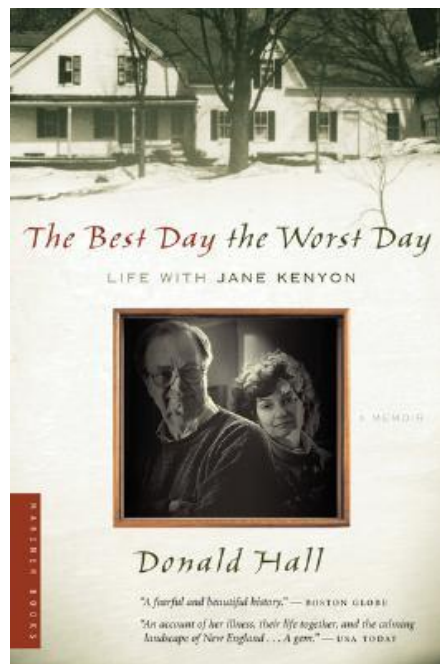




The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon

Donald Hall

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A candid memoir of love, art, and grief from a celebrated man of letters, United States poet laureate Donald Hall

In an intimate record of his twenty-three-year marriage to poet Jane Kenyon, Donald Hall recounts the rich pleasures and the unforeseen trials of their shared life. The couple made a home at their New England farmhouse, where they rejoiced in rituals of writing, gardening, caring for pets, and connecting with their rural community through friends and church. The Best Day the Worst Day presents a portrait of the inner moods of "the best marriage I know about," as Hall has written, against the stark medical emergency of Jane's leukemia, which ended her life in fifteen months. Between recollections of better times, Hall shares with readers the daily ordeal of Jane's dying through heartbreaking but ultimately inspiring storytelling.

The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon Details

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From Reader Review The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon for online ebook

Ye Lin Aung says

I first got to know about Donald Hall through his excellent piece on New Yorker call Double Solitude. It's really sad but a great read. I also remarked that this man truly loved his wife. So, I suggest to read this one first.

Then I read this book. From the very first chapter towards the end, it's filled with sadness, happiness, almost alternatively.

It's truly one of the great books I have read so far.

Carissa says

I haven't read much of his work, but I like what I know of Donald Hall. Former U.S. poet laureate, gifted poet and essayist, husband of the late New Hampshire poet laureate Jane Kenyon.

This book is a memoir of his life with Jane, his beloved wife. She died in 1995 after a long struggle with leukemia.

The clarity that Hall brings to the documentation of his wife's demise is heart-rending. I find it fascinating to watch a writer deal with his own grief in such a lucid manner. (Come to think of it, I almost have a morbid fascination with grief memoirs; I also loved Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*).

Here is an excerpt of a page toward the end of the book, when everyone begins to understand that Jane's death is imminent:

"Now the florists' vans began to pull into the driveway. Lilies arrived, tulips, roses, bouquets that were tight and hard, bouquets that were lavish and gorgeous... In Jane's journal, when she trained to be a hospice worker in 1981, she answered questions put by her teacher. She had been asked: What would you want to do in your last days if you knew that you were dying? In 1981 she wrote that she would want flowers about her, but the reality was opposite. Flowers were a major adhesion to the world Jane was leaving. She would not look at them. When I brought them into the bedroom, she had me take them away. Soon the kitchen and the dining room were overrun by cities of petal and bloom. She would not look at flowers nor allow me to play her favorite CDs. These things tied her to what she had to part from...."

The book was by turns joyful and mournful. I found it deeply moving and engrossing. I cried when I got to the end.

Belle says

Just yes.

