

Press in America
Book Review
Sample

Christina Rodriguez
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Walt Whitman, A Life by Justin Kaplan
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Kaplan's *Walt Whitman, A Life* is as complex and mysterious as Whitman himself. There are definitely tidbits of interesting facts about Whitman that one never knew before, but it seems to jump around a lot, especially in the first chapter. How does a book go from describing Whitman's last years to how there was a fund to purchase him "a gift of a horse and buggy for daily outings"?

Granted, it is related to how he was becoming a recluse while living in Camden, New Jersey after living with his brother and his brother's wife, but how does this transition into Dr. Oliver Holmes' insistence that his contribution to Whitman's horse and buggy was "solely an act of kindness to a disabled author, implying no approval whatever to his writings". One could guess that is the way of most biographies, somewhat chronological, but at the same time, never in true order. And every book must start off somewhere. The last present time known of a person's life is often the best place to start.

So this biography is truly written almost backwards. You get Whitman in his seventies, the time before his death. You see what he has come to from his way of thinking to his way of speaking, a man constantly editing himself. In the first chapter you are told that he would burn manuscripts, edit names and genders, constantly changing anything that showed the true Walt Whitman. And he was highly disorganized through the eyes of any visitor that comes by, with his papers thrown around the floors and table, though for Whitman, he could usually find anything he needs with ease. "The disorder is more suspected than real," as he commented one time.

Perhaps to understand that is to understand who Walt Whitman truly is. There is a vast spectrum of Whitman that is recorded throughout this biography. How can Justin Kaplan capture the aging, dying poet and the egotistical man who celebrated himself and what he has done but was always in constant loneliness because of what he has done? Sheer luck and years of Whitman already documented through paper and through people.

Walt Whitman's, A Life is an appreciation for a man who gained the majority of his praise decades after his life. Only a few peers and friends appreciated Whitman and his *Leaves of Grass*, yet he is now widely studied by most academic institutions in one way or another. It's not a general known fact that Mr. Whitman was also a journalist unless you dedicate parts of your life studying him. Kaplan captures all dimensions of Whitman's journalism, from the time he was an editor for several newspapers to the founding of a paper or two and especially, though not all his accounts are journalism pieces, his accounts on the Civil War. The beauty of Whitman during the Civil War is that there are so many sides to his opinion. From the eyes of a soldier to being a man with an opinion on Lincoln and what he is trying to do, you have the war in a nutshell with Whitman and the fact that Kaplan pays attention to that and the rest of his journalism is definitely a victory for journalists and historians alike who read this book.

There are also other tidbits of information that one would not think of listing when it comes to Whitman, like his love for Italian operas and which ones he liked and listen to. Of course you have the debate of his sexuality which Kaplan does not hide, but paints him as a sexually repressed individual which is ridiculous to do because one would have to be a fool to believe that he never had at least some of the experiences that he wrote about, some of which is evident in *Leaves of Grass* and other writings.

Historically, the book gives you a lot of insight. Not only do you get information from Whitman's point of view, Kaplan also gives you a little bit of the history behind the history, though at times to the casual reader it could either bore you or slow you down. It was rather interesting to know that Lincoln would rather not talk about his humble beginnings of the living in the frontier. Whitman was a supporter of Lincoln though at times he criticized him too.

Whitman, while being a journalist for some time of his life, also made it into the newspapers as a poet. In a chapter called Meteors, you have an account where he shows up in one particular newspaper more than twenty-five times, due to a man named Henry Clapp, editor of the *Saturday Press*. Twenty-five times in one newspaper in a short period of time? That is not something you learn everyday of people from Whitman's time. Look at a newspaper or a magazine of today and you could find one person being mentioned about that many times or even more, sometimes even having a whole periodical dedicated to one person. I guess that I did not imagine someone during Whitman's time to get that much time dedicated to one piece of work.

Ironically, this one piece of work is why Whitman is famous. From its many revisions it has gone through to the content within its pages, *Leaves of Grass* is one of the most famous poetry collections ever written. Though Whitman has experimented with all types of writing, from journalism to short stories (the short story was not very successful), poetry was what Whitman was. It was Whitman's language for the American landscape, a country that he loved to explore and speak for and Kaplan captures that. While Whitman has written other poetic works, *Leaves of Grass* was the beginning of it all. It has gotten praise and denial. It has several editions and has been printed

everywhere in the world. Though Whitman has other poetic works, it was *Leaves of Grass* he tried to perfect.

Personally, I have never got the chance to read *Leaves of Grass*. Only as a poet myself, can I understand Whitman's need to perfect this collection. He wanted people to understand and he wanted to be the voice of an America who lived through a time where life was becoming uncensored. Through the select verses that Kaplan chooses to display the works of Whitman, there is a refreshing voice that speaks the sexual life of America and speaks of the opinion of a government, a war and a life lived in great thought.

I, never being exposed to the hype of Walt Whitman poetry would recommend this book as a stepping stone to be placed on the enormous river of a man that is Walt Whitman. It gives you an understanding to who Walt Whitman was and why his work is classic. You do not only get who the poet was, but who the man was. Walt Whitman never made any apologies for whatever he wrote whether it was a poem or an article about the benefits of licensing brothels and Kaplan makes sure to show that. Kaplan shows the many sides of opinion, from those who detested Whitman's work to those who thought he was an all-American genius who was America through his *Leaves of Grass*.

Not only does Kaplan capture the enigma that is Walt Whitman, he himself creates a voice that is just as passionate and poetic as Whitman himself. This is not a cut and dry account of Whitman's life, but a soft, rising sun that shines so bright, you would have to wonder if he was right beside Whitman at times, absorbing Whitman's open elegance that pulls people in with just a few words.