



Once Again to Zelda: The Stories Behind Literature's Most Intriguing Dedications

Marlene Wagman-Geller

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A fascinating look at the stories behind the dedications of 50 literary classics.

Mary Shelley dedicated *Frankenstein* to her father, her greatest champion. Charlotte Brönte dedicated *Jane Eyre* to William Makepeace Thackeray for his enthusiastic review of the book's first edition. Dostoyevsky dedicated *The Brothers Karamazov* to his typist-turned-lover Anna Grigoyevna. And, as this collection's title indicates, F. Scott Fitzgerald dedicated his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* to his wife Zelda.

Often overlooked, a novel's dedication can say much about an author and his or her relationship to the person for whom the book was consecrated. *Once Again to Zelda* explores the dedications in fifty iconic books that are an intrinsic part of both literary and pop culture, shedding light on the author's psyche, as well as the social and historic context in which the book was first published.

Once Again to Zelda: The Stories Behind Literature's Most Intriguing Dedications Details

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Gloria says

I think I've read too many biographies of authors.

This book I expected to be an entertaining, informative read about everyone from Mary Shelley to Sylvia Plath, Truman Capote to Stephen King, Ernest Hemingway to J.K. Rowling. Other than a few tidbits about some of the more contemporary authors, there wasn't a wealth of information in this book that I didn't already know.

It's put together a bit like a mini-history/biography of each writer. So, if you know the general story of these people (and I do mean very general), you're not missing much by skipping this book.

Renee says

The subtitle to this book should have been "The Predictable, Occasionally Interesting Stories Behind the Dedications of Some of Our Most Intriguing Literature."

Wagman-Geller picked some well-known pieces of literature--good pieces of literature--and did shallow Wikipedia research into the basic stories behind the dedications (I'm not exaggerating: there are internet links to wiki pages in the bibliography). And, sit down for this part, what seemed like 90% of writers dedicated their books to parents or partners, which is *gasp* downright shocking, given that partners and parents support writers through their writing endeavors. She's confused the part about intriguing literature with intriguing dedications.

Really, I'd rather she'd found more obscure, but more interesting *dedications* and uncovered the mystery. Like, I would be fine if the book was something I'd never heard of but the book was dedicated to somebody's pet octopus. Or, to the unnamed neighbor down the street who is just called Neighbor, Who Inspired it All.

Because if she'd done that, I could have forgiven her her dramatically simplistic writing. Guess what? When your story is only 2 pages long you don't need to use foreshadowing!! Nor do you need to incorporate the name of the book into some word play in every. single. story. Wait, actually, what I meant to say is that you should NEVER incorporate the name of the piece of literature into your work at a pale attempt at clever word play. Ever.

J. Ewbank says

This is an interesting book that Wagman-Geller has written. Indeed a vast amount of research has undoubtedly been put out in order to give us all this information. She tells us about the book dedications of the famous authors and those from whom the book is dedicated. Enjoyed reading it very much.

J. Robert Ewbank author "John Wesley, Natural Man, and the Isms" "Wesley's Wars" and "To Whom It May Concern"

Roseann says

A great little volume of short anecdotal and historical tidbits about the dedications of some of the many books we have read in our lives. Quick reading and some are funny, some sad, some just fodder for cocktail party conversation. A good read.

tomlinton says

Interesting stories
that normally I would eschew
because the writing is only fair
as I'm looking to improve myself
but I can't resist
such things as Harper Lee
Gettum up Scout!
beating up kids at school
when they would pick
on her effeminate neighbor friend
who would grow up to be
Truman Capote

Mary Kay says

A "veteran" high school English teacher researches the backgrounds of dedications of 50 famous works of literature. It's a very interesting book, but the egregious grammar errors made me cringe, especially since the author is a "veteran" high school English teacher!

Ghost of the Library says

Well this is an interesting challenge to review , and i admit to some guilty given that i like the topic chosen, but frankly the book starts well and ends like a serious of articles of some gossip magazine.

i will try to explain - if there was such a thing as a people's magazine for lovers of good literature i suppose this book would perhaps qualify as its "best of the year" edition, if you know what i mean.

What the author proposes, and was the main reason why i got this one from the local library, is to unravel the mistery behind the dedications of some classical masterpieces - and some total strangers to me - in literary history.

