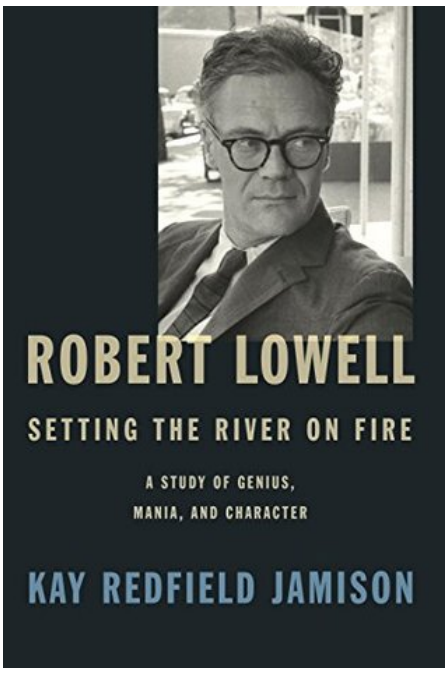

Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character

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In this magisterial study of the relationship between illness and art, the best-selling author of *An Unquiet Mind*, Kay Redfield Jamison, brings an entirely fresh understanding to the work and life of Robert Lowell (1917-1977), whose intense, complex, and personal verse left a lasting mark on the English language and changed the public discourse about private matters.

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry, Robert Lowell put his manic-depressive illness (now known as bipolar disorder) into the public domain, creating a language for madness that was new and arresting. As Dr. Jamison brings her expertise in mood disorders to bear on Lowell's story, she illuminates not only the relationships among mania, depression, and creativity but also the details of Lowell's treatment and how illness and treatment influenced the great work that he produced (and often became its subject). Lowell's New England roots, early breakdowns, marriages to three eminent writers, friendships with other poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, his many hospitalizations, his vivid presence as both a teacher and a maker of poems—Jamison gives us the poet's life through a lens that focuses our understanding of his intense discipline, courage, and commitment to his art. Jamison had unprecedented access to Lowell's medical records, as well as to previously unpublished drafts and fragments of poems, and she is the first biographer to have spoken with his daughter, Harriet Lowell. With this new material and a psychologist's deep insight, Jamison delivers a bold, sympathetic account of a poet who was—both despite and because of mental illness—a passionate, original observer of the human condition.

Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character Details

Date	:	Published February 28th 2017 by Knopf
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From Reader Review Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire: A Study of Genius, Mania, and Character for online ebook

Owlseyes says

"I have a nine-months' daughter,
young enough to be my granddaughter.
like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear."

"What can the dove of Jesus give
You now but wisdom, exile? Stand and live,
The dove has brought an olive branch to eat."

"When the Lord God formed man from the sea’s slime
And breathed into his face the breath of life,
And blue-lung’d combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of His will."

THE ILLNESS AND INSIGHT OF ROBERT LOWELL
A new book is the first to bring clinical expertise to the poet’s case. What does it reveal about his work?
By Dan Chiasson
in: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/201...

https://www.theparisreview.org/interv...

Aida Ghazar says

This is an interesting book .The author has done a very thorough research on Robert Lowell,his personal and literary life and his poetry and prose.
Robert Lowell was a gifted poet who was suffering from mania and depression while creating very original and beautiful works of art .Ms. Jamison had explored deep in these issues and had tried hard to explain why and how the disorder had affected Lowell's work.Yet one wonders why such an exhaustingly detailed study on mania and depression? This is not supposed to be a medical study book .The author seemed obsessed with the bipolar disorder and has repeated herself so often on the subject.However, I had always enjoyed Robert Lowell's poems and prose.He was a genius.

