



Ghosting: A Double Life

Jennie Erdal

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When Jennie Erdal was hired to edit a flamboyant London publisher's Russian books in translation, she was happy to be able to commute from her home in Scotland. Soon, however, she was also secretly writing her boss's love letters, hundreds of newspaper columns that appeared in his name, and, though she had never before written fiction, his two well-reviewed novels. For more than fifteen years she would be the indispensable ghostwriter for the exasperating, obsessive, but nonetheless charming "Tiger." Erdal reveals this oddly intimate relationship with a novelist's flair for character and observation--and wry insight into her own collusion. Suspenseful, controversial, and beautifully written, *Ghosting* is the most penetrating portrait yet of a mysterious profession.

Ghosting: A Double Life Details

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From Reader Review Ghosting: A Double Life for online ebook

Jordan says

A ghostwriter's memoir. Jennie Erdal went from translating Russian lit to ghostwriting two novels for her writer/publisher boss, Tiger. Tiger's concept of the writing process is a little vague - "We are thinking about a beautiful novel, very beautiful. And it will have a beautiful cover. We will make sure of that." And the details of story/character/everything in between are left to Erdal. (Sex is an exception though. Tiger's adamant about having poetic, distinguish sex scenes and asks Erdal every day, "Have we done the fucky-fucky yet?") Ghostwriting seems to only lead to bizarre situations, and with the mind-boggling, fantastic Tiger at the center of them all, this was a great read.

Barb says

So far, absolutely fascinating!

Finished now, did not want it to end... This skilled writer, Jennie Erdal, really held my attention, and not only because her autobiographical book centers around interesting revelations from her years of ghost-writing for a well-known London publisher. While the Scottish mother of 3 young children, she had translated some important Russian works. Being in the right place at the right time, she developed his trust in her abilities, which gradually led to supporting his ego, and ghosting, with occasional trips to London and southern France.

Her sensitive consideration for others' feelings is evident throughout the book. She treats all manner of occurrences with such articulate literary style; her carefully constructed discussions on the writing process itself warrant note-taking & discussion. A brief section on her upbringing in Scotland, complete with elocution lessons and anti-Papist propaganda from her family, should be expanded into its own book. I hope it will be.

As life progressed, some elements in her family and job must have been quite difficult to deal with and, even years later, to describe. She handled these stresses so well! Detailing the numerous, ludicrous demands made by her boss, "Tiger," she chose varied, sometimes clipped, British terms, delivered with delightful, understated sparseness. His dictatorial mode was almost unconsciously funny, while Ms. Erdal was ever uncomplaining... but never oblivious. She remained, still keeping secrets and philosophical, long after what most would call "the last straw." Way toward the end, she used the word "lies" quite judiciously, & effectively. My impression is that she still maintains her friendship with Tiger.

Even for a few distasteful topics, her descriptions could not have been more masterful! Wish more authors wrote as well, and will look for more of her writings... under her own name!

Courtney Johnston says

A couple of years ago I dabbled in some ghostwriting. It was very different from editing, and not an

experience I greatly enjoyed. I felt like a bit of a fake, and my pride, I have to admit, was rather hurt when the book came out and I received none of the praise.

My experience has very little to do with Jennie Erdal's. For nearly 20 years she was an editor at London publisher Quartet Books. Originally employed to manage the Russian list, she gradually moved into the role of ghostwriter, servicing the flamboyant head of the publishing house, Tiger, writing everything from his love letters to his novels.

Parts of the book play out like 1980s sparkly excess - Tiger surrounds himself with longstemmed young ladies plucked from the lower aristocracy, with names like Cosima and Nigella and Samantha, whose primary roles are to be seen at the right parties. He owns the first car phone Erdal has ever seen, and uses it chiefly on the way to the airport, to remind people he has it. He is hysterical, excitable, enthusiastic, bloody-minded, incredible.

These seem to be the bits of the book other readers enjoy - Erdal's trials and tribulations and trips and tiffs with Tiger.

Interspersed with these tales are stories from her own childhood and observations on writing. These are the bits other people find boring. Admittedly, they don't have the sparkle of Tiger's world - they are the dour Scottish porridge to his aromatic Mediterranean truffle. But they detail the ambivalence she has always felt about language, an ambivalence that became more and more complex as she spent more and more of her life turning Tiger's (often strange, occasionally pervy) idea nuggets into fully-fledged books.

Growing up in Scotland, Erdal was hyper aware of the place language held in her family. At the age of five she was sent to elocution lessons - but simultaneously disparaged for talking like Lady Muck at home. Some words were allowed (bottom) and some forbidden (bum) - seemingly at random. Her mother had her everyday voice and her visit-from-the-church-elders voice, a distinction as rigidly enforced as the towels in the bathroom that were just for show - never for the family to use. Erdal writes of her happiness in the visits of an old family friend, whose storytelling brings the dinnaes and cannaes and winnaes back into the household, along with a sense of comfort and ease that is usually lacking: when he leaves after a visit she tries to continue the mood by using his words, but is swiftly shut down.

