



## The Life-Writer

*David Constantine*

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# The Life-Writer

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## **The Life-Writer** David Constantine

The long anticipated novel from the author of the short story 'In Another Country', which inspired the Oscar/Academy Award nominated film, #45Years.

Following the death of her husband, a literary biographer resolves to turn her professional skills to the task of piecing together aspects of his life, in particular, a journey he made years before they met – a hitchhike through France that he had tried to tell her about in the last few hours of his life. Picking her way through bundles of letters and postcards from five decades earlier, Katrin begins to uncover a life she knew nothing of, and an expedition that exceeded anything her professional, biographical subjects ever undertook. 'Think of me then,' her husband beseeched her, at the roadside, thumb in the air, gaily setting forth, 'never forget me then.'

David Constantine's passionate tale of grief and rediscovery marks only the second foray into novel writing for an author whose short fiction has won international acclaim. A great work of literature, he reminds us, is never finished, it is 'a living and moving thing, alive in all its parts in every fibre', designed to be inexhaustible and to outlive. As Katrin's journey proves, the lives of those we love are similarly inexhaustible, they keep on offering up new revelations, possessing the people they leave behind, and forever needing to be re-written.

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## **The Life-Writer Details**

Date : Published August 25th 2015 by Comma Press

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Author : David Constantine

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## From Reader Review The Life-Writer for online ebook

### **Melissa says**

Thanks to Edelweiss and the publisher for an Advanced Reader Copy in exchange for an honest review.

Don't get me wrong. The writing is fantastic. I wanted to finish, I enjoyed the characters, I wanted to find out what happens to Katrin. However, I got through 70% and just couldn't take any more. So morbid, that Katrin, clearly loved by her recently deceased husband, would mourn his death by writing the story of his supposed one great love at least forty years in the past. Very well written, it was a bit too heavy for me at the time.

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### **Lucy VanPelt says**

davvero bello e molto ben scritto, questo The Life-Writer che in italiano è uscito con il titolo La Biografa. Se non metto il punteggio pieno, è solo perché mi è risultato pesante. Non perché sia noioso, anche se è sicuramente lentissimo - il che non è necessariamente un difetto, quando si hanno cose importanti da dire - ma perché mi riesce proprio pesante personalmente il tema dell'elaborazione del lutto che pervade tutto il testo.

Katrin infatti, di professione biografa di vite minori, per uscire dalla depressione provocata dalla recentissima morte del marito decide di ricostruirne la vita e in particolare di raccontare/raccontarsi gli anni della sua giovinezza e dell'intenso primo amore. Una ricostruzione più riuscita, a mio parere, nei suoi momenti più lirici e pastorali che in quelli della passione travolgente. Per pura coincidenza, ho letto subito dopo un altro splendido romanzo che, scritto in tempi molto diversi e per narrare una storia molto diversa, di nuovo e in molto altrettanto poeticamente riuscito mette a tema il passaggio dall'adolescenza all'età adulta attraverso una narrazione pastorale in cui la natura è insieme metafora e protagonista.

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### **Angela Young says**

I'd like to give this book 100 stars: it is the most lyrically beautiful, subtly evocative story of love, life, death, the natural world and the way we human beings are that I've read for a long long time. For ever, possibly. If you didn't know David Constantine was a poet (I didn't) you'd know from reading *The Life-Writer*'s prose, but even more importantly *what* he writes about is what we all need to read to discover how we are when we're in love; to discover how we might be in death or when we're grieving the death of a beloved person; how to be more observant about the astonishing planet we live on, naturally, and how to think about our planet; and, for me at least, to recognise the way marvellous writing can elevate our thinking and our very being.

Here is a (male) writer who understands women emotionally and observes women acutely. For instance, about a pregnant young woman:

In that short interval [she] has lapsed into her familiar remoteness, behind the mask of her

pregnancy, not discourteously but as of right withdrawing into the centre of her waiting and attending, where she belongs.

Here is a writer who loves the natural world:

Another thing in him, of course, another premise or the consequences of the premise of atheism, is love of the earth. I had a walk last weekend, hitched into Wales, walked a good long way and slept out on a hill facing Cader Idris. Cold, of course, but such beauty of moon and stars, the owls calling across me, till the hesitant rosy-fingered dawn. I brewed up a coffee, leaned in my bag against a tree, the rabbits came forth, quite close, the ground was silver-dewy, and I read his epigraph again, from Holderlin's *Empedokles*, you remember, the dedication of oneself to the earth, to love her faithfully, fearlessly, in her sufferings, in her mysteries, with a love that would last till death. And it's that, the love of the beautiful earth and the making of an answering beauty in art and in deed, that I'm most touched by at present. Revolt in *jouissance*, in the enjoyment and in the making of beauty, so that men and women will live lives fit to be looked at on the beautiful earth. That seems to be a project worth working for in the time allowed.

