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Jill Ker Conway

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Conway's *The Road from Coorain* presents a vivid memoir of coming of age in Australia. In 1960, however, she had reached the limits of that provincial--and irredeemably sexist--society and set off for America. *True North*--the testament of an extraordinary woman living in an extraordinary time--tells the profound story of the challenges that confronted Conway, as she sought to establish her public self.

True North: A Memoir Details

Date : Published August 15th 1995 by Vintage (first published August 9th 1994)

ISBN : 9780679744610

Author : Jill Ker Conway

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography, Biography Memoir, Cultural, Australia

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From Reader Review True North: A Memoir for online ebook

Jocelyn says

Jill Ker Conway sketches the beginning of a woman's academic career in the 60s and early 70s, from graduate work at Harvard to assuming the presidency of Smith College. Here is a strong, Type-A personality--tested in the crucible of a farm in the Australian outback and the struggle to break free of a controlling mother, and so ready to tackle gender discrimination and to campaign for women's education. Her natural ability and training as a historian enable her to view the places she lives and the conflicts she observes in the context of natural and social history.

Paula Dembeck says

This continues the memoir started in her previous book: *The Road to Coorain*. It picks up the story as she leaves Australia for Harvard where she enters a small community of women scholars. She has a love affair with a Canadian War hero John Conway, twenty years her senior and also a manic depressive. It continues until she is ready to leave her last post at the University of Toronto to become the first woman president of Smith's College.
Candid, easy reading, well written.

Bettie? says

Dedication: *For John*

Description: *Conway's The Road from Coorain presents a vivid memoir of coming of age in Australia. In 1960, however, she had reached the limits of that provincial--and irredeemably sexist--society and set off for America. True North--the testament of an extraordinary woman living in an extraordinary time--tells the profound story of the challenges that confronted Conway, as she sought to establish her public self.*

Opening: **Within hours of my arrival in September 1960, New York astonished and delighted me. The astonishment was instant.**

Started this in the middle of a sleepless night and it is nice to know about how others have faired in a life that is so different from my own. That's what reading is all about, finding out about different things.

A quick read about struggle with sexism, in both harking back to Australia, and with her arrival to NY, US, in hurricane *Donna*.

Learning point: JFK airport was known as Idlewild airport back in 1960.

This strong woman came through to become Visiting Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Women's History Month Honoree of the National Women's History Project.

Jordan Kinsey says

A couple thoughts I found intriguing: "The departmental organization of university faculties means that every department faculty, dominated by the research ideal, strives to teach ever-more specialized courses in its chosen discipline, seeking to convert its students to aspire to graduate study in the field in question. This objective is in direct conflict with the undergraduate's need to sop up general knowledge like blotting paper, to try out new ideas, to test the limits of the individual imagination, and to find the moral insight desperately needed as an anchor during the intensely competitive process of being rigorously evaluated in a self-advertised meritocratic society."

And here's my favorite: "The first wonderful discovery was that I was obliged to move from a colonial idea of education, in which the instructor disciplines the student so that he or she measures up to standards externally developed, to a setting in which each student was viewed as a potential Nobel Prize winner, a possible colleague whose talents might one day transform what was regarded as important knowledge. This made teaching a joy, more like an intellectual form of athletics as distinguished from some parade-ground drill."

Maija says

Read it for my book club at work - I liked this, but I think it may have helped to have read her previous book first. I also was bummed it didn't cover her years at Smith (the book ends as she is to become president of Smith College - the first woman president, I believe, of all-women college). plus, I love Western Massachusetts and would have liked to read about it. Her style is somewhat removed - she is clearly an academic, not very emotional. I enjoyed most the parts about her experiences such as how women were treated in the Ivy Leagues at this time and the politics of Canada.

Connie Kronlokken says

When Jill Ker Conway arrives at Harvard, she is a scholar dedicated to her work on early women social workers, especially Jane Addams. She teaches, meeting a Canadian veteran, John Conway. They fall in love and together move to Toronto, where Jill Conway teaches at the University of Toronto. She pays attention to many administrative matters and is asked to become a Vice President for Internal Affairs. She is scrappy and is surprised to find that she likes intellectual sparring.

Conway does not skimp on the emotional challenges she faces, her mother still bitter and miserable in Australia; and Conway fighting manic depression. She is also lavish in her description of place and weathers. It is hard to love the north country after her beloved Australia, but she believes Canada to be a more fair place politically, and she eventually makes it her home. Her story is told with great insight and understanding of cultural mores.

Judi says

I was merely an academic, not an intellectual. I am merely a feminist, not a philosopher. Fifteen years younger than Conway, I appreciate what she and other feminist scholars did for those who came behind. But my working-class, state school, problem-oriented self just can't muddle through any more year-long honeymoons in Europe, dinners with Archibald MacLeish, loving descriptions of Roman apartments, or wrestling with the nature of God after a fifth of gin. A brilliant trail-blazer, but dusted with the pretentiousness that comes from some deep, deep sorrow.

Rick says

I gave this book 4 stars because I really like memoirs and loved *The Road from Coorain*, Conway's earlier memoir of her childhood. A more objective reviewer could very justifiably give this memoir, which covers the time from graduate school through her acceptance of the Presidency of Smith College at age 40, 3 stars. As many of the Goodreads reviews have noted, this book bogs down at times, going into excessive detail on small points and occasionally slipping into a detached academic tone.