This is Erdal's first book under her own name. It's very enjoyable, if occasionally squirm-worthy: that's mainly the excerpts from the sex scenes she had to realise from Tiger's rather feverish erotic imagination. More than anything, Erdal has an observant eye and a deft touch. Here she describes the scene after the family's weekly baths, when her father has made the sprint from the bathroom back to the kitchen:

The scene was sombre but curiously edifying, a kind of Victorian death-bed moment. My father, now dry, would go to a corner of the kitchen, turn his back on us, drop his towel and bend down to step into his pyjamas. This was the moment worth waiting for, the fascination and appallingness of it undiminished by its weekly repetition. For there, hanging down between my father's legs, was a sort of pouch, loose and macerated like an oven-ready bird and, to make matters worse, there was another bit, peeping out from the base of the pouch, a pink dangly thing. When my father raised first one leg, then the other, to enter his pyjamas, the pink dangly thing moved as if it had a life independent of my father's bare body. No one ever said anything. The wrinkled arrangement between his legs was clearly some unspeakable deformity, which my father to his eternal shame had to endure. I felt sorry for him, and sometimes when he was angry with me I made allowances for him because of his misfortune.

Laura Hancock says

This memoir is about a Scottish woman who was an editor and ghostwriter for a London publisher for 20 years, through the late 1990s. One of her degrees is philosophy and I enjoyed her perspective as she tried to write books, newspaper columns and even love letters for her male boss. Essentially the moral dilemma is this: In each novel, the author's perspective on life comes out through the characters. When you're a ghost writer, you're creating a voice of the author, who is creating characters. So there is a sort of double deceit or double invention. Exhausting was the work to convince (often unsuccessfully) her boss that a book did not need another sex scene or character or what have you.

She needed the job after her husband left her with three kids to live in Australia with another woman... In addition to appreciating the financial stress she was under, I was mortified when I read that she often had to create sympathetic protagonists who were like her husband.

The British press ripped this book for not revealing more juicy gossip on the sexual and family life of her boss, the publisher of Quarter Books, who is apparently a flamboyant and controversial figure in the London literary scene. It yawned on the details of her childhood and adult life.

For me, an American who picked this book up used at Powell's City of Books in Portland, Ore., I loved the details about her life mixed with the details of the job.

Suzanne says

Entertaining, though I have to admit I was disappointed when (after reading the book) I did a little internet research to learn who she was ghostwriting for and I'd not heard of him nor any of the books she wrote for him. Still, an interesting glimpse into the life of a ghostwriter and her outrageous boss.

Ensiform says

The author worked for years at Quartet Books, gradually and somewhat unwillingly becoming the default ghost writer for its flamboyant (possibly gay?), Middle Eastern editor whom she calls Tiger. First she helps research and organize his interviews with prominent people, then somehow becomes the writer behind his novels. While a generous and mostly pleasant man, Tiger is also demanding, fastidious, and irrational, and soon Erdal needs to leave.

She's written what is a very pleasant memoir about it all, striking a fine balance between her personal life (early childhood, an unexpected divorce) and work with Tiger. She also crafts, in fine, philosophical prose, some excellent passages on the nature of writing, translating, love, and other Big Issues. It's a very entertaining and well written book.

Georgia says

So...I feel quite justified in my book cover prejudice because this book has a mediocre cover and complementary content. Ghosting is the 20 year memoir of a ghostwriter and the flamboyant publishing

playboy she wrote for. During the course of their relationship they developed a somewhat odd symbiosis. Erdal learned to cope with Tiger (as she calls her employer) and his outlandish personality and persnickety habits. She wrote at least 3 books under his name along with letters, reviews, and columns.

The concept of ghostwriting is definitely interesting and controversial and Erdal gives a great peek into the process of writing as someone else, as well as, the writing process in general. Where the book (which is fairly short) failed was in 1. structure--going back and forth between the psychology of her upbringing and her personal relationships, a character studies of Tiger and her writing process. It felt very disjointed. 2. High falutin' writing. While her writing style was mostly accessible she kept throwing in latin phrases and other references which were further made the story disjointed. One or two *sine qua non* would have been enough I think. 3. Sometimes I just didn't believe or understand Tiger as she explained him.

