The two talk as they go, and Harry ironically tells Evelyn he doesn’t care for routine, he doesn’t like being told what to do, and he has a hard time holding his tongue—all things he will spend the better part of his life having to do—with her. When they pass a number of “grand Victorian villas,” Evelyn exclaims: “Imagine living in one of those!” Harry will later identify that moment as the decisive one, when he committed himself to making Evelyn happy.

Not long after, the two are married. Soon Harry is off to war, fighting in Tunisia, while Evelyn moves from London to the country—with her infant daughter, Lillian. From Africa Harry writes long, sometimes lyrical letters to Evelyn—he has a literary bent and is a great lover of poetry, which sometimes works for him as a kind of medicine. Harry’s early letters are full of the longing of a young man in love; in the later ones, he is prone to dark thoughts and is weary of war. He writes more for himself than for her, Evelyn thinks dismissively, as she sets one such letter aside. (She will never recognize that Harry has an inner life.) She has her own wartime challenges, of course: She chooses rough conditions and manual labour on a wartime Gloucester farm rather than lodge in the city with her parents—her long-suffering, self-abnegating mother and her alcoholic, tubercular wastrel of a father. Her mother would only criticize Evelyn for her hasty marriage, and her father’s germs might infect baby Lillian. Both Harry and Evelyn encounter wartime “temptations” yet remain faithful.

Upon Harry’s return from Africa, the two can finally have an everyday domestic life. Harry wants “to love passionately,” go beyond himself, and “perhaps even to write.” He works hard to provide for his family, studying on weekends to improve his employment prospects. They have a second daughter, Valerie, and eventually, in early middle age, a third, Louise, who is trouble from the moment she’s conceived. In that third, resented pregnancy, Evelyn is stricken with intense morning sickness; she’s moody, irrational, a loose cannon—her essential intransigence is magnified. She would prefer not to have this baby, but it’s 1960, and the baby is born.

Harry oversees the building of a large house in the suburbs—at some distance from where he and Evelyn grew up. It’s what Evelyn wants, of course, and it signals the family’s rise from working to middle class, but it comes at a cost. Eldest daughter Lily observes that the upkeep of the new house consumes time the family used to spend on outings. Evelyn’s mother, May, laments that she can’t easily pop around to see her granddaughters—but, then, May is always dissatisfied anyway. Harry considers it’ll take him forty years to pay down the debt. Yes, as much as Harry takes pride in being a good provider, he periodically chafes against the constraints of family life. At times, he longs for the freedom of an unsettled life. Always overriding this, however, is the need to keep Evelyn onside, to please her, and smooth over the difficulties. And Evelyn is certainly difficult. I found it hard to understand how anyone could love such a person. Reading page after page about her was more than enough for me. Good looks and “magnetism” apparently go quite a long way for some.

At one point, Harry reads a biography of Edwardian poet, Edward Thomas, and finds that the marital experience of the poet’s wife, Helen, resonates for him. Like her, Harry has had the task of “fitting . . . [himself] around someone driven and intransigent.” But Harry also has his blind spots. He is, for example, unaware that Evelyn, though conventional and rigid, also struggles at times with her domestic role and thinks

back longingly to the time before her marriage when she was praised for her correspondence and reception work at a London law firm.

I had trouble warming to Page's novel. I'm not crazy about wartime stories or epistolary novels, and that's what this book at first seemed to be. (It actually wasn't!) However, the main problem for me was Evelyn, an utterly infuriating, self-centred character, quite unable to recognize the needs of anyone beyond herself. Harry's love, his weird psychological enslavement to her, seemed a curse of almost mythical proportions: "Evelyn was some kind of goddess, and he was just a man." There is, as well, a slightly distant, cinematic quality to Page's work. She provides some wonderfully precise period, location, and domestic details which anchor her book in time, but I felt I was often watching her protagonists rather than engaging with them emotionally. I also found the novel overly long by perhaps 50 to 75 pages. I think the same themes could have been communicated with greater economy.

Dear Evelyn initially reads less like a novel than a series of chronological, linked short stories, but, at around the halfway point, that changed for me. By then I had a better feel for Page's style and for what she might be trying to do—that is, present a study of a marriage: show a couple, individually and together, across time, at certain critical or emotionally significant moments in their relationship. Page's is a rich and insightful work that is infused with poetry and literary references. Like the best literature, it feels true—especially in its communication of the idea that people do not change; they just become more and more themselves. In the end, however, this was a book I could admire only. Something—likely too much Evelyn—held me back from love.

