



I Just Lately Started Buying Wings: Missives from the Other Side of Silence

Kim Dana Kupperman

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I Just Lately Started Buying Wings is a finely crafted debut, winner of the 2009 Bakeless Nonfiction Prize

Kim Dana Kupperman's essays plumb the emotional and spiritual depths of a transitory life. Her episodic "missives" cover territory from the chaos of a frenetic childhood to love affairs, failed and otherwise, to the Chernobyl nuclear accident, to an ocean-crossing search for her Eastern European roots. In confident, lyrical prose, Kupperman leads the reader through a winding gallery--a collection of still lifes and portraits, landscapes of loneliness and love.

I Just Lately Started Buying Wings: Missives from the Other Side of Silence Details

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DH says

I'm not a huge fan of short story or personal essay collections because I like books with well developed characters and plots and I didn't think short stories and essays could accomplish that. But in my quest to try new things and my love for nonfiction, I decided to give this book a shot. And boy am I glad I did.

I Just Lately Started Buying Wings was an exceptionally well written collection of personal essays that reveals her personal struggles and defines what life encompasses. Surprisingly enough, this book actually took me some time to get through it. It wasn't because I didn't enjoy the book, but because I wanted to fully absorb the essence and message behind each essay before moving on to the next. As with all collections, there were some essay that I loved more than others, but overall the collection of essays was amazing and one that I would highly recommend.

Each essay carried its own weight and pulled at your emotions differently. Kupperman has a way with words and she has a great ability to make the readers see the emotions behind them as well as force the readers to use their senses. At times I felt like I could hear the sounds she was hearing as well as feel the things she was touching. There was something about her writing that made me feel she was writing with a distant and detach voice at times, as if she was a third party looking in on the tragedy when in fact she was experiencing the tragedy first hand.

The personal essays in I Just Lately Started Buying Wings were not always cheery and bright and many of them drew tears from my eyes, but they're also essays that stayed with me after I finished reading them. They were thought provoking and insightful. If you're a fan of non-fiction or if you're looking to read something different, I would recommend this book.

Amy says

Disaster and loss happens to everyone at some point in their life. But in the case of Kim Dana Kupperman, it seems like she's had several lifetimes worth of grief in just a few years. This is a collection of essays she's written in response to the various sorrows she's endured-the loss of a brother to AIDS, a mother to suicide, and a father to old age. Mix in a vicious custody battle and a drug-addicted half-brother who complicates everything, and you get just a snapshot of her life. She's had it rough, but none of the essays solicit pity. Instead, she speaks in a no-nonsense voice with no embellishment, just her take on 'who' and 'what' happened to her. She leaves the 'why' up to the reader.

In one essay, she talks about the 'arrangements' that must be made after a death-the practical aspects that are attended to in a haze of grief. Specifically, what do you do with all that stuff? Do you keep it? What makes something an heirloom? What defines a memory? In all the loss she endured, she realizes:

"Later you touch and sort, discard or keep for another time all the artifacts that testify to a life that has passed...Eventually all these objects are not only handled more than once, they are packed into containers, some resurfacing on shelves or in drawers years later, others given to friends...So many things we once

thought were useful and beautiful dissipate or are buried, as if there was no point in having them in the first place. But in the act of letting go of them, there is a relief that they no longer have to be carried, cared for, or worried about."

How many people are willing to admit that carrying the momentos of life can be a burden? It's this unflinching honesty that draws you in, and makes her writing more touching than if she simply summarized her losses. Her unique voice is apparent early on, as she describes being the trophy in a bitter custody battle between her controlling but hypocritical father and her drug-addicted mother. She tried to please both sides, eventually creating a sense of isolation in herself. Regarding childhood, she states, "The miniature versions of who we become as adults are always available, if we pay attention. As soon as I could write, I made lists and stories. And before understanding the power of words, I drew messages." What she drew were subtle indications of her frightened isolation, and yet only one person realized her plight.

