

Short Lives

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What to say about a collection of short biographies of short lives which include Elvis Presley and Simone Weil? From the high-brow to the very low-brow. With a few exceptions it concern lives of the 20th century and the examples are almost all taken from performers and writers, predominantly poets. In short celebrities. Truly short lives such as that of Galois and Abel are not included. Probably the author had never heard of them (but she knew that Weil's brother was a renowned mathematician, but that she probably just cribbed from the sources for her piece on the sister). There are thirty cases presented in strict alphabetical order (and one a personal as an appendix and about the author's boyfriend, which probably inspired the writing of the book). One would expect a balanced sex-ratio, especially in a book written by a woman, but only seven of the lives are those of women, four of them performers, two poets, and so Simone Weil as a philosopher and a saint. Two of the individuals experienced their fiftieth birthday, Artaud and Nijinski the latter at 62. This hardly counts for a tragically short life span, but the dancer Nijinsky went insane at the age of 31 and was after that confined to institutions. Seven nationalities are represented, of those 18 are Americans, 3 of French, English and Russian respectively, and one of Japanese, Italian and Dutch. Of the seven women, six are American and one French (Weil). The median age of women was 36, of men 40, and the corresponding averages 38 and 39. Those are not remarkable ages when compared to those of the Third World or in the 19th century and earlier. Incidentally the author of the book was 36 at the writing. Of the thirty people, eleven can be classified as performers (be it singers, actors or stand-up artists), ten as poets, six as predominantly writers of prose and two as painters (Modigliani and van Gogh) and Weil as the odd-bird, but maybe saint should be classified as performer, she certainly was aggressive when it came to humility. Of the thirty there are five I had never heard of before, namely Montgomery Clift (actor), Harry Crosby (poet or maybe rather poetry-groupie), Sergei Yesenin (poet), Ross Lockridge (novelist), Yukio Mishima (writer and hara-kiri-performer a one-time stand). If there are any unifying theme it is, as the author claims, a common pursuit of death, burning their candles at both ends as well as their bridges, leading to their lives a burning intensity appealing to our sense of romantic doom. And indeed most of the lives depicted are of abuse, be it alcohol or drugs, or both. The book was published in 1980, the most recent death being Presley in 1977, and I guess there would be no dearth of untimely deaths would a sequel be published forty years later,

The author is primarily an editor and literary agent but has in later decades acquired a renown as an artist and producer of flower images. The book itself is probably to be classified as an impulsive and mistaken purchase and would not have been picked up and read but for the fact of a dearth of reading materials up by the cabin where I found it.

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