If you, dear reader, have ever wondered why Moby Dick was dedicated to Hawthorne, Frankenstein to William Goodwin and a few others - look no further here's the mistery unraveled!

A good amount of research was clearly put into this, and for the my sincere congratulations because it clearly shows. However, the style of writing slowly goes on a downward spiral from good to just plain boring and hinting too much at gossips for my own personal taste ...coulda, woulda, shoulda...stick to facts! is it really

necessary to imply the rumors of possible incestuous relations between Mary Shelley and her father? to state the Melville and Hawthorne were probably likely rumored to be

Don't get me wrong, i know the world isn't pink, unicorns are myth and human beings are capable of the most unimaginable actions, but still i come out of this with the impression that the author either lost of her way along the process of compiling the book, or just got too excited over all the rumors and forgot to stick to a more coherent tone and content.

tiny pet peeve - the selection of authors and books should perhaps have been more international...i doubt this will appeal on a more deeper level to non american/canadian readers, given the selection of authors that compose at least half of it.

Still, is it worth the trouble? yes, if for no other reason that you might end up getting another author or two to add to your ever growing pile of to read books.

Sesana says

Some mixed feelings here. On one hand, some of these dedications were quite interesting, and so so were the histories they brought up. On the other hand, most of the dedications were simply to the current significant other of the author in question, so it ended up being more of a series of short biographies than I had expected. Maybe it's too tall of an order, but I would have rather that Wagman-Geller had concentrated on the more unusual dedications. Because let's face it, the dedication of Schindler's List (to the Holocaust survivor who inspired the author to write about Schindler and helped his research) will always be more interesting than the dedication on *The Darkest Evening of the Year* (to his wife).

I had some quibbles with the style, too, mostly the author's need to end nearly every essay with something unbearably trite, usually referring directly back to the title of the book in question. ("They are the ones who prevent 'the darkest evening of the year' from being a metaphor for Dean's life.") And call me a history snob, but I have severe qualms about a published book that cites Wikipedia. Maybe I should just be happy that Wagman-Geller cites her sources at all (she does!), and I do like reading Wikipedia myself (I do!) but for nearly every section to refer back to at least one Wikipedia article is just really poor research practice. I wonder if she would have accepted Wagman-Geller teaches high school history and English, and I have to wonder if she would have accepted Wikipedia as sources from her own students.

Jennifer says

The subtitle of this book promised more than this book offered. There were a few "intriguing dedications" (Ayn Rand's comes to mind), but most of these were fairly straightforward. Wagman-Geller basically gives short bios of the original authors and their significant others, and they're fairly interesting - the contemporary authors' bios more so, since we know more about the older ones like Fitzgerald or Hemingway.

However, one thing that really irritated me was the cutesy way Wagman-Geller would refer back to the title of the work or a part of the dedication. Instead of just ending the brief bio, she would make a comment, such as "They are the ones who prevent "the darkest evening of the year" for being a metaphor for Dean's life", which refers back to the dedication Dean Koontz wrote in *The Darkest Evening of the Year* . And she does this in virtually every bio (she was a high school English teacher, which may explain such cheesy conclusions -- and I have been a high school English teacher, so I can understand). Maybe I'm petty to harp on this but it made me want to skip the last paragraph in each section... Aargh!

Bookworm1858 says

Once Again to Zelda by Marlene Wagman-Geller

Perigee, 2008

276 pages

Non-fiction

3/5 stars

Source: Library

Summary: An examination in to some of the most famous and most puzzling dedications of books in order to gain insight into the lives of the writers.

Thoughts: The first dedication is for the novel Frankenstein by Mary Shelley. It is to her father who wrote a biography of his wife and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, published in 1798, which she says scandalized Victorian society. Do you see the error here? Victoria wasn't even born until 1819. This was so blatant that it almost made me shut the book but I continued because I thought (and still think that it's a great concept). And maybe I'm overreacting but that's a big error; the Victorians were far more prudish than Regency-era, if my reading of romance novels is accurate.

The writing itself had many awkward sentences (none of which I flagged so that I could report them to you) which made those passages unpleasant. It was not well done and if good writing is important, then definitely skip this.