One of the most moving essays was of her life in France when the Chernobyl disaster occurred. Her first reaction was to notice the wind blowing outside the window, and the implications of the poison heading her way was horrifying. The thought of it consumes much of her concentration, yet five years later she travelled to Kiev, in search of the history of her grandmother. There, she gathered stories of people who were there when the implications of the catastrophe were realized:

"I visited with a journalist who told me that in May of 1986, Ukrainian radio broadcasts recommended taking showers after outdoor excursions. He walked his Afghan hound in the park, wiped off his shoes with a wet rag by the door when he came home, and showered in his clothes with the dog. He never let on if he cried through any of this. Or what he did with the towels after those showers. Or if the dog lived."

It's in the course of her interviews that she realizes that while much is said, something is missing from their narratives: "Perhaps we participate in acts of omission to shape memory into something manageable and safe. Who has the room inside their psyche to remember everything, carry the weight of how things felt, and still get out of bed each morning?"

In all, this is a collection that begs for discussion. Her matter-of-fact tone in dealing with dividing the ashes of a loved one, identifying a body, or reading old letters from her parents, is one that makes it easier to grasp just what sadness is faces all of us. It'd be an ideal and unusual selection for a book group because the difficulties are universal. Most meaningful, she ends this on a reflective note, a word of advice for others: "My mother reminded me to care for memory as if it were my child."

Amy says

As a whole, I found this collection to be uneven. Some of the essays were mesmerizing, while others left me feeling nothing at all. A few of my favorite memoirs include "The Glass Castle" and "Angela's Ashes," both of which also detail horrific childhood circumstances. The difference, however, is that those authors used humor to tell their stories. Especially "Angela's Ashes." I am amazed and in awe of someone like Frank McCourt who can see the humor and joy in tragic situations. With Kupperman's essays, I felt ... burdened, almost. I did not feel joy or laughter. Although, I wonder if that was intentional on her part. Perhaps this dispassionate, detached, no-nonsense approach allows her to keep her distance in a way that preserves her sanity? Perhaps it's her coping mechanism, as it were.

So which specific essays caught my attention? I found myself nodding my head while reading "Anatomy of

My Father” as Kupperman described the scene where her brother Kyle insists on getting “his half of the ashes.” It reminded me that we probably ALL have experienced unpleasant situations/conversations/demands from family members that shock us with their insensitivity during times of mourning. My great-grandmother used to say that weddings and funerals bring out the worst in people, and I’ve found over the years that she was 100% right. I also felt the emotional impact of “That Roar on the Other Side of Silence” – while I have not ever experienced domestic violence in my personal life, I know women who have. I think this was Kupperman’s most powerful and provocative essay – I would choose this one as my “favorite.”

I also felt a strong connection to “Wings Over Moscow,” particularly the following beautifully worded sentences: “We’ve come here to fulfill some kind of ancestral errand in an attempt to complete a journey started by someone else, in search of something we never left, but which we feel responsible for finding ... something in both of us feels at home in this geography, longs for and somehow remembers” I totally identified with these feelings and yearnings. I have been doing genealogy research as a hobby for many years now, and I too have been obsessed with wanting to tread the same ground that my ancestors did. I’ve made trips to Ireland and Germany and stood in the places where my great-great grandparents once walked, and I too have felt that “tingle in the bottom of my feet” that feels like home in a place where I’ve never lived. It’s a powerful feeling, and I felt that Kupperman captured it very well.

Did I enjoy this collection? I don’t know if I would answer “yes” to that. I probably won’t recommend it to my friends, unless they indicate a particular fondness for dark, confessional memoirs. But I am glad I read it. And I do think that some of it will stick with me.

Kerfe says

The main problem with Kupperman's essays is that they sound so much like Creative Writing. They are overworked, or to use my daughter's description after reading one over my shoulder, "too much", "overwrought"--mostly style, not substance.

There is good writing here--a lot of it actually, especially in the first section "letters home and abroad"--I was particularly touched by the stories of her grandmother and her search for the things her grandmother chose not to say or reveal.

But they mostly try too hard, say too much. By the final section "billets-doux", the text had disintegrated into fancy phrasing that went nowhere for me. I could barely get through them.

And once again I wonder not only that people so easily and willingly expose so much of themselves to strangers--something I'm uneasy about--but that they also are unwilling to keep from telling what they know about others, that they feel compelled to also expose those who have been part of their lives in the same way. That always gives me a feeling much deeper and sharper than unease. The Personal, the Intimate, is gone; all is Public. It's not a place I'm comfortable in.