Lynda Archer says

Robert Lowell was a Pulitzer prize winning poet, extremely bright and he suffered from bipolar illness / manic depression. Jamison does an amazing job of taking us inside the life , from birth to death, of someone who is brilliant, creative and suffers from a major mental illness. She makes an exhaustive examination of the connection between mania and creativity. I have read other books by Jamison, in particular, The Unquiet Mind, in which Jamison writes about her own journey with bipolar illness and her works as a clinical psychologist. While these books may not be for everyone, I must stress that neither are dry clinical treatises,

but beautifully written stories and journeys into the life of mental illness, profound efforts to help the world better understand mental illness.

Jeffrey Hatcher says

The public, the student, and even health-care practitioners need more biographical exposure to people with mental illnesses. The only way to really grasp the nature and diversity of mental illness is via empathy. Brains have no moving parts and x-rays, MRI's and autopsies come up decidedly short for imparting understanding. More importantly, mental illnesses frequently need an intimate, real - world perspective to be best understood. Kay Redfield Jamison helps fill this gap with a study of Robert Lowell.

Writing as an academic, Jamison presents a biographical dissertation on Lowell, the patient and the poet, that trends to unabridged. However, even to someone unfamiliar with the man, she brings him alive in a manner that engages. I received this book in a giveaway lottery - I am not deeply into author biographies. Hence, twenty percent of the way into it, I wondered if I would finish it given its narrow focus on someone with whom I have little familiarity. I am pleased to say that I did and am glad to have done so. Jamison writes in an energized style. She has a talent for keeping every paragraph vibrant in the manner of a first - rate fiction writer, let alone an academic. But the book is anything but fiction, and the fact that it is not adds to its richness.

The book has one structural weakness that the reader can remedy on their own if they know to do so. Mania, in and of itself, is fascinating and complicated. By the third chapter, I wanted more medical background to better appreciate the poet. Half of the way through, I craved it. Jamison had me hooked, but I was not appreciating all that she had to say about Lowell's life circumstances. She brings the disease alive at Chapter 9 and again in Chapter 13 (the best of the book).

Jamison does give a fine clinical description of the disease. Unfortunately, she has hidden it in Appendix 2. In future editions, it should be worked into the main text after the 2nd or 3rd chapter. I encourage the reader to start with the appendix or check it within the first half of reading the book. Mental illnesses are very diverse and poorly understood by the public and very often by doctors as well. Lowell's life needs to have maximum context from the beginning to best orient the reader.

The book's subtitle lists genius, mania, and character as topics. The text is strongest on the topic of character, then mania, and lastly genius. Given the order, some more space could have been allocated to his poetry with a few more examples showing where his genius lay early on. A larger amount of direct commentary on the verse would be helpful to tie it to Lowell's mania. Redfield does note, "manic patients use more adjectives and action verbs and more words that reflect power and achievement," but these points could be referenced to specific verse examples more frequently. It is not entirely clear how Lowell has more genius than other poets. Chapter 13 brings his writing alive (it is about death, after all) in the more dissected manner that poetry often requires for a novice to quickly appreciate. My own unfamiliarity with Lowell limits my full appreciation of Jamison's work in this regard.

All in all, a rewarding read to the amateur and undoubtedly mandatory one for the literary scholar. We hear about the relationships between mental illness and talent often to the point of cliche. Setting The River On Fire brings said relationship into valuable focus and adds depth to our knowledge of mental illness and talent generally.

James Murphy says

I thought this a beautifully rich and reverential book about the great American poet Robert Lowell. It's rich in its comprehensive investigation into his work and his manic-depressive illness and how the two affected each other. And it's finally an homage to the great poet he was despite his affliction. Kay Redfield Jamison makes clear early on that the book isn't biography. Rather, it's a psychological study of his life and mind and a history of his illness. Since his hospitalizations began in 1949 and he underwent 16 periods of treatment for his mania, the book is a record of his illness across his entire life as poet and teacher. There was no facet of his life not touched by the illness, no relationship not seared in some way. Though Jamison is a psychiatrist and not a literary critic, all her previously published work has involved the relationship of psychology and art. I think her knowledge of both fields are shown to good effect here. I was impressed with her discerning analyses of Lowell's poetry. Her glosses of the poetry don't have to concern themselves with the influence of his mania in order to show how adept she is as a critic. One of the things I like best about the book is what I think is her clear understanding of the man and poet Lowell was. In demonstrating how brave he was in the face of his lifelong disorder, she also demonstrates her evident respect and affection for him. This is a wonderful read.

