



Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives

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There are lives, real lives, and there are the theories that explain them. Partly autobiographical, taking a mother and her daughter; two working-class childhoods (Burnley in the 1920s, South London in the 1950s) and trying to find a place for their stories in history and politics, in psychoanalysis and feminism. What happens to cultural criticism when you confront it with working-class women and little girls? What happens when psychoanalysis is asked to look at women who don't possess the wish for a child? And what happens to theories of patriarchy when autobiography deals with a working-class father who isn't important in the world outside the household? This book is about the centrality of some stories and the marginality of others, and about the stories we tell ourselves to explain our lives.

Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives Details

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Annette Kane says

A bit too academic for me. I enjoyed the autobiographical stuff the most. It had some interesting and original ideas in it though and I enjoyed it.

Jork says

Deeply felt, beautifully written, and above all convincing, Steedman has produced a shattering family history in the mold of a psycho-analytic myth: the story of an individual that is the story of all. Excellent.

Andrea says

Unique and undefinable, I loved this more than I can say -- probably one of the things more full of personal meaning to me as well as of theoretical import that I have read in a while. Possibly because of, rather than despite, how different our encounters with the intersections of gender and working class life have been.

Dana says

So I read this way back in my Freshman college year for English comp and don't remember much, but I do remember (surprisingly) enjoying it. One day I will pull this out of storage and give it its due attention and a fuller review.

John says

I honestly don't know what to say about this book...it is still puzzling me. It isn't really a memoir, or a traditional work of history, and I can't remember ever reading a book quite like it. It has some fascinating things to say about how the stories that we tell to make history make sense can fail to encompass real people and their contradictions. Nobody really, truly fits our easy narratives, but we have to make them fit, because we need history to make sense, individual idiosyncrasies be damned. The moments that stand out for us about our childhoods seem important, and we create meaning for them to help us understand our lives, but maybe nothing really happened the way we remember. Maybe others remember things differently. I think I can recommend this book, just because I feel like some people are really going to love it, but they won't know unless they read it themselves. Some people are going to hate it too. I don't know which kind of person you are. Give it a shot. It is really short and won't take too much of your time.

Jesi says

Second reading (12/5/17): Feels weird that I picked this book up again almost exactly three years to the day after I finished reading it. Still a remarkable, breathtaking book - there's something almost hypnotic about Steedman's prose (though that's not quite the word I mean). So, so fascinating, and I think the first and last sections are just like, some of my favorite pieces of writing I've ever read.

First reading (12/4/14): An incredible book. I don't think my summary would do it justice, but wow, if you are at all interested in class, British culture, feminist theory, working class childhoods (cough Aubri), representations of poverty (cough Kristin), difficult mother-daughter relationships (cough Courtney), or just gorgeous prose, you should read this. I think this might be my favorite genre of all -- the creative nonfiction/memoir-type essay that functions both as social critique and as a meditation on the work we do as literary critics. I feel like I'm giving everything five stars lately, but it's just because I'm reading so many damn good books.

Jolette says

This book deserved a second try. I did not finish it when in college, but I think time only improved my understanding. This is an interesting work about class, psychoanalyses and how young girls' working class childhoods are influenced by their understanding of their position in society. This is often triggered by the realisation that the father has no influence outside the house. It also elaborates on the economic value of children.

Hafsa says

While reading *Landscape for a Good Woman*, I noticed a strong parallel between the style in which Steedman decides to write this book and the ways in which my women's studies readings challenge traditional disciplinary approaches by using and giving legitimacy to personal stories. I am impressed, although a bit taken aback, by the ways in which Steedman confronts what she sees as major pitfalls in how accounts of working-women and mothers are simplified during the 1950's, a time of significant political, economic and social change. She aims to challenge an intellectual tradition that denies "its subjects a particular story, a personal history, except when that story illustrates a general thesis." She does this by using personal experience, existing political and social science theory, other autobiographies, and psychoanalysis of the attitudes of the working-class intersect throughout the chapters.

Melissa says

Thoroughly enjoyed reading this beautifully written remembrance of a 1950s working-class childhood. It made me realize how little I've thought both of my own parents' positions while raising me and the "accuracy" of my memories of that time. Feminist, Marxist, and psychoanalytic analysis of a compelling mother-daughter relationship.

Two of my favorite quotes:

p. 29 "Memory alone cannot resurrect past time because it is memory itself that shapes it, long after historical time has passed."

p. 128 "...childhood is a kind of history, the continually reworked and re-used personal history that lies at the heart of each present."

Kristin Canfield says

Wow! Okay, in love with this. It contains all of the things that I like: post-war decline of Britain, working-class narratives, adolescence, female subjectivities. JL Egan, you were right.

Katharine says

This was an excellent read, but not as relevant/applicable to my work as I hoped it would be. If you're interested in British Cultural Studies, it's a must-read, but a lot of the material is specific to the author (personal accounts). However, the personal nature of the book is what makes it so easy and interesting to read. It doesn't feel super "academic."

Korri says

In this history/biography, Steedman qualifies the use of the Freudian psychoanalytic case study to look at her working-class South London childhood. She re-evaluates histories of working classes which focus on proletariat solidarity, the law of the father, and the myth of mothers' tough love at the expense of women's agency, some women's lack of maternal feeling and portrayals of women who desired status as embodied in material goods. Fascinating & ambitious.

Ai Miller says

Steedman's book really challenges histories of working class folks by taking her own life and her mother's life and tracing them with some lenses of psychoanalysis and also readings of class consciousness and showing how disconnected those experiences are from dominant narratives about working class life. It sort of feels all over the place, but every part of it reads towards her argument and it's really compelling in the ways she mines her own experience for these pieces. I can't quite explain it, but I found it to be a really interesting, compelling read and I definitely recommend it.

Meraki says

What struck a chord with me from this book was the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship it portrays. The psychoanalytical aspect throwing light on how the former's identity is firstly aligned to, and later contrasted to, the perceptions and expectations of the latter. Narratives that mediate between the past,

present, and future.

Paul says

4.5 stars

I first read this when it was published in the 1980s and I still have the virago original paperback from that time. Aubrey's efforts in the 500 great books by women group has prompted me to dig it out and re-read. It is a partly autobiographical work which looks at the childhood of the author (1950s London) and her mother (1920s Burnley/Lancashire). Steedman uses the factual information to analyse female childhood (working class childhood) in feminist and psychoanalytic terms.

Steedman looks at the nature of patriarchy, how it is learnt, even with a father absent and what its theoretical limits are. There are discussions about legitimacy, the nature of childhood (using fairy tales to illustrate theoretical constructs), poverty, class, interesting critiques of Hoggart and Seabrook and a good section on reproduction. The book is about marginality, how to explain a patriarchal figure who is totally unimportant outside the household (the story about the bluebells is especially telling) and what about women who don't want a child. Steedman throws her net wide in what seems a narrow subject, but it's a telling analysis, especially when she looks at Freud and Dora.

There is an excellent bibliography and this is a book well worth seeking out; imbued with a particularly English radical tradition, but broad in scope and written with great compassion.