Here is a writer who knows love:

I saw very clearly what you were like with me when we made love, how at the mercy of it you were, just as I was, both at the mercy of it, equally, and I saw then and I still see now how good that was, such a good thing, given to very few, and it was ours, in us, and in our heart of hearts ... if you woke this morning and looked in the mirror you would see us standing side by side and naked, wide-eyed, astounded, fearful, at the mercy of it, rejoicing, exultant, wholly given up to it in one another ... you ... will always know that it was glorious, being in it, head over heels in it, laughing and crying and whispering and shouting in it, you knew it was good, you knew your life, like mine, would need it for ever, having loved like that, been *in* love like that.

I left bits out only so I wouldn't give anything away, otherwise I'd have quoted the whole piece. And here is a writer who knows death and grieving:

Rob will grieve as you are grieving, it can't be otherwise, for so much love, so much grief, it is just, your grief is a measure of your love, be glad if you can, rejoice if you can, grieving you love him, in your heart of hearts you would not want it any different.

It reminds me of something I stumbled on the other day:

Grief is love with nowhere to go.

What else can a reader possibly ask of a novel? Please please please read *The Life-Writer*. You'll be missing a beautiful evocation of the fundamentals of life and some extraordinarily moving scenes written in astonishing language that will carry you directly into the hearts of the people you're reading about if you don't read it.

PS It's thanks to that wonderful publication *The Reader* <http://www.thereader.org.uk/magazine....> that I discovered David Constantine and this book. Thank you.

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## **John Addiego says**

I found this very moving and extraordinarily poetic in its exploration of grief and old love. There's a writerly conceit that the reader has to accept: that the protagonist, who is a writer of other people's lives, is able to imagine so much into the experiences that aren't hers. Now and then this felt like too much artifice for me, but most of the time it's enthralling. Now and then the depiction of romance and the grieving process also seemed too much, unbelievable, unhealthy, but the writing is so exquisite that I let it be. Youth, hedonism, romance, adventure, the French--against such a sane and proper English boy seems to have little chance.

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## **Susan says**

A well written story with a protagonist who frustrated this reader. Katrin cares for her older husband who dies of cancer and then indulges in excessive grief while investigating his life before they met. She discovers that he was unlikable and had disappointed and dismissed a brother, his parents and a good friend. In the process of learning the husband's life story, especially details about his first love whom he met in Paris, she neglects to pursue and live her own story and in the process Katrin becomes passive and dull. Katrin strives for accuracy and fairness in telling her husband's story despite her distress that he had been wildly in love with Monique, but the reader can't be sure how much is real and how much bubbles up from Katrin's imagination and a certitude that her partnership with the man was almost an afterthought or mere convenience.

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## **Michelle says**

"The Life Writer" by British author David Constantine covers early widowhood, mourning, the lingering imprints and effects left behind and the need to connect with the past for a better understanding of loved ones. Dr. Katrin Szuba decided to retire from her position at an unnamed University in Surrey after the death of her beloved husband Eric. Eric had passed away before he could complete a story he was telling Katrin, as she would bravely examine his romantic past that included other women.

At Eric's wake his first love Monique was present and weeping like a child claiming Eric had been the grand passionate love of her life she had foolishly betrayed and lost. Katrin decided to explore Eric's early years in 1962-1963, beginning with the love letters Monique had mailed to him from France; recovered from his trunk stored in the attic of their home. Also present during that time was Eric's lifelong best friend Daniel, who shared his version of events and stories of Eric's romances. With a writerly focus and determination to know more, Katrin traveled to Eric's youngest brother Matthew and Shelia's home near Manchester, and learned that Eric's family wasn't ever pleased with young Eric's free-spirited nature, travel to France, and inability to take his studies at Oxford more seriously. They never approved of Monique or Eric's hasty marriage to his first wife. Eric would later become a single father of his only son after the marriage ended in divorce. Katrin would become Eric's second wife in middle age.

Constantine is a gifted writer of highly detailed (scenic) lyrical prose, sometimes the story seemed lost in overwriting; it was challenging to connect emotionally with the matter of fact writing style that defined character development and interaction. An example of this was when Katrin implored Daniel to continue telling his story about Eric over the phone and fell asleep. There were many predictable and typical things that happen in young love that seemed a big deal in the storyline, though wouldn't be the case in real life.

The literary references throughout the story lead to one most fascinating: Katrin's muse, Polish poet Marianna Levetzow who lived in the 19th century and performed from memory her works in French, German, and English. The ending of the story was truly sweet as Katrin developed connections with people who knew and loved Eric the most. With thanks to the Seattle Public Library.

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### **Nancy says**

I did not get the point of this book. Not only could I not relate to the quest of the bereaved wife, I found her obsession to discover past details of her husband's life, to the detriment of her personal growth and daily living, rather sad. Completing this book was an act of personal discipline. It was a choice of my book club, or I would have discarded it early on.