Brendan says

My enjoyment of this book is due in part to the fact that it's *not* by a literary scholar. As a history of Robert Lowell's mind, written with great sympathy by a fellow sufferer, it's the book I think Lowell has deserved all along, and I hope it goes some way toward reviving his reputation. Here are two paragraphs that give a sense both of Jamison's style and of what the book is about:

> When mania swept through Robert Lowell's brain it did not enter unoccupied space. It came into dense territory, thick with learning, metaphor, and history; filled with the language and images of Virgil and Homer, the violent rhythms of Nantucket whaling; a decaying Puritan burial ground stacked with ancestors and ambiguity; the words and moods of New England writers, Hawthorne and Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, and Henry Adams, Jonathan Edwards; and the thicket of memories kept by a sensitive and observant child reeling within his family. The words of Dante, Shakespeare, Pasternak, Hardy, and Milton were not just in his mind but *were* his mind, kept alongside the place he kept for Dutch paintings and Beethoven's late quartets. Lowell's mind had been stamped by words and shaped by shifting moods; always, it had been beholden to words. Mania, when it came, shook his memory as a child shakes a snow globe.
>
> When Lowell was well, which was most of the time, his mind was fast, compound, legendary. The depth of his knowledge and the relentless seriousness with which he acquired and used it were spoken to by virtually all who knew or studied with him. His was a retentive and elaborating mind; brilliant, all encompassing; a labyrinth of myth and language and experience. When mania attacked it advanced on a well-used and comprehended library of history and life, a field of ideas that could not be crossed. Mania attacked in the way characteristic of mania, a stereotypic assault, but the brain it set afire was rare in its capacity, seriousness, and discipline. (p. 282)

Jennifer says

My only complaint is that it got a little long and tedious, but this is a brilliant portrait of a complicated, talented man. Jamison's prose is gorgeous. I listened to the audio book and at times couldn't tell if she was quoting Lowell's poetry or writing her own descriptions. It was often the latter.

Lew Watts says

As Kay Redfield Jamison says, "This book is not a biography...[but]...a psychological account of the life and mind of Robert Lowell." In doing so, she does much to correct the negative views and reviews of Lowell, not least Ian Hamilton's biography of Lowell, first published in 1982, that presents an image of a boorish, angry man—no doubt gleaned from Hamilton's observations of Lowell in one of his late-stage manic episodes. Indeed, these manic episodes, followed by long periods of depression, were both the curse and source of inspiration throughout Lowell's life, intense periods when he wrote frantically and beautifully.
Jamison is a professor of mood disorders and psychiatry at Johns Hopkins university, and is supremely qualified to write about the nature, and terrible effects of Lowell's bipolarism (or, as she prefers, manic depression). She is also an honorary professor of English at St Andrews in Scotland, and this comes through in both her writing and sensitivity to Lowell and his work.
My only (slight) criticism is that, for readers more interested in Lowell's poetry, one does have to plow through long sections on mental illness, its historical treatment, and the latest views on its causes. This notwithstanding, it is a powerful and long-overdue book, particularly for those, like me, that adore Lowell's work

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Scott Rhee says

Mental illness is trending throughout the news threads these days, but it isn’t necessarily trending in a helpful way. People on both sides of the gun debate seem to agree that mental health issues should be addressed in a better way than it is currently being addressed, which is, of course, not at all. The problem is in the stigma, misinformation, and stereotypes that still plague the general public regarding mental illness.