Mary Lins says

If you appreciate beautiful prose and a well-paced story, I highly recommend, "Dear Evelyn", by Kathy Page, the story of Harry and Evelyn and their long marriage. I heard it recommended on NPR as part of a 2018 year-end review of books and it sounded intriguing. I'm so glad I trusted my instincts and bought it. Now I'm keen to read more of Kathy Page's novels. What a writer!

Connie says

I was enjoying the book, the period detail, the characters, but the last section depicting Harry's deteriorating health and his wife's reactions grabbed my heart and would not let go. How did the author so eerily get inside the mind of Harry in his final years? She shows us what he is losing—his short term memory, his patience for his difficult wife—and what remains: love, and his essential kindness. Although this section was emotional for me to read, it was my favourite part. Anyone who has visited a nursing home patient or watched the decline of an elderly parent will get a lot of insight into their inner lives. This is an honest and unflinching look at old age which will stay with me.

Not since Margaret Laurence's *Stone Angel* have I been this moved by a book that shows the inner life of elderly people. It made me reflect on the possibility of a similar future with my husband as we age.

Thank you, Kathy Page!

Tricia Dower says

One of the best books I've ever read. Harry, especially, is written with such compassion I suspect the author has a father she loves no matter what. Evelyn is as honestly written a character as I've ever read. Love, love, love this book.

Doreen says

This novel, a study of a 70-year marriage, is about ordinary people but is extraordinary in quality.

Harry Miles, a sensitive man with a love of poetry, meets Evelyn Hill and falls in love immediately. He describes her personality when he first meets her: "She had an appetite for the better things, quick judgement, a very strong will, a dislike of doubt or ambiguity, and a way of making her words count. Her opinions and feelings stormed through her. She warmed to appreciation." The two marry during the early years of World War II, and because Harry enlists and is sent to North Africa, their first years are "islands of cohabitation in an ocean of separation." After the war, they begin what Harry calls "a new marriage: real now, an everyday, actual thing instead of a frenzied week trying to make up for lost time and then a slew of letters."

After the war, Harry has clear hopes for his life. He does not want to be a "slug of a man, pale and oblivious, bored, existing, yes, but not much more than that"; instead, "Having survived the war, I hope not to be ground down by the peace. I want to stay alert. To love passionately. To go beyond myself. Even, still, to write." However, Harry loves Evelyn and wants to give her everything she wants: "He is her agent. She articulates an aim, he finds the way." He takes a job in municipal construction and works hard so they eventually have a beautiful home with room for a large garden. They raise three children who have opportunities denied their parents. They should be happy but that is not the case, especially as they age and contend with physical infirmities.

Harry observes that "Marriages were not equal or fair" and it is obvious from the beginning that his marriage to Evelyn will not be either. Harry loves Evelyn beyond measure and when not with her tries to write about his feelings: "But despite or because of the intensity of his feelings, it was impossible. He could barely read. It was as if he had lost all access to language." Evelyn, on the other hand, misses "his attention to her comfort and well-being, the feeling of her own value, a deep acknowledgement of that. On her part, there was no suffering, no feverishness, no lovesickness." Harry wants his wife to be happy and early on decides that he will devote himself to giving her what she wants. When they move into a new home with a garden he tells her, "We'd only known each other about half an hour . . . but I knew then that you must have your own house with a garden. . . . I knew I must get it for you." Her response is, "I just wish the garden would grow faster."

There is an overwhelming feeling of sadness because of how Harry's love is not returned in kind and his sacrifices are unappreciated. He takes a job he does not enjoy because it provides financial security and enables him to give Evelyn what she wants and his children what they need. Unfortunately, he loses himself in the process: "He would never complete a poem to his satisfaction, much less send one to a little magazine, however much he had once imagined he might do such a thing. . . . And he was no longer the young man coming home to his wife after years of war, vowing not to be ground down by routine, to stay open to the possibility of an ecstatic life." His is a diminished, disappointed life devoted to fitting "around someone driven and intransigent."