But even if Conway's writing style is not as consistently engaging as it was in *The Road From Coorain*, it really doesn't matter. The incredible life she led during those years, the fascinating people she met, the insights she gained, the cultural obstacles/sexism she overcame, and the contributions she made to enhancing the equality of women, transcend any minor concerns about her narrative technique. To read this book is to time-travel from the 1950s to the 1970s and, for those who weren't women or didn't live through those years, to have a fully opened window into the challenges of being an intelligent, accomplished and ambitious woman in a world not prepared for or interested in such strange animals.

True North also provides fascinating insights into academia; the similarities and differences among Australian, Canadian, British and American culture; and the city of Toronto. While the most important story Conway has to tell is the struggle for female identity and acceptance, she is at her best and most engaging when talking about her personal rather than professional experiences, for example her nights of drinking and sharing ideas with her graduate school housemates or her struggle to cope with not being able to have children. That's when she really comes alive to me.

The most poignant part of the book is when she describes trying to come to terms with her husband's manic depression -- a condition that was barely understood at the time. "Slowly, before my eyes, the light within in faded, flickered frantically, and then was extinguished completely. This blackness was different from any moods I knew -- sudden moments of despair, depleted energy, lost confidence, anxiety. Though I racked my brains to decipher some psychodynamic origin for John's sudden swings into profound depression, they were totally unpredictable, products of a central nervous system disorder beyond anyone's control. One could, with experience, see the warning signs, sudden irascibility, flashes of suspicion, wild surges of enthusiasm, until suddenly there was a full blown manic episode -- a rage or panic of monumental proportions -- a prelude to a depression so bleak and impenetrable that no ordinary bodily cycles seemed to operate. . . .I'd thought myself a mature adult before. Now I learned firsthand the hard lesson of the middle years of life. I was bright. I had boundless energy. I was an excellent manager of time, resources, people. But I was powerless to avert suffering from the person who was the center of my personal universe."

Jo Young Switzer says

Like she did in her book *The Road from Coorain*, Jill Ker Conway uses her stunning writing ability and wise insights to describe her new life in the United States. Completely stopped from advancement in Australia because she was a woman, she found a lively, welcoming, dynamic intellectual community at Harvard. Her descriptions of her student and faculty colleagues assured the reader that she had found a place to thrive. And she did! She was a successful teacher and student. She and several women friends shared a home that became an intellectual community itself. She met her eventual husband. And all with an intellectual vitality that flew off the pages. The book moves past graduate school to her work at the University of Toronto where her combination of intellectual acumen and her sensible problem-solving meshed to create a wildly effective administrator. I wish many of us could meet with Jill Ker Conway because she is so deeply in tune with what women face in academia and in life. She is an intellectual giant, an energetic and focused writer, and a tremendous role model for women in academia everywhere I can't wait to read her next book.

Terry says

A continuation of Conway's intellectual and professional journey as she begins graduate school at Harvard. She finds both her professional speciality - the history of women and their struggle for equality - and her future husband John. She adopts Canada as her home and grows professionally at the University of Toronto before accepting the presidency of Smith College.

Consuela says

This is the sequel to *Road to Coorain* and continues with the life story of Jill Ker Conway after she leaves her native Australia to head to Harvard for graduate studies in History. She is a scholar and it's really a joy to read about her love of learning and research. This book takes her through falling in love with another scholar 18 years older than she is, their marriage, move to his native Canada, to becoming the first woman president of Smith College. What I'm impressed with is her continuation of learning, whether it's accounting, gardening, classical music, jogging. She's a wonderful writer.

Joyce says

Borrowed from public library. Adult memoir.

I must have read *The Road from Coorain*. This follows that. She's such a good writer.

Australian born, educated at Harvard, married a Harvard prof, taught at U. of Toronto (1964-1975), President of Smith College (1975-1985) in Northhampton, Mass.

Writes about discrimination against women in Australia, feminism, education, homeland, family, history -- all objectively -- and life. Quite a learning experience!

Janice says

In this second volume of Conway's memoirs, she defies the provincial attitudes of her native Australia and her controlling mother's objections and enters graduate school in history at Harvard. This takes place in the pre-feminist late 50s (think Mad Men, season 1), and it's remarkable to me that Conway had not just the determination but the scope of mind to pursue a scholarly life; coming from where and when she did, going to Harvard required an imaginative leap. I particularly enjoyed the first part of the book, when everything at Harvard is new to her; but throughout, there's the pleasure of engaging with an agile mind.

David says

another fine section of autobiography - from departing her mother and Australia to enter Harvard's graduate program in history AND covers her time at Harvard, marrying John Conway, moving to Canada to administer at York University while she teaches at the University of Toronto, until they move to Northhampton, Mass., where she will be President of Smith College.

For me the most interesting portions were the History work in Widener and Holyoke House, her view of teaching and of research, and her decisions at each stage of life about what to do. One reviewer "Rick" gives his reaction this way:-

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Ebirdy says

This got somewhat bogged down in the minutia of working at the University of Toronto, but her experiences overall were really interesting and one cannot doubt the depth of her accomplishments.

I most enjoyed the sections on her personal relationships.