Our knowledge of mental illness---who it affects, what it is, how to treat it---has improved somewhat in the past century, ever since psychiatry and psychology have been accepted (somewhat) as real science, but what we don’t understand about the mind and its many tendencies to malfunction has continued to be a problem for many people, not the least of which are the people suffering from mental illnesses.

The stigma that made mental illness such a taboo subject for centuries, forcing families to dump loved ones in horrible insane asylums and institutions where they would stay locked up until they died, still exists in the embarrassment and shame many people have when it comes to talking about their own illness. Even the millions who suffer from the most mild forms of depression are still, sometimes, hesitant to talk about it, and rightfully so, when so many people don’t understand that depression isn’t simply “feeling sad” and that a good cry and some positive thinking isn’t nearly enough to cure it.

Misinformation abounds in the public forum mainly because this stigma still lingers. Vocal anti-psychiatry

advocates like Tom Cruise---who claims that psychiatry is a “pseudoscience”, that chemical imbalances in the brain are “imaginary”, and that psychotherapy is “dangerous”---unfortunately have weight in many people’s minds because they, themselves, don’t know much about psychology and because, well, Cruise’s stultifyingly misinformed (and Scientology-based) contrariness resonates with a burgeoning anti-intellectualism in this country.

It doesn’t help that Hollywood still can’t seem to provide a portrayal of mental illness that doesn’t fall into one of two camps: 1) psychopathic killers, or 2) frighteningly pathetic victims of a tortured psyche whose only recourse is a strait-jacket and a padded cell. What about the millions of mentally ill people who still manage to lead productive lives? What about the millions of people who, in some cases, see their mental illness as not necessarily a bad thing?

Thankfully, occasionally, a movie or a book will get it right.

Kay Redfield Jamison’s biography/case study/literary analysis, “Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire” is notable and excellent for many reasons. Besides being beautifully written, Jamison also comes from an extremely informed position in her approach toward the poet, Lowell. She is not only the Dalio Family Professor in Mood Disorders and a professor of psychiatry at John Hopkins University School of Medicine, she is also a professor of English at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. She is uniquely qualified to speak about both Lowell’s life-long struggle with bipolar disorder *and* his body of work as a poet.

Lowell was born on March 1, 1917 in Boston, Massachusetts. From a young age, Lowell felt compelled to be a writer, and not just any writer. He wanted to be a poet; THE poet. By all accounts, including those of his closest friends and family, he had a deep compulsion and drive inside him, one that strived for perfection and deeper thinking. Sadly, he also had inside him a disorder that would plague him for his entire life.

This disorder manifested itself in long periods of restlessness, sleeplessness, uncontrolled speech, physical violence, a brain that wouldn’t shut off, hyperactive libido, complete lack of inhibition, and a total dismissal of moral structure. When this ran its course, it was immediately followed by a long period of inactivity, exhaustion (physical and mental), and feelings of extreme guilt and self-loathing. For decades, this disorder went by the name of manic-depressive disorder. In 1980, the nomenclature was changed to “bipolar” disorder.

Lowell’s case was textbook bipolarism: prolonged periods of manic highs followed by near-suicidal lows. Over the years, Lowell learned to recognize the signs of oncoming mania, and his friends and family did as well. Oftentimes, he was able to check himself into hospitals for treatment. Occasionally, he was sent there against his will when his mania became too out of hand.

While his manic episodes were trying times for friends and family, Lowell found a way to at least take advantage of them. He wrote much of his poetry in mania-fueled marathon writing sessions. Many of these poems found their way into award-winning books, such as “Life Studies”, considered by many critics to be Lowell’s best book of poetry as well as a classic in 20th-century American literature.

It is amazing to think that Lowell, even through the roughest episodes of mania, managed to write some of his best work. It is, however, in the history of artistry and insanity, not unheard of or unusual.

Jamison writes about the growing scientific evidence that links positive mood increases with increases in creativity. Lowell’s experience with his manic episodes throughout his life seem to illustrate this and is supported by the scientific evidence.