Anyway...here's a lesson for all of you: judge books by their cover

Ciara says

i picked this up due to my interest in the lives of ghost writers. the author of this memoir wound up working as a ghost writer for a single employer, a man she called tiger, for about twenty years. she was originally hired by tiger to work as a translator. she had studied russian literature & language in college & tiger ran a publishing company that had acquired the rights to a russian manuscript & needed it translated into english. he was so appreciative of erdal's work that he started giving her more translating jobs, which led to a timely score when she got to read the original russian language manuscript of a book that went on to be a publishing coup in the early 80s (can't remember the name of the book--sorry). tiger began to heap more & more responsibilities upon erdal, & she accepted them because she enjoyed the weird, creative, glamorous work, & receiving tiger's largesse (such as money to save her house when her husband unexpectedly walked out on her & their children), & the flexible hours that permitted her to work from home in scotland. tiger is portrayed as quite the dandy, flinging money around & lusting into publishing integrity more than anything else. eventually he decides he wants to write a book too, but he can't write, so he dictates the skeleton of the story to erdal & asks her to write it. it sounds pretty dreadful, with tiger obviously imagining himself as the dashing protagonist who is irresistible to women. but she writes it, & due in part to tiger's publishing contacts, it's surprisingly well-received. he has erdal editing an endless series of interviews he is conducting with well-known women, ghosting a weekly newspaper column, & writing a second novel, even more preposterous & dreadful than the first. she answers his correspondence, accompanies him to his country home just to keep him company, & is trying to hold down the fort of the sinking publishing company when tiger's spending outstrips the income & a shady character starts stringing tiger along, promising money & not following through. eventually her professional relationship with tiger ends on good terms, & erdal returns to a normal life with her new husband, & her own creative pursuits. this wasn't the best book i'd ever read, but tiger was a wacky enough character to keep things interesting. & the lengths he went to with the ghost writing kind of blew my mind. erdal was taking on an incredible degree of work & tiger seemed to have no idea what he was asking of her. it made me feel pretty lazy.

Jamie says

I get the feeling this book would be very entertaining if the author ever revealed who the real-life "Tiger", her megalomaniac boss, is. I also get the feeling that most people in the (European) publishing world

probably know exactly who he is. Since I don't, I read the book with the decided feeling of the one who isn't in on the joke. Tiger comes across as a jackass, and the author (Ms. Erdal) seems to be in a passive-aggressive codependent professional relationship with him. Okay, but why should I care?

Structurally, I found it extremely odd that the author continually rambled on tangents about her childhood that seem to have nothing to do with her experiences ghost-writing. Perhaps to justify why she stayed in this mess of a relationship, I suppose.

To sum up, this book isn't really about an interesting experience ghost-writing. It is a very average book about a boring woman and a horrible boss.

Debbie Robson says

Jennie Erdal had, for fifteen years, what I consider to have been one of the most intriguing jobs ever. During the eighties and nineties she worked for Quartet Books as an editor and translator. She was there in the early and mid eighties, a time of excess. I love the descriptions of the "girls" who worked there, mostly from wealthy backgrounds - always beautiful and beautifully dressed. She remained until the late 90s when money was scarce and the world had changed, with publishing houses now struggling to make a living. In between these times Erdal takes us on a wonderful journey from her childhood in Scotland to the glitz and glamour of London with retreats to a house in the Dordogne (which I would have loved to have seen).

What I really enjoyed about this book was Erdal's clear and elegant style of writing and her obvious intelligence which shines through on every page. What I also noticed, when reading other reviews, is that mostly people didn't seem to appreciate the humour in the book. I was in fits of laughter when the 10 year old Jennie is accosted by what she thinks is a man pulling a skinned rabbit out of his pants. She is bemused and startled but it is her parents' reaction to the scene that actually leaves her upset.

It was interesting to learn that her parents, particularly her mother, were on occasion ashamed of their native Scots accent and would often change their way of speaking when visitors were in the house. As a result, from a very early age, Erdal didn't trust the English language and became driven to learn one language after another, as if the answers to life might be available in another language instead of English. Her knowledge of Russian led to her job as editor/translator and eventually ghostwriter for Naim Attalah of Quartet Books, known only as Tiger in Ghosting.

Here are snippets of Tiger and his world:

"Arriving in Tiger's publishing house for the first time was like turning up in someone else's dream....It felt high voltage and slightly dangerous...."At the palace there was a retinue of attendants - valets, scribes, equerries, foot messengers, maidservants, not to mention a chamberlain figure, who had the difficult job of balancing the books."

Of Attalah Erdal writes:

There were at least two Tigers: one was the exotic, flamboyant, quixotic, loveable character, defined by his generosity, compassion and energy; the other was a vainglorious dictator. The latter was generally in the shadow of the former, but both versions were real."

I love this short description: "Like fine wine, and cats in baskets, he did not travel well." And her description of him using his mobile phone! He had acquired one of the earliest versions and was constantly on it, particularly in the back of a taxi. As Erdal says so eloquently:

“And in the back seat I experienced the first stirrings of those feelings now common among travellers whose basic entitlement to peace and quiet is being violated. I had no idea then that within twenty years a billion people would be jabbering into mobiles.”