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### **Ian says**

There is a moment of understated poignancy (one among many such) in David Constantine's novel *The Life-Writer* when Katrin—struggling through the aftermath of her husband Eric's death and writing his biography—realizes that his life was much more dramatic and thrilling before she became a part of it, that she only came to know him on the tranquil downside, long after the passions were quenched and the adventures were over. It is typical of the discoveries that Katrin makes, as she sorts through the letters and memories that Eric has left behind. Eric, 68 at the time of his death and many years older than her, lived an entire life before they met, and though Katrin has always understood this, as her research progresses she often finds herself shocked and bruised by the details of this previous life. Katrin, an academic and writer, has focused her professional career on the lives of minor figures of European romanticism: artists, writers and musicians who aspired to greatness but never quite measured up. She is fascinated by their relentless striving and how, in the end, they either accepted their mediocrity or continued to rebel against it. When Eric dies, as both therapy and tribute, she decides she will treat him as one of her subjects, and in the process, finds that her husband loved with reckless abandon, disappointed his family, and let impulsive decisions and wayward behaviour damage his career prospects. The revelation that Eric was human and made mistakes does not surprise her. But the fact that she responds to this discovery by doubting his love for her does. Constantine's novel fully immerses the reader in Katrin's consciousness. It is a compelling narrative that as you get deeper into it becomes somewhat suffocating, and readers may find themselves looking for ways to gain a bit of distance from Katrin's anxious self-criticisms. But it is also a beautiful, wise and compassionate book filled with memorable passages and stunning visuals, written with depthless understanding of the mysteries of the human heart.

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### **Isla McKetta says**

This book was gorgeous. Like leaving me speechless gorgeous. Though I did not request the review copy that landed in my inbox, I'm so glad I was on the list because it was one of the best books I read this year. I worked on a full review for my site on how *The Life-Writer* helped me come to grips with grief and appreciate love, but it took me a month to finish the review because I wasn't ready for the book to end.

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### **Dana says**

I just can't deal with authors who don't use quotation marks.

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### **Lisa says**

The descriptions of grief are beautifully rendered and the book is well written throughout. I just had trouble caring about the E and M storyline from 50 years ago. It did not sustain my interest, at all, and therefore the book became a slog.

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### **Indigo Wayworth says**

This book gripped onto my heart and still hasn't let go.

Read for ENGL 4811: Is Beauty Just?

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### **Marjorie says**

This is a beautiful book about a literary biographer named Katrin, whose beloved husband, Eric, is dying from cancer. I had to marvel at the author's ability to so movingly depict those last months they have together. After Eric's death, Katrin starts reading through his paperwork and old letters and decides to write his life history in the hope that it will help her through her grief. As painful as it is, she begins to reconstruct the time frame when Eric falls passionately in love with Monique when he was a young man. Katrin had been so happy with Eric but now she begins to doubt whether their life together could begin to compare with his love for Monique.

Katrin's dwelling on Eric's past became obsessive. There were times when Katrin would want to stop reading the letters and just get on with her life and I wanted to selfishly plead with her to please keep reading since I wanted to know more. This was one of those books that I didn't want to end and when it did end, I wanted to start from the beginning again and that doesn't happen often. This book wrapped its words around my heart and just wouldn't let go. Gorgeous writing that touched me in so many ways.

The only negative thing about the book was that there were times when the French was not translated and I had no idea what was being said. There was one vitally important sentence in a letter from Monique to Eric that wasn't translated which I found very frustrating. At the end of the book, there was a list of translations with the page numbers, which wasn't very helpful when reading an e-book. Plus I wasn't aware those translations were there until the book had ended. Since I was reading an ARC of the book, hopefully that will be rectified in the final edition.

Highly recommended.

This book was given to me by the publisher through Edelweiss in return for an honest review.

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### **Michellelester says**

Partly it's taken me this long to finish reading because at times 'The Life-Writer' is so unbearably painful, this story of a woman writing out her grief at the loss of her husband, that I've had to steel myself for those few pages of bedtime reading I can manage at the moment. But it's more than a bereavement tale. Katrin is a biographer and in deciding to write her husband's life story, most particularly the brief but life-affirming, life-changing passion with Monique, questions are posed about how we know those we love; how the past shapes the people we become, and how written versions seek to fix the unfixable essence that is who we are. Finally, it is the most powerful story of everlasting love that I've read in a very long time. Constantine is a beautiful writer. Where has he been all my life?

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### **Robert Wechsler says**

Constantine is a writer's writer of short stories and translations, and now of longer fiction. Constantine has a perfect ear for prose and a calm, highly detailed delivery, with occasional heightened moments (with a minimum of set pieces).

The complexities and originality of this novel are literary rather than linguistic. Constantine does not embrace naturalism in that he allows his characters to have extraordinarily detailed memories, to act in extreme (but quiet) ways, to enter into unlikely relationships, etc. The narration is third-person limited tightly to the title character, which allows the author to keep a tight rein on what the reader sees and hears, without giving a direct voice to the protagonist's emotions (that is, keeping them at a bit of a distance). The author takes a risk with the uneventfulness of the novel; all events involve the personal relationships of a character who has nearly abandoned them. The result is truly excellent, but sometimes dull and repetitive in an uninteresting way. It is a joy to watch Constantine at work. A 4.5.

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