



Review - My Misspent Youth

Essays

by Meghan Daum

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Review by Miranda Hale

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Essayist Meghan Daum, in her ten-essay collection *My Misspent Youth*, is beautifully and painfully honest even when it is self-incriminating to be so. She forewords her book by arguing that it does, indeed, have a cohesive point and a subject, which she summarizes as "about not knowing what things are about and trying to sort matters out by using one's personal experiences and observations as a tool" (9).

These essays offer wise, questioning, and often skeptical analyses of American culture from the perspective of the hope and the disapproval of youth. Her humor is amazingly potent, and her sophistication as a writer allows her access to subtle and beautiful nuances of language to make powerful and amusing comments on everything from flight attendants to polygamists to dying young.

The first essay, "On the Fringes of the Physical World," relates Daum's experience at being charmed and romanced by e-mail. She understands that, although she never expected herself to be part of something so seemingly "geeky" and so potentially dangerous as courtship with an absolute stranger, it was something she, and many of her friends from whom she heard similar stories, had to do because they missed the "courtship ritual" (27) so missing from contemporary existence:

We had finally wooed and been wooed, given an old-fashioned structure through which to attempt the process of romance. E-mail had become an electronic epistle, a yearned-for rulebook. The black and white of the type, the welcome respite from the distractions of smells and weather and other people, had, in effect, allowed us to be vulnerable and passionate enough to actually care about something. It allowed us to do what was necessary to experience love. It was not the Internet that had contributed to our remote, fragmented lives. The problem was life itself (27-8).

Like many of the essays in *My Misspent Youth*, Daum here is able to summarize the search for beauty and meaning that many people, especially young adults, are facing in a consumer-driven, alienating, and often cruelly disappointing world. She is able to chastise herself and others while at the same time displaying a keen and sympathetic understanding the circumstances that have caused them such loneliness and isolation.

"Variations on Grief," the book's most honest and vital essay, details Daum's experience with the death of an old friend about whom she had very mixed feelings. Throughout the essay, she admits how she was unable to admit her grief at the time, a mixed bag of grief and relief, and instead "decided to create an ironic occurrence rather than a tragedy" (157). She relates the experience of lying to his parents both before and after his death, and of the confusion and pain that this caused her:

The words I said to Jan and Howard Peterson after their son was dead were even bigger lies than the ones I'd said when he wasn't. I continued with the present tense. "Brian's probably laughing at us now." And "Brain, though he is sad to leave you, is probably fascinated by whatever he is experiencing now." They loved this (169).

Throughout *My Misspent Youth*, Daum is alternately engaging and intense, momentous and delightful, and always honest. This is a collection of essays that seems to be disparate in its subject matter and themes, yet it is one that upon further thought reveals itself to be an absolutely appropriate work for disaffected, alienated, yet undyingly hopeful readers, both young and old. Daum has succeeded both in making a work very much of its time and one that will be relevant for many years to come.