But for the most part, of course, this book is about Erdal’s struggles to live with her profession - the difficulty of writing whilst pretending to write as a man when you are a woman; to write a book about something that is not your idea or is not what you want to write (which is something I know I would find impossible to do) and lastly how she dealt with living a life that ultimately was not her own. Highly recommended.

Catie says

Reading the Slightly Foxed Editions No. 43 released September 2018.

Felice says

How much of yourself do you set aside every day when you go to work? Are you putting on a game face or do you become someone else entirely? In *Ghosting*, author Jennie Erdal writes about her years spent living a double life at work. Why? Money? Timidity? Power? Ghostwriting started out for Erdal as a convenient job for a mother of three. It became a very strange and morally murky career. The details of her 15 years ghosting for a well known publisher (Referred to as Tiger throughout the book. In real life he was Naim Attallah) and media personality are absorbing. During that time she wrote a huge amount of business letters, love letters, articles and even full length books that were published under Tiger's name. It's quite bizarre and absorbing.

Erdal grew up in Scotland, studied Russian literature, married, divorced, married and in between had three children. She writes about all these events with grace and humor. However it's her symbiotic relationship with Tiger and especially how she got to that point, that is the fascination here. This is no misery memoir. Tiger, while the antihero isn't a villain. Some of *Ghosting* is quite amusing. Erdal as her alter ego, writing Tiger's erotic novel and the trip to France to write his first novel when she has no idea at all how to write fiction. There is some unpleasantness: temper tantrums, office politics and an ego the size of the universe to deal with on a daily basis.

Ghosting is a remarkable life portrait about an intelligent woman in a very curious situation. She not only thrives in that situation but survives and overcomes it as well.

Rita says

2004

This book was definitely entertaining for at least the first half. After that, it got rather repetitive. The flamboyant publisher/boss keeps on, but the author's [or protagonist's] understanding of him does not seem to evolve much after that.

More intriguing to me would have been if the author had explored much deeper why she continued to be so drawn to his outrageous personality and behavior. Twenty years, for goodness sake! But probably she can't explain herself to herself [and most of us can't]. Charisma [if this is the right word for what this man had] is probably a slippery thing to get a handle on.

But the first half really is nice to read. I was glad for her snippets about her childhood; there could have been more of that, for my taste.

MICHAEL GLENNY WAS THE FINEST TRANSLATOR OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE, p 77

There are nice discussions of writing, translation, and other aspects of the publishing business.

121 "Autobiography is unreliable. A lot of what we remember is designed to shield us from painful truths. As is a lot of what we forget, or choose to forget."

The book is full of such passages, that are nice to think about, though they don't always fit seamlessly into the story.

Heather Mathie says

Interesting, but I found it a bit hard going, and unable to put my finger on why.

Susan Ferguson says

An interesting book with a discussion of languages, translation, publishing and writing.

Jennie Erdal started out as an editor for a small publishing company. She called her boss "Tiger" because of a huge tiger skin he had on the wall in his office and he called all the women who worked for him "Beloved". She was an anomaly to Tiger's usual staff. Most were thin, young, single, society girls. Jennie was older, married with children and worked from home in Scotland, only going to London once a month for a meeting. Jennie had studied languages in college and knows quite a few - German, Russian, French, etc. She scored a coup for her publisher in reading a Russian book for another publisher who turned it down. The book was "Red Square". She recommended it to the other publisher in an independent reader's report, they didn't take it so she suggested it to her boss. They bought the book right before the death of Brezhnev. The book was a thriller - fiction mixed with facts concerning the death of an important official in Soviet Russia. The book was an enormous hit. She supervised the translation by dealing out portions of the book to various translators and then reviewed the whole to make sure it merged seamlessly. It was praised as a "nearly invisible translation".

Jennie talks about how she thinks she became interested in language - because growing up in Scotland there was the local dialect and the "proper" language she learned (from being sent to an elocutionist). She became obsessed with words.

She discusses the difficulties of translation. Also the difficulties of ghost writing. Tiger decided he wanted to publish a book of interviews of women in society and of renown. He sent tapes of all the interviews to Jennie who organized and edited the interviews into the book. Which was published under Tiger's name. He decided he would do another book as well. Then he wanted to write a novel. He had a few specific ideas about what he wanted in a book - and was insistent that it be included. Even if she didn't like it. It was a difficult job

writing it. Then he decided he wanted to write another, so she did. But she grew in awareness that she didn't like writing like this. She did not enjoy it and it was extremely stressful to herself. But, it took her four more years before she could finally break the connection and quit.