Harry believes the words of a favourite sonnet (*Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks / But bears it out even to the edge of doom*) and the sentiment is true in his case: “He had loved her all his adult life, long after the gloss of their youth and its illusions had been worn away and left them with the essentials of who they were, along with a collection of sometimes contradictory memories ... He had never denied her anything, material or emotional, that he could provide.” Evelyn’s decisions in their waning years suggests that her feelings have changed; in fact, even during the war years, when Harry is “low and worn out” and writes about his “dark thoughts,” she is not understanding: “this Harry was not exactly like the one she remembered. This man was less practical, less positive, and less affectionate.” Their daughters tell Harry that “he was too accommodating with Evelyn” but “he didn’t see it just as giving in. It was doing what he could to make things work. He could bend, she could not.” He also fears that if he had stood up to her, “he would have lost her, and that was unthinkable.” Evelyn, however, interprets his constant accommodations as a sign of weakness and she dislikes “compromise, weakness, vagueness.”

Evelyn is not easy to like. She is such a self-centred and domineering person who is never satisfied. At the beginning Harry loves Evelyn’s strong-mindedness: “one of the things he loved about Evelyn was her fierce pride, her willingness to argue even when the facts were against her, to interrupt, to refuse, to insist-.” Later, when he is especially frustrated with his job and speaks without thinking, these traits are turned against him and he realizes “How very sensitive Evelyn is to . . . any criticism or lack of respect, whether real or perceived. How, thinking herself slighted, she will put everything she has into self-defence. How she can be vicious.” As she ages, “She had become more intensely herself . . . she understood duty and believed in it, yet in practice found it intolerable . . . When she wanted something, it drove her. She experienced her own feelings with great intensity, but often failed to accept those of others, especially if they differed from hers.”

Despite this negative portrayal, it is possible to have some sympathy for Evelyn. She enjoyed her work at a law firm but was dismissed once she married. She is not prepared for her role as a wife; she has to learn how to cook and thinks of the house as something she must put “under control,” so much so that she detests Harry’s collection of books because of “the fussy, old-fashioned effect it gave a room, especially since his book jackets did not match.” She struggles with motherhood; one of her daughters says, “She’s just not a natural carer.” When she speaks to her doctor about some concerns, he is rather dismissive. Then there’s a late pregnancy which she didn’t want. And there is no doubt that her father’s alcoholism had a long-lasting effect on her life; certainly, his behaviour and her mother’s reactions help account for Evelyn’s need to be in control.

This is a novel of character which is breathtakingly realistic. I understand why it won the Rogers Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize. Page’s other novels have also been nominated for prestigious awards, so I will be checking them out.

Please check out my reader's blog (<https://schatjesshelves.blogspot.com/>) and follow me on Twitter (@DCYakabuski).

Colleen says

“*Dear Evelyn*” is basically a study of a marriage, but it’s really so much more than that. The story starts with our two protagonists, Evelyn and Harry, when they are children, and takes us from the moment they meet right up to the end of their lives. We follow snapshots of them (the book is only 300 pages long) through all the ups and downs of an everyday relationship: their dating and marriage, the raising of children, the inevitable health issues as they age. It sounds pretty basic, but Katie Page writes beautifully and the reader can’t help but be drawn in to Evelyn and Harry’s lives: the early love and passion that was tested during their

years of separation during WWII; the social pressures to be successful; the challenges of raising three children who were very different from one another; the struggles that come when they become elderly. So many topics are addressed and handled so authentically: what does a married woman do when she finds herself pregnant and doesn't necessarily want to be? When you're in the middle of a war and you may never see your spouse again, is it OK to have feelings for someone else even if you don't act upon them? When your partner's health deteriorates more rapidly than your own as you age, at what point do you look after your own needs first?

I must admit, I was definitely more "Team Harry" by the latter part of the book, but Evelyn's entire life was so negatively impacted by her relationship with her father that even though I didn't like her actions, I could understand why she was behaving the way she was. I may not have loved her, but she certainly was an interesting character! Here was a woman who was constrained by the postwar times; she would have fared much better had she been born fifty years later.

I learned in Page's notes at the back of the book that she used actual letters that her own father had written to her mother during the war (with their permission) to add authenticity. What a lovely tribute to her parents!

Tracey says

I loved this book, and I'm a very picky reader. *Dear Evelyn* was very touching & poignant, lyrically written, delving not only into the trials & tribulations of a long marriage, but the act of aging in all its emotional truth. Very much reminded me of Anne Tyler's writing. If you enjoy well written, character driven literature that makes you think AND feel, I highly recommend this book.

Ben Truong says

Dear Evelyn is a standalone, contemporary adult novel written by Kathy Page. The narrative centers on Harry Miles and his romantic relationship with Evelyn Hill over seventy years of their lives together.