Shannon says

Would have been better but Kupperman has an annoying habit of providing definitions throughout. Etymology did not add to the missives.

Janet says

I couldn't honestly give the whole collection 4 stars, but I *really liked* a few of these "creative non-fiction" essays--namely the ones about the author's complicated family, and especially the ones about her uncommon brushes with love. She is brave and honest and writes about things that have clearly affected her deeply--her mother's suicide and demise, the deaths of her father and brother, the suicide of a boy she loved with "ethereal hair," and the affair she had with a married man while she too was married. The essays, however are not maudlin or depressing, not at all. They are simply observant of underlying tones and details that shaped what she was feeling at the time and what she feels after the passage of time about a life lived.

Koz says

This "meh" review might have more to do with the fact that I've never been all that interested in reading the confessional memoir genre than any distaste I felt toward the book itself. In fact, I'm not exactly sure why I bought this book in the first place. I think I just liked the title. So it's a goodness of fit thing, really. The writing is interesting at times, has a strong poetic flair, and is thoughtfully crafted. Overall, though, it's just not my particular cup of tea. Speaking of which, now might also be a good time to mention that I don't like tea.

Samantha Grabelle says

Loved it. Love her. I will viscerally remember the tension with her traveling companion and the kissing with the guy from the bookstore. She bared herself more than many who have claimed to.

Jen Hirt says

A delight in this collection is the passage that gives us the title -- the context totally surprised me. I had imagined that the "I" in the title was Kupperman, and in some ways it is, but the person who actually says the line is quite different. It's a good example of the smart surprises that pop up throughout this lyrical collection of essays.

ace says

A+. so far i see to have a pretty amazing batting average with this year's list. kupperman's style of prose seems almost poetic, evoking a longing and loneliness that was almost unbearable. sometimes funny, sometimes sweet, sometimes melancholy but always beautiful. probably in the top three for this year.

Lisa Roney says

Well-crafted essays about the numerous traumas in Kupperman's life. Some of them are terrific examples of the form, but there was something missing in some of them--perhaps a depth of sympathy for the people she describes. She clearly has some things to hold against people--perhaps most fascinatingly the custody battle between her parents over her--but I was sometimes worn out by these accusations. And I'm a person usually tolerant of misery. I guess I just need a bit more self-examination along with the condemnations. Still, some of the essays captured the way that history and family and self are all tangled together.

Richard Cytowic says

A beautiful example of literary essay without the "look at me" attention that calls attention to its technique or subject matter. Kupperman explores the deep silences left in the aftermath of HIV, her family's vacation of Chernobyl (!), ended romances, and in the reminiscences of family history in Eastern Europe. Compelling stories that seek the *meaning* of what happened. The calm felt after reading it is a pleasure in this ever hurtlign world.

Sarah Wells says

If you're looking for a model collection of essays whose meaning and impact as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, then Kim Dana Kupperman's *I JUST LATELY STARTED BUYING WINGS* is the essay collection for you. Kupperman exercises every tool in the nonfiction writer's toolbox. She is creative, imaginative, and descriptive. The essays in this collection are heartbreaking and honest. Each essay unfolds into the next essay with seamless ease, transitions as natural as flight. I could study her writing for weeks.

Deborah says

I liked parts of the book, particularly the essays at the beginning. My interest declined when the author seemed to stop telling a story and began to sound like she was seeking an award for literature. I didn't even understand what she was writing about some of the time. I'm not sure why I even kept reading. I only gave it 3 stars because she writes well and probably has won some award.

Jessica says

A fellow writer and reviewer of books for the NY Times told me about this collection of essays. I have to say I had mixed feelings. While she certainly has a distinctive voice, a mastery over the essay as a form, and crisp prose, I couldn't get into many of the essays. I don't know if it's that I'm finding collections of essays difficult or if it is something about her language that did not grab me, certainly not in the way Latiolais' prose

in Widow did. The essays are worth reading though since she uses a longer form and is not always immediately transparent about the heart of the piece. In fact, the true guts of the pieces weren't always obvious, even though there were beautiful moments and interesting connections being made between her life and science or law or history.