Carol says

Otherwise

Jane Kenyon

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

"Otherwise" is one of Jane Kenyon's most frequently quoted poems. Each of us faces "otherwise," though few experience a devoted marriage like Kenyon's beforehand. Sadly, Kenyon's final "otherwise" struck when she was only 47 and at the height of her powers. THE BEST DAY THE WORST DAY came out in 2005, the same year that Kenyon's Collected Poems was published, ten years after her death. Reading this made me long for Kenyon's voice so I often turned to the Collected Poems as I read this and I know I'll continue to read Kenyon's poetry this week. The horrors of Kenyon's leukemia treatment, which included an unsuccessful bone marrow transplant, are leavened in the telling here by Donald Hall's continuing and passionate love for her. So much goes on besides the tragedy of Kenyon's death. Hall's mother died of heart failure as Kenyon was beginning the treatment journey and then Kenyon's own mother died while she was away for her bone marrow transplant. The death of a parent is devastating. Here it's as if the deaths are part of a war being waged against Hall and Kenyon with Jobean force. In the years just previous, Hall had been treated for colon cancer and a recurrence in his liver. He may not have counted on survival himself as "the best day" and "the worst day" unfolded. It must have taken Hall years to reach the place of being able to write this and, given his own experience with cancer, it's remarkable that he remains alive, still writing. I had

a cousin who died suddenly at 47 of breast cancer and a friend who died after a bone marrow transplant for breast cancer--a procedure that caused much suffering and never worked for breast cancer patients-- so I have some understanding of the horror Hall and Kenyon lived. Years ago, I'm sure, I wouldn't have been able to read this book. I'm grateful that I found it when I did. THE BEST DAY THE WORST DAY is beautifully told and inspiring. Hall accepts the worst with the best. Ultimately, I've found, healing from trauma depends on this sort of surrender.

Lauren says

Donald Hall, who was U.S. poet laureate a few years back, released this book shortly after the death of his wife, poet Jane Kenyon. It's mostly a memoir of their love affair, but it's honest enough that it doesn't feel gushy. I loved it, and I plan on reading it again.

Christy S says

I was going through my library's biography and memoir collection, and almost got rid of this one: no one had checked it out much, or in several years, and we need room for things that will check out much, and this year. Instead I took it home on a whim... was it the cover I liked? The synopsis? Maybe I read a page or two and enjoyed Hall's narrative.

I am not a reader of poetry, and so I didn't read this book for know the names of the poets Jane Kenyon and Donald Hall. I am often drawn to books about death and loss, for some reason. Hall wrote this book about his marriage to Kenyon, twenty-some years in his family's old farmhouse in rural New Hampshire, including the last years in which they attempted to overcome her leukemia. He shows the reader their love in telling of the couple's conversations, patterns, habits, hard times. It was, of course, hard to read, but also beautiful.

Some excerpts:

"What we did: love. We did not spend our days gazing into each other's eyes. We did that gazing when we made love or when one of us was in trouble, but most of the time our gazes met and entwined as they looked at a third thing. Third things are essential to marriages, objects or practices or habits or arts or institutions or games or human beings that provide a site of joint rapture or contentment. Each member of a couple is separate; the two come together in double attention. Lovemaking is not a third thing but two-in-one. John Keats can be a third thing, or the BSO, or Dutch interiors, or checkers. For many couples, children are a third thing. Jane and I had our cats and dog to fuss and exclaim over--and later five grandchildren. We had our summer afternoons at the pond, which for ten years made a third thing. After nap we loaded up books and blankets and walked across Route 4 and the old railroad to the steep slippery bank that led down to our private beach on Eagle Pond." p108-109

"Through bouts of ping-pong and Henry James and the church, we kept to one innovation: With rare exceptions, we remained aware of each other's feelings. It took me half my life, more than half, to discover with Jane's guidance that two people could live together and remain kind. When one of us felt grumpy we both shut up until it went away. We did not give in to sarcasm. Once every three years we had a fight--the way some couples fight three times a day--and because fights were few the aftermath of a fight was a dreadful gloom. "We have done harm," said Jane in a poem after a quarrel. What was that fight about? I wonder if she remembered, a month after writing the poem." p.111