Sometimes I feel sad that I'm not a genius, whether in writing or music or writing or something. But after reading these stories, I'm really happy that I'm not. Many of these authors (most if not all arguably in the genius category) were violent, adulterous, and/or just plain selfish. I'd much rather be me and try to be a good person and treat the people in my life right.

Overall: Interesting concept but serious flaws in the writing.

Cover: I like bright colors so it fails on that account but I enjoy the typeface.

Laura says

Though the premise is interesting, and the dedications are as intriguing as promised, the book is written so badly that I started to feel guilty for even being interested. Cheesy and condescending by turns, I can only imagine it was perhaps aimed at the high schoolers Ms. Wagman-Geller taught. But even high schoolers who would have enough interest to read about literary dedications would probably be insulted by the sheer bad writing.

Oh yes, and even a tenth grader might manage not to mangle Hamlet -- it's "FLIGHTS of angels sing thee to thy rest," not "bands of angels." I imagine Shakespeare is rolling over in his grave.

J. says

So this is a book about the stories behind the dedications of books of stories, as you can tell from the title of the book, and the stories inside.

The good: the stories are generally pretty interesting, and we learn lots of interesting tidbits about writers. (Some of them had really fascinating lives.) And we learn things about famous writers as a class of people. (They're predominately cheaters.) And we get a sense of the social milieu that brought about some of the famous works.

The bad: the book choices are sometimes pretty standard, and definitely skewed to the author's tastes. So there's a lot of authors in here that I've never read, and a few I've never even heard of (and I'm a pretty avid reader.) Even for a given author, the book chosen is sometimes an unusual choice. (I mean, doesn't everyone know Zelda was Fitzgerald's wife? That's like the only thing I know about him!) So "most intriguing" is a bit misleading--I would read it to mean "most elusive" (Rosebud?), but Wagman-Geller apparently means "most easily researched," or perhaps, "the one that makes the cutest story."

The really bad: every chapter ends with like the cheeeeeeeesiest ending. Like, if she were writing about how John Doe dedicated his book "Staring at the Stars" to his cat, "Poopsie, who will eat anything" the author will write this whole long story about how much Poopsie meant to John, and how she saved his life when the house caught on fire, and how she defended his house from killer robots that one time, and how she invented the coffee table. But then, at the end of the chapter, when Poopsie dies of glaucoma at a very old age, Wagman-Geller has to write a sentence like: "And John was so sad that he couldn't 'eat anything' but would only sit around 'staring at the stars.'" Yeah, every time...it's like retroactively ruining my enjoyment of the story. (It's so bad that I actually kept thinking of those opening scenes of CSI:Miami, where the head guy says some unbelievably cheesy lines while putting on his sunglasses. Yeah, it's that terrible.)

Michelle W says

I was drawn to this book because of its spine. When I picked it up and read the front cover I decided to get it. This book is about the backstory of the dedications of some famous literature. Even though I have not read much of the literature discussed in this book, I enjoyed the book because it gave a lot of history surrounding these famous authors and the reasons why they wrote the books they did. If you are a fan of classic literature I would highly recommend picking up this book.

Randi Rathbun says

Such an interesting read! So cool to get some behind the scenes info on these authors.

Kasia says

I was so excited about this one, and it is a big disappointment. I lovelovelove reading dedications and acknowledgments in books, so I am very interested in the subject matter of the book. And the cover and

design of this book are lovely. I have major gripes about this one, though, and here they are:

1. The writing! It is just so trite and uninspired. I really reminds me of essays written for school.
2. Who cites Wikipedia in their book?? Repeatedly? Seriously. Most of the sources are webpages, many that don't even look like legit resources. How hard is it to take a look at the articles or books that the Wikipedia entry references, so you don't look like a lazy moron?
3. These are not "intriguing" dedications. Almost all of them are just to spouses. It is still interesting to hear the biographical info and stories about the authors and their relationships, of course, but it seems like one could find some more interesting dedications out there. I can't imagine why some of these are even included. Did she read Didion's *A Year of Magical Thinking*? Or even read a description? It's not exactly "intriguing" that the book about her husband's death was dedicated to that husband (and her daughter).

In the end, this was still an entertaining read if you like short bits of biographical info about authors. But I really really want someone to write a good version of this book soon!
