



# My Life

*Isadora Duncan*

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## My Life Isadora Duncan

*My Life*, the classic autobiography first published just after Duncan's death, is a frank and engrossing life account of this remarkable visionary and feminist who took on the world, reinvented dance, and led the way for future great American modernists Ruth St. Denis, Agnes de Mille, and Martha Graham. Documenting Duncan's own life as a dancer and as a woman—from her enchantment with classical music and poetry as a child in San Francisco and her intense study of classical Greek art in Athens, through the great strides she made in teaching, founding schools, performing, and collaborating with international artists, to her notorious love affairs and the tragic deaths of her own children—*My Life* reissued here is still as extraordinary as the woman who wrote it more than sixty years ago.

## My Life Details

Date : Published March 17th 1996 by Liveright (first published 1927)

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Author : Isadora Duncan

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## From Reader Review My Life for online ebook

**Aya Hatem says**

## Sue Iri says

## Disappointing

The life of Isadora Duncan was undoubtedly worth writing about, but she was not the one to do it. Her turgid writing style and overblown dramatics make the autobiography almost unreadable. She had a great deal of sadness and reason for heartbreak but suffered excruciating highs and lows that may well have been part of her nature, and are exhausting to follow.

**Sabrina says**

My first edition 1928 copy of this book sprouted post-its in every direction as I researched my graphic biography of Isadora. Isadora's version of events is perhaps a little puffed up, perhaps not all written by her own hand, but it's still the closest you can get to this daredevil of a woman. When I found this memoir on my grandmother's shelf, Isadora became my first feminist heroine.

## **Fiona Goodman says**

I thought it was interesting coming from her point of view, however it was extremely self-aggrandizing and showed that she had little insight into her own psyche. I would like to read other books about her to get a fuller picture of both the good and bad aspects of her character. The funny thing is, she does present her self as someone so flighty that she would get her scarf caught under the wheel of a car and die.

**Abeer says**

**Asya says**

In cases like these, memoirs of people who exceed life, what can be said about their writing when it's all about their lives? Does Duncan write well? She never claims to, in fact the opposite. Is her narrative well-crafted? Hardly, and she admits as much. So what I'd be rating here is her life rather than how she tells it, and that is really unratable because it exceeds all bounds of norms, bounds, the typical vicissitudes. I couldn't help but read her as a character, a Mme. Bovary meets some George Sandian heroine, with a mix of Thomas Hardy. Inspiring, absurd, obnoxious, visionary, moving, but never mild, and neither is the book. The parts I enjoyed most were her theories of dance and her anecdotes of her contemporaries such as Eleanora Duse, Rodin, Loie Fuller, D'Annunzio and others. Her views on jazz, the role of the intelligentsia, the artist vs. the mob (and this oddly at odds with her revolutionary impulses) are unsettling and often unpallatable, but regardless I found myself admiring her sheer conviction

**Elizabeth says**

I'm trying to figure out what to make of this book. More importantly, I'm trying to figure out if I would have liked this person if I met her in real life. She's complex. Sometimes she talks out of both sides of her mouth, declaring one thing at one moment in the book and the opposite idea later. But then again, I value the ability to change your mind and evolve.

She's certainly a product of her time, but ignoring that fact, I have feeling I would have loved her but also found her annoying if I had met her. Some of her comments are so rash...and she name drops with great frequency. I found her abrupt dismissal of jazz music as un-American simply abhorrent. She also bats down ballet in a few cast-off sentences as coquetry. I wonder if Balanchine's American version of ballet would have rebutted her declaration: "The real American type can never be aa ballet dancer. The legs are too long, the body too supple and the spirit too free for this school of affected grace and toe-walking."

In general though she reveals great truths: She's a hopeless romantic and her idea that a woman much choose between art and love resonated. Certainly if one is interested in being a creator, the act of being a mother or a wife/partner takes up an enormous amount of time and creative energy.

“...often wondering if woman can ever really be an artist, since Art is a hard task-master who demands everything, whereas a woman who loves gives up everything to life.”

I remember reading that George Sand gave up her writing at a certain point, to live life fully.

I do think in general, she was quite unhappy. Not surprising, given that she declares that she's been hoping for a happy ending in life via the avenue of a love affair, and she lost her young children. Comments such as "I have met many great artists and intelligent and so-called successful people in my life, but never one who could be called a happy being, although some may have made a very good bluff at it. Behind the mask, with any clairvoyance, one can divine the same uneasiness and suffering," reflect her great sadness more than her

clarity about others.

Perhaps to further cement that theory, she writes: "Certainly, if suicide pellets were sold in drug stores as plainly as some preventatives, I think the intelligentsia of all countries would doubtless disappear over night in conquered agony."

Finally, I think this book is incredibly modern. She sounds like a feminist (albeit a bit rash one) . Her attitudes towards marriage and relationships sound much more 2017 than 1917. It's a little bit surreal.

