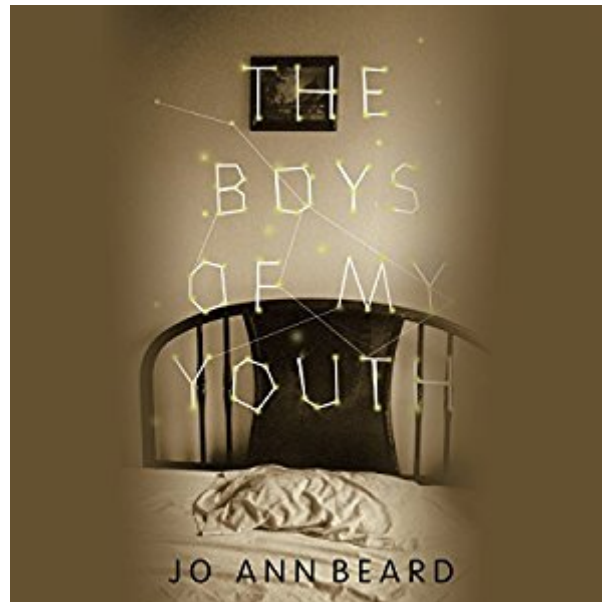


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The Boys Of My Youth



Synopsis

Rarely does the debut of a new writer garner such attention and acclaim. The excitement began the moment "The Fourth State of Matter", one of the 14 extraordinary personal narratives in this book, appeared in the pages of The New Yorker. It increased when the author received a prestigious Whiting Foundation Award in November 1997, and it continued as the hardcover edition of The Boys of My Youth sold out its first printing even before publication. The author writes with perfect pitch as she takes us through one woman's life - from childhood to marriage and beyond - and memorably captures the collision of youthful longing and the hard intransigencies of time and fate.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"My mother is sewing a button on my father's shirt while he's still wearing it. 'I was having this terrible feeling,' she says, 'that she'd be this forty-year-old woman, going around telling people that we took her d-o-l-l away from her.' She leans down to bite off the thread. My father tests his new button and it works perfectly. 'In three days she won't remember she even knew that d-o-l-l,' he predicts." But of course Beard remembers, and tells, in this 1998 non-linear collection of linked personal essays. They're coming-of-age essays, where growing up is as likely to occur at thirty as at thirteen or three. Each age is rendered perfectly, as are the characters and the 1970s-80s period details of small-town Midwest. Among the boys of Beard's youth are Hal, that beloved d-o-l-l her mother's oldest sister bullies her mother into throwing away; teenage boys who mostly ignore her at backwoods parties; her father who drinks and disappears for weeks at a time; Eric: boyfriend,

husband...; and a school-shooter where Beard works in the University of Iowa physics department. There are girls, too -- aunts and cousins; her older, nemesis sister; her mother who smokes on every page; a lifelong best friend she consults while writing these essays. I love these people and their settings; I've read Beard's novel IN ZANESVILLE, and the first half feels exactly like these essays. I love her writing and look so forward to more.

For a book that I approached with the intention on learning how to write a little bit better (mostly on the description of emotion) I was pleasantly surprised. Jo Ann Beard makes poignant, oftentimes in one sentence, indications of the people she has met in her life. She even goes so far as to, in the last chapter, intone about the book and the people to whom she must speak to about the book. What lies within the cover is a collection of short stories, jumping back and forth between Beard's adult and younger life. Although her focus is on the males in her life, whether it be a male doll when she was a kid, her father, or a lover, she also describes those in her life that were female. It's a delicate tale, but faced with a lot of courage to bear open some of her inner demons, emotions, and mistakes. Although she details on how to be human, a facet often not easily captured, this was not the most compelling of stories. Don't get me wrong, I was engaged and curious about her tale. However, I was not unable to put it down or set it aside or to think of other things, such as her quality of writing while reading. I wish I could give half stars, and for that I might have depleted just a half, but c'est la vie. And before everyone shakes their finger at me for being mean towards a personal tale, it's also extremely feminist at times. It can, therefore, be a bit oppressive towards a male audience or an audience, such as myself, who is not so geared towards feminism. Don't let such a minor mishap get you down. This book is a keeper. It's an easy read, her writing is always poetic, and worth the time, the money, and the emotional burden.

I thoroughly enjoyed this collection of autobiographical short stories. It was fun to read about someone who grew up in the same era that I did. My favorite was "The Family Hour" which was so reminiscent of the dinner table at my house back in the 60's and 70's that I had to read it aloud to my husband and sister. This collection is not all laughs, however; there are sad, poignant, and even frightening pieces that stay with you well after you put down the book. Beard's topics transcend time and place. In fact, "The Fourth State of Matter" is so timely that I saw a similar event on the news yesterday. If you're looking for a collection of essays worth your while, you've found it in "The Boys of My Youth."

For those who love dogs, best friends, and times that somehow get shared - this is our book. Read it out of order though. Read "The Fourth State of Matter" first, then start at page one. I am taken time and time again by her ability to state things so simply and so perfectly. I thank her for writing these stories. Please buy the book.

I bought this book recently after reading "The Fourth State of Matter" as part of a graduate writing course in memoir. It was my second reading of the essay, which chronicles Beard's experience of losing several co-workers in a shooting at the University of Iowa. After reading the negative reviews here, I couldn't understand (having at that point only read the one essay) how it could garner the criticism it did. As a student of writing, I look closely at how writers craft their work to see what techniques I can employ in my own writing. Beard knows her stuff. Her essays are extremely poetic. A scene at her grandfather's funeral includes this observation, "I'm too big to sit on a lap, my legs are stiff, and now my heart has a grandpa in it." Beard uses lyrical structure fluidly in many of these essays. "Cousins" runs two parallel narratives. One of Beard and her cousin, the other of their mothers, who are sisters. The result is a reinforced understanding of the closeness between the women. She is a sensory writer, and employs unusual images that are vivid and unique. In a scene in "Cousins" Beard describes herself in utero as "the size of a cocktail shrimp," in another essay, the rivers are the color of bourbon. If you are looking for a lurid, sensationalized, book that tells all the dark dirty secrets of a writer as s/he overcomes a particular obstacle, I would look elsewhere. This book does not follow the traditional arc of a coming of age tale. It is not one book length narrative, but 12 separate essays. They are not all as captivating in intensity as "The Fourth State of Matter." But thank goodness life is not always that painful. I admire the alchemy though, of taking a life and rendering its moments and phases as artfully as she has done in this book.

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