When lithium was discovered to be highly effective in treating mania and depression, Lowell was an early beneficiary of the drug. It worked extremely well for him, and it helped keep his manic episodes at bay for longer periods of time. Sadly, though, it was not a cure. Lowell would suffer manic-depressive episodes for the rest of his life until his death on September 12, 1977. He died of a heart attack brought on by heart disease that most likely had its roots in his life-long struggle with bipolarism.

Jamison's book is certainly an unusual biography in that it is a respectful account of a man's life, but it isn't only that. In many ways, it is a biographical account of Lowell's illness and an examination and overview of the history of manic-depression/bipolar disorder.

Interspersed throughout the book are chapters that look at how mania and depression were treated by our ancients, starting as early as the Ancient Greeks, many of whom wrote about the connection between mania and creativity, madness and genius, long before the scientific evidence had been gathered to support it.

There is no doubt in Jamison's mind that Lowell was a genius. There is also no doubt in her mind that Lowell faced his disease with aplomb, courage, and a realistic sense that he would never be cured so he may as well make the best of life, which is what he did.

Lowell's life is, perhaps, a healthy template for people suffering from mental illness, in whatever form it takes but especially in the oft-misunderstood form of bipolarism. Jamison's book is also an important, compassionate, knowledgable examination of mental illness in general, which is much needed in today's hair-trigger, anti-intellectual, dispassionate atmosphere that has led to a complete lack of understanding and mistreatment (and, in many case, absolutely no treatment whatsoever) of the mentally ill.

Carl says

Seventeen years ago I retired from my academic career as a scientist to immerse myself in poetry: in reading it, in writing it, and in studying it and poets.

Along the way I did encounter Robert Lowell and his poetry and specifically liked a couple of them: Skunk Hour and For The Union Dead. As for the poet himself I came away with the impression that he was a bit of an oddball, but no sense or perspective on what he contributed to poetry until I read Adam Kirsch's The Wounded Surgeon.

But I still had no appreciation of the full extent what he had done until I read this book. I came away with an entirely new perspective and at the end of the book I have three specific regrets:
---That I never got to meet this remarkable man
---That I was not there in June of 1960 when he read For The Union Dead on Boston Common
---That I was not there for any of his readings at Harvard College.

Now let me talk about this specific book. It is an extraordinary book about an extraordinary poet and written by an equally extraordinary author. Kay Redfield Jamison set out in this book to correct the record about Robert Lowell: to address and characterize his illness and its impact on his poetry and the field of poetry itself. To this task she brings several unique qualifications. In the first place she is a clinical expert, meaning her academic career has been devoted to the study of mood disorders, including manic depression, or what we now know as bipolar disease. Furthermore she brings the unique perspective of she herself suffering from bipolar disease. In addition, though she is not a poet herself, she writes like a poet: succinctness of writing,

great metaphors, and magnificent lists, like this one:

"It seemed a uniquely blighted era of writers; manic breakdowns, depression, addiction, alcoholism, or suicide struck, among others, Hart Crane, Vachel Lindsay, Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Delmore Schwartz, Theodore Roethke, Randall Jarrell, Robert Lowell, Jane Kenyon, Boris Pasternak, Dylan Thomas, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Styron, Jean Stafford, James Schuyler, James Wright, Thom Gunn, Geoffrey Hill, Mary McCarthy, F. O. Matthiessen, Elizabeth Bishop, Edward Thomas, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, John Berry"man, Anthony Hecht, William Carlos Williams, Walker Percy, Moss Hart, William Inge, George Mackay Brown, Louis MacNeice, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Edmund Wilson, Robert Penn Warren, Franz Wright, James Dickey, and William Meredith."

Several things about Lowell stand out from her story about him. In the first place, from the beginning he had an incredible sense of purpose, the sense that he was not only meant to be a poet, but that his purpose was to move poetry into new arenas. Secondly, is how much his mania was in the service of this purpose. Third, is an almost serendipitous occurrence which ensured he would achieve his purpose. His parents sought the help of a psychiatrist to cope with what they viewed as their wayward child, but this man, also a poet, had the incredible wisdom to get Lowell connected up with John Crowe Ransom and Alan Tate, two great poets and teachers. One wonders what would have happened to Lowell if he had not found this connection?