Harry Miles, born between the wars to working-class parents in south London, is a scholarship boy with a literary bent and an ambition to escape the lower social standings of his childhood. When he meets Evelyn Hill, from a background very like his own, he is instantly attracted to her as they complemented each other rather well.

The early years of their marriage coincide with the outbreak of war, and by the time Harry ships to Cairo in 1942 as part of Churchill's North Africa campaign, they have had their first child – a girl. Afterwards Harry Miles takes a white-collar job in municipal construction and the couple settle down to life in the suburbs.

Two other daughters follow, clever young women who have choices of which their mother could only dream. As the family grow older, Evelyn becomes increasingly domineering and Harry, the more accommodating partner, is increasingly resentful, until they are left in a mutual stranglehold.

Dear Evelyn is written rather well. It has many elements – it is a love story, a coming-of-age story, and a brilliantly evocative sketch of Britain in the 20th century. There are shocking reminders of the casual daily humiliations women endured before the wake-up call of feminism. Yet through it all, there is a current of sadness and a lamentation of youthful idealism.

It is a novel more than just a lament for the inevitable failure of youthful ideals. Its picture of Evelyn herself is authentically troubling, a study of a woman in the grip of terrible compulsions. The warning signs are there from the start, in her panicky housekeeping, her rigid washing and vacuuming schedules, her obsession with hunting down missing pillowcases. Later she is prone to sudden explosions and to punitive silences that last for days. Under the cover of a domestic history, she has ambushed us with a chilling account of a disordered personality.

All in all, *Dear Evelyn* is a wonderful written novel about a love story, albeit an unconventional one, about two people who shaped each other as their marriage and their country changes.

Penny (Literary Hoarders) says

Oh my goodness, what a wonderful story. What a wonderful ending. I so love Harry! Evelyn was a bit of a pill wasn't she? But this is a beautiful story of a marriage, imagined and not so imagined from letters the author's father wrote her mother during the war. Loved it. Loved the ending very much! Shed a few tears for sure.

Jenny says

Excellent story and writing. Really interesting characters. Harry was definitely very likeable. When I finished the book I thought that I disliked Evelyn but having thought about her I suspect that she is not untypical of many women of her time - intelligent, not having the advantage of much education and bored and depressed by an unfulfilled life despite being married to a man who loved her and whom I think she fundamentally loved. Her childhood with a drunken father and her life as a lonely young war bride with a baby, not knowing whether she would ever see her husband again probably impacted on her too. An interesting character to ponder.

Jill says

Harry is the son of a working-class couple, an aspirational "scholarship boy" with a love of poetry and reading. Evelyn comes from a background not unlike Harry's and she shares his appetite for a better life.

Both characters are meticulously crafted in the hands of Kathy Page. In a mere 300 pages, she encapsulates and showcases their 70-year "ordinary" marriage that is anything BUT. All the milestones are there - the war years that separate and test the marriage, the ensuing house and children, the chasing of the dream, the inevitable arguments and health issues.

But Kathy Page is seeking - and capturing - a deeper truth here. Harry's aspirations lead to a greater alienation of self - a self that never quite finds the time to engage in the simple pleasures of life that once were so important. And Evelyn is genetically incapable of being happy, with her obsessional organizational skills, her control tendencies, and her out-of-proportion responses to things that don't go her way.

Harry's desire to placate Evelyn and assure her of his love test him and separate him from his desire to "stay open to the possibility of an ecstatic life." The marriage - the life - is anyone's definition of material and career success, yet poignantly, it is a sad tale of a patient man who gives his all to placate his perfectionist

spouse.

The dynamic of their marriage plays out against changing times in Britain with all the shifts in mores and social norms. As a character-driven reader, I thought this novel was superb and beautifully paced and proof once again that beneath the surface, no marriage is quite what it seems.

Julia says

This story of a relationship is told with unflinching honesty, resulting in a realistic, but often bleak portrait of a couple's life together. Harry's lifelong love of poetry is lovingly portrayed from the awakening of his interest in childhood to fragments remembered in his old age. The titular character is at times both sympathetic and unlikable, but the author makes her vitality leap off the page. Though the novel ends with an inevitable sadness and frustration, one feels that the characters would make the same choices if they could do it all over again.

You will be thinking about "Dear Evelyn" long after you read it. It may inspire you to write a letter the old-fashioned way!