Krista says

I read Hall's *Unpacking the Boxes* late last year, and was a little disappointed to find out that he didn't really spend much time on his marriage to Jane Kenyon - that was in a different book (this one). The two were originally intended to be one book, but editors thought it better to separate them. I can see the benefits of the two volumes being separate, but I can't really think of them distinctly. While I really appreciated both, *The Best Day* is a much more painful read; if you have had family members die of cancer, it will hit close to home. Yet he puts in words things about suffering, treatments, etc. that many couldn't. Hall can be very vulnerable - honest, but also proud. And as in "*Boxes*" (see full review below), I feel like there are places he fails to dig deep - in particular, regarding his - and their - faith. Overall, I would recommend this book, though it is pretty heart-wrenching. A final note: I really appreciated having a copy of Jane Kenyon's final book of poetry, "*Otherwise*" around while reading this book. Her poetry stands on her own, but carries even more weight when you read about the context of some of her poems.

My review of Hall's "*Unpacking the Boxes*"

This is the year (year and a half?) of reading memoirs by writers who lived primarily in New England, most of which I've really enjoyed - and *Unpacking the Boxes* is no exception. I enjoyed Hall's honesty, his voice (even when it became quite proud), and getting a glimpse into what this writing life looks like, for him. I've only read a few Hall poems, but am interested to read more now. And am even more interested to read "*The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon*" - a memoir about his second marriage, which is actually the book that I had hoped "*Unpacking the Boxes*" would be. There are some things that Hall fails to dig deep into (particularly his marriage with Jane, and his faith) that I would have liked to see explored, but am hoping that "*The Best Day*" will do so

M says

(3.5)

Poetry gives the griever not release from grief but companionship in grief. Poetry embodies the complexity of feelings at their most intense and entangled, and therefore offers (over centuries, or over no time at all) the company of tears. . . It was a year with out seasons, a year without punctuation. I began to write "*Without*" to embody the sensations of lives under dreary, monotonous assault.

Emily Green says

The Best Day the Worst Day is Donald Hall's remembering of his marriage, wife's illness, and her death. Jane Kenyon, who died of leukemia at the age of forty seven, was a well-known poet.

Hall's writing is detached and factual, reflecting on both triumphant moments of the marriage, as well as the horrible pain Kenyon experienced in her search for a cure. The writing is not devoid of emotion, but rather shows the epitome of show don't tell in the face of great emotional drama.

Hall makes the effort to be loving and honest in the tale, including difficult moments of Kenyon's mental illness as well as some bumps in their marriage. Overall, however, the book is a testament to love and

growth, as Hall depicts Kenyon developing from a young college student into an accomplished woman and poet. As Hall tells it, the two shared a loving and compatible marriage that thrived on a shared love of writing, literature, and their rural home, Eagle Pond. Eagle Pond becomes as much a part of the narrative as their mothers and beloved dog, Gus.

A difficult book to read, *The Best Day the Worst Day* does not turn away from lethal illness nor does it sugar coat loss. Death is part of life in Hall's tale.

As a side note, my copy of *The Best Day the Worst Day* was given to me by the store manager at Borders after I was accidentally locked in the store on my first day of work. He was a kind and thoughtful man, as were the rest of my colleagues. Working at Borders was one of the best jobs I have had, and I was sorry to see them go. May the written word of poets like Kenyon and Hall live on.

Susanne says

A close friend always remarks about Jane Kenyon's poetry - and I'm not even familiar with her work. (now I am) So, when I came across this book, I just downloaded it. This was not an easy book to read, but it is one of the most impactful books I've read recently. The book is from Donald Hall's, Jane's husband, perspective as he cares for his wife, Jane, during her battle with leukemia. He's writing posthumously - you know that from the outset; what works so well is that interspersed with chapters about Jane's illness and what's involved for Hall, he writes about their 20-plus years together. I am just so respectful and sort of in awe of two such talented writers building a life together - the high moments of professional recognition, the daily process of a "writing life", their beloved home. Hall also tells with love about living with a spouse with clinical depression; it's a more honest picture than I've read. This is a beautiful book about the work of love.