The other unique factor about Robert Lowell was that he had an iron willed determination – what he wanted and what he set out to do, he did. Jamison attributes this in part to his unique personality and equally to his New England Puritan legacy and character. More importantly she cited this will as essential, given the nature of his disease. He did not have garden-variety bipolar disease, his disease was so serious that he was hospitalized 20 times in his lifetime. And those hospitalizations were not just for a few days at a time and not just a few weeks---sometimes even for months. It took an incredibly strong will to overcome that amount of distraction and destruction, and he did it, to his credit.

She also observes how Lowell, toward the goal of achieving his stated purposes, changed his style, and poetry in general, with each book of poetry, not just once but multiple times, and his changes were seismic. The first example of this is the comparison of Lord Weary's Castle, 1944, to Life Studies, 1956.

Her academic research gives her another unique perspective, for she has focused on the relationships between creativity and bipolar disease, among other things. Her summation about creativity, writing, and mania is that mania drives the creativity in a man already skilled as a poet, but does not make a poet out of an uncreative person. Lowell himself affirmed in an interview that indeed his mania did drive his creativity and his poetry, more like the mania gave him the rough outlines and when the mania passed, with the cold eye of depression, he forged it into decent poetry.

Along the way, as she tells this clinical and poetic story, she also documents with comments from friends and acquaintances, what a warm and appreciated friend Robert Lowell was. Not the least of these friendships was the lifelong one with the poet Elizabeth Bishop, their correspondence documented in the book Words In Air. The point being not only was he a great poet but he was a great human and a loyal friend.

My humble opinion is this is not a book and a story to be missed by anyone with any interest in poetry whatsoever.

Beverly Hollandbeck says

I once had a college professor for a poetry class who believed that the explication of a poem should not involve the poet's life at all. She believed that when a poet wrote, he/she took on a "persona" that was not necessarily the poet. This book about the relationship between Robert Lowell's poetry and his bipolar disease blows up that theory. Lowell is his poetry. It's as much Robert Lowell as his nose. So. Dr. Hunt, you need to go back and rethink that grade you gave me for my Sylvia Plath composition.

I marked the rating lower because so much of it was repetitive. How many ways can one describe mania?

George Witte says

An outstanding book that brings us closer to Robert Lowell’s life and work than any previous book on him—or, indeed, on any other poet. Jamison brings her unique perspective and intimate understanding of how mental illness (unlike most physical illness) is misperceived as willful, a character flaw, a thing to be ashamed of. In this great poet and in so many other artists, as Jamison convincingly demonstrates, such illness is part and parcel of the creative spirit and can help enable extraordinary accomplishment, while at the same time be destructive to human connection and therefore uniquely lonely to endure. Lowell’s courage and resilience in the face of repeated hospitalizations and mental breaks is as remarkable as the poems he wrote despite (and perhaps because of) his illness.

Julie Ehlers says

Ugh, the writing is just deadly. I've been constantly looking for other things to do so I don't have to pick this up. That means it's time to move on.

William2.1 says

Very excited about this one.

Jenna says

My review of this book is now up at *Literary Matters*: http://www.literarymatters.org/10-1-a...

And here are a few Lowell quotes from the book that I enjoyed and jotted down but was unable to work into the review, to tantalize you further:

"My disease, alas, gives one a headless heart...."

"Such a narrow fierceness, so many barbed quills hung with bits of skin."

"Why don't they ever say what I'd like them to say?...That I'm heartbreaking."

"To live a life is not to cross a field.... We cannot cross the field, only walk it."

"THE IMMORTAL IS SCRAPED
UNCONSENTING FROM THE MORTAL"