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## Bo Olsen says

I found this to be a remarkable book that held my interest from the beginning. She had an idea of what dance should be and how it should be performed. She left her home in San Francisco with her entire family and no money, hoping she could find someone in show business to understand what she wanted to bring to the stage. It wasn't to be in America, so they set sail to Europe where she found people willing to listen and let her express herself, her free spirit. People liked her style and she found an audience for her modern dance. She always seemed to have a nice run, collect her money, spend it on one idea or another until she was broke and then sign on for a new engagement, over and over throughout her entire life. She was definitely a strong willed feminist who had to have it her way or the highway. She could not understand why anyone would Marry, as she never did. She was highly critical of the ballet, and never saw it as an art form, and how anyone could understand jazz as music was from beyond. She had the handsomest men father her children, while one was a multi-millionaire, and she always spoke of love, while never seeming to find the time to enjoy it. She played to sold-out houses throughout Europe and Russia and even made her way back to the USA, but always seemed to want more than they were willing to give. She also seemed to always live amidst tragedy, losing all three of her children in two separate incidents and a lot of mental imbalance, brought on by trying to just do to much at once, and she had her own way of finding happiness with certain people when she needed to find happiness. I found myself magnetized to Isadora's trail through life.

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## Sergiu Pobereznic says

[amazon.com/author/sergiupobereznic](http://amazon.com/author/sergiupobereznic)

I know that I am probably going to commit Isadora Duncan sacrilege with this review, so before I begin, and for the record, I would like to state that the world is indebted and grateful for what Isadora Duncan achieved in her lifetime and what she stands for as an artist in the dance world.

However, my critique is directed towards her writing (and perhaps her eccentric career claims) not her dance and career achievements.

Although her fame is undoubtedly recognized throughout the world, my inner voice tells me that she was a serial confabulist from what I have just read. I feel absolutely terrible for admitting this about her *mémoire*. Perhaps it was the peculiar writing style that made the work seem so categorically unrealistic.

The opening of the book was, I admit, entertaining and even a touch humorous. About her birth she says: "Before I was born my mother was in a great agony of spirit and in a tragic situation. She could take no food except iced oysters and iced champagne." Then she goes on to say that this is why she began to dance. "It was the result of oysters and champagne – the food of Aphrodite."

This is basically the tone of her *mémoire*.

She shared some interesting and abstruse philosophies with unique and idiosyncratic thoughts on artistic and life related issues, like only Isadora Duncan could. About art she said: "... that is not the thing itself, but a symbol – a conception of the ideal of life." This is something I agreed with, wholeheartedly. But as the book progressed the author ventured briskly into a mythical, chimerical land full of fantastical allegories and symbolism that rendered me speechless – until I wrote this review that is.

She spoke of herself as a legend in her own time and saw herself as “built along the lines of the Venus de Milo”. Not at all vainglorious. Her life reads as though it were a fictional account. She moved through the world like a nymph. I had to double check that it was in fact her autobiography that I was reading.

There were times I wondered if I were reading some fictional, anachronistic, olde-worlde Dickensian style melodrama with a martyred, often penurious and severely misunderstood heroin at the helm of a dancing career that was always on the precipitous edge of celebrity.

Isadora was The Little Match-girl meets Ondine (on dry land) in the Midsummer Night’s Dream, Romeo and Juliet and perhaps the Odyssey with profound Wagnerian musical motifs. She seemed completely out of touch with the real world. Her life has the feel and atmosphere of an epic Homeric poem that unfolds in masses of drama and ends in the only way it can... TRAGEDY.

When discussing spirituality and her soul she said: “My soul is like a battlefield where Apollo, Dionosyus, Christ, Nietzsche and Richard Wagner dispute the ground.”

A good writer she certainly WAS NOT – favoring a syrupy, flowery kind of prose – but at least she never claims to be a literary genius, unlike her dancing. Quite the opposite, she tells the reader over and over that she is not good as a writer. But what she does manage to do is harp on about all her dancing talents without lassitude. It seems that she was always showered and covered in flowers. This became tiresome. Lauding your own plaudits is not an attractive quality to behold. Her writing style made her heroic, larger-than-life journey of movement, dance and freedom of expression into a comical pantomime.

Let’s not forget that she had no previous training as a dancer and taught dance from the age of ten, with great success. Seriously? When asked who taught her to dance, she answered: “Terpsichore.” She was living in a parallel universe, surely.

She comes across (because she probably is) so immodest, self-absorbed and self-aggrandizing that it made reading quite a laborious and punishing task. I suppose this is all right because she was, after all, the improvisational, modern dancing Pop-star of her generation. She invented what is known as ‘free movement’. She can be forgiven for anything after such an accomplishment. If only she had held back a little (or perhaps a lot) in the rhapsodising of her career accomplishments.

The most humorous aspect of this *mémoire* is that even though she claims to have often been impecuniously poor, she was still able to act like a complete and utter supercilious snob when she was down on her luck and apparently sleeping on park benches in central London. She never seems to speak about those times with understanding.

Many people have said that she wasn’t given enough credit for what she accomplished. The fact is this; the world knows the name Isadora Duncan, surely this is mission accomplished. Even so, not to worry, she gave herself enough credit in this *mémoire*.

She was most certainly composed of a hefty amount of self-assured aplomb and a steely demeanor. Even if only 10% of her story is genuine, I take my hat off to her. She had hubris and conquered the impossible dream in a time when the task would have been near impossible. Very few females were heard in those days. I think that she would have been an enchanting feminist with extremely radical ideas during a time when such a person was beyond rare – a zealot of the dance world. Oh, and a vegetarian to boot. She did it all on carrots.

But, to me, best of all is the manner in which she died. Uber theatrical. A dramaturge could not have

improved on this, even with limitless funding, writers, producers and designers to create the setting. Isadora Duncan was strangled by a long scarf that became entangled in the wheel of her car.

Obviously I don't celebrate her death, but it happened in the most cinematic way possible. Even if she had planned her death it could not have occurred in a more memorable way. Her life was meant to be captured in a movie, or a great novel, but the screenplay should not to be written by the heroine herself.

The tale itself made sudden leaps during the story telling. Whenever this happened I was left wondering what she may have omitted from her amazing, poetic, and passionate (Shakespearian/Homeric inspired) life.

Early on she mentions that:

"The thing that makes for a secure and calm existence is 'good English servants'. They move about with a sort of assured aristocratic manner and have no wish to rise to the social scale of their employers."

Interesting view that tells you just a little more about her modest character.

She often uses long phrases and paragraphs in French, German and Hungarian. This is acceptable if you speak the languages but quite alienating otherwise. How many people speak Hungarian? other than the Hungarians. I have said this before; publishers should revise such things and give a translation for the readers. It's not that difficult to do.

I wanted to like this book, sadly it wasn't to be so. Perhaps it was all a metaphor for something that I was being too obtuse to comprehend. If you can get past the phantasmagorical sections, you may just find something inspirational.

I gave 2 stars out of respect.

– Sergiu Pobereznic – (auhor)

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## **Duane says**

This autobiography by Isadora Duncan reads like a work of fiction. What a remarkable woman she was and what a remarkable life she lived. She was born in California in 1877, but she spent most of her life and career in Europe and Russia. By 1910 she was world famous with several dance schools across Europe. She was the mother of modern dance and she was a shooting star that streaked across the sky of the world she lived in. She died tragically in Paris at age 50 in a car accident, when the long scarf she was wearing got tangled in the spokes of the wheel of the open car she was in.

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## **Adam says**

I knew nothing about Isadora Duncan, the highly creative dancer, before I picked up a copy of her charming autobiography. It is only because I had recently discovered that she had spent some time in Albania, a country that fascinates me and about which I have written, that I decided to read this book.

The book was highly enjoyable. She writes well and makes frequent allusions to, and uses quotes from, the great classical authors and also from Nietzsche and other more recent writers. I felt that Isadora was trying in

her flamboyant way to give a reasonably accurate account of her colourful life. It was a life of tragedy and triumph, liberally spiced with a series of lovers who never failed to help her with her career and her life problems, including the sad loss of her three children. She was privileged to have met and been admired by great personalities such as Stanislavsky, Rodin, d'Annunzio, and Eleanora Duse. She married the Russian poet Essenin briefly, but that part of her life is not recorded in her book.

As for Albania, there are only a few pages dedicated to her brief time there. Frustratingly, her autobiography ends with the invitation she received to set up a dance school in the young Soviet Union in about 1921.

The autobiography has gripped me sufficiently to make me want to read a good biography of Isadora.

Susanne says

Isadora is one of my heroes. She was so far ahead of her time.

## **Nasser Moh'd says**

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## **Heather says**

Truly fantastic work! Duncan was so much more than a dancer. She was a dedicated scholar, one of the most free-thinking feminists I've encountered (some of her ideas would still be considered radical to some degree today), and a great writer. I was really surprised by the depth of her thinking and her understanding and passion for art in its many manifestations. She understood that one of the highest callings one can have in this life is art and that it is a spiritual pursuit—and she created some of the most intelligent writing about dance that I've ever read.

I felt a little defensive every time she criticized ballet, since academic ballet is the vocabulary that I speak, but I understand that at the time she was writing ballet had become more about spectacle than spirit. I love ballet, however, and know that it carries an extremely strong emotional and spiritual component, a point on which I don't believe Duncan would agree.

Honestly, part of me wondered what Duncan's dance actually looked like; I couldn't help but think that it might lack skill and seem, I don't know, juvenile (and that's where my bias toward ballet asserts itself). It's one thing to write about dance and quite another to execute it. However, I recently saw some of Duncan's works performed in a video about her life and work, and I can honestly say that I was mesmerized. Though I began watching with a wrinkled up nose, while fiddling with some project on my lap, I found myself not long after completely fixated on the screen and motionless. Good stuff.

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