Pmalcpoet Pat Malcolm says

This is among my favorite books. Donald Hall's stark portrait of his own grief has allowed me to feel the cherishment that existed within their relationship. This gift they gave one another is framed within the minutiae of everyday living, heightening the sense of their bonds of love and mutual respect for the reader. For me, it was an opportunity to gain some limited emotional access to a kind of relationship I've always believed to exist, but which I've not experienced in my own life. Poetic writing indeed.

Judith Hannan says

I first read this book a couple of years ago when I was putting together a marketing plan for my own book, also a narrative that has at its center a medical story but which reaches far beyond to become a tale of family and relationships. I decided to read it again because I missed so much during my initial scan; I'm glad I did. I have followed Hall for some time, not only for his writing but for a very non-literary reason--I spent my weekends and summers at a home in New Hampshire very near Hall's home. At the time, I didn't know any "real" people who lived there. I passed house after house with yards filled with old cars, stacks of wood, beaten lawns, and snotty kids. Who knew that poetry lived in those woods.

The Best Day the Worst Day didn't disappoint. I responded well to the structure of the book, which moved

back and forth between the present crisis of Hall's wife's (Jane Kenyon) cancer and their history together. Hall provides an intimate picture, although very rarely he provides details that are unnecessarily intimate, a risk that all memoir writers run in the effort to be honest. I was particularly drawn to Hall's details when talking about place, whether it is the home in NH which Kenyon quickly fell in love with, the hospital cafeteria, or the many places they traveled.

Hall nailed the medical experience--the waiting, the conversations, the caregiver as a nurse, the lists of things to pack or administer, the calls to make, even the pets to be concerned for. But I found unexpected wisdom about relationships. Perhaps the most profound for me, because of what is paramount for me in my own marriage, is this quote. "Third things are essential to marriages, objects or practices or habits or arts or institutions or games or human beings that provide a site of joint rapture or contentment." Later, he says, "Sometimes you lose oa third thing." This is poetry.

And so is this: " We lived in an apartment on a street of the city but our only address was leukemia. We woke and ate breakfast and showered in leukemia. We walked around the block, keeping up strength, in leukemia's neighborhood. We slept in leukemia all night, tossing and turning with unsettling dreams."

But the book doesn't live in leukemia. It lives in the lives of two people, deeply but not perfectly in love.

Nan says

No one, with the possible exception of C.S. Lewis, writes about the loss of a spouse as accurately and movingly as Donald Hall. Gave it four stars last week, thought about it more, and raised it to five. That good.

Jessica says

Best poets: worst memoir. Love the poetry of Jane Kenyon, like the poetry of Donald Hall (except for his collection Without, which I personally could have done Without), but the tedious details in this book are only for scholars of the couple and/or their marriage. Which makes me sound hard-hearted, given the topic.....I guess maybe I am....not really though. I just want the author to do the work of selecting the details that should have meaning for readers, not cataloging all of them.

Edmund Davis-Quinn says

Really excellent but incredibly slow read.

Such excruciating detail about Jane Kenyon's illness and eventual death.

Beautiful and brutal. I had to finish it, it took me months, luckily the library let me extend my check out date.

This was very good but to deal with the pain of grief I would recommend Donald Hall's "Without". That is a phenomenal book.

MEGAN C says

It's okay. A little tedious in parts.

Celia Kaltenbach-crotteau says

In a book of terrible beauty, writer Donald Hall describes in alternating chapters his life with and then the death of his wife, poet Jane Kenyon.

I admire Jane Kenyon's sparse packed style. (Last year I used her famous "Let Evening Come" in my middle school writing class when I taught how to analyze poetry.)

This is the testimony of a great love and two lives well lived as well as an honest portrait of one woman's final illness and death.

Ruth says

I have, for quite some time, been fascinated by the Jane Kenyon/Donald Hall marriage and its tragic end. I came to it through JK's poems, which I continue to find deep and yet deceptively simple. I didn't find her until just after she died.

When DH published his book *Without* I bought it immediately. However, I was somewhat disappointed. While some of the poems were deeply affecting, I found others to be closer to just a flat out retelling of the events around Jane's death.

When I saw DH read about 4 years ago, he mentioned Jane quite often. It was at that time I began to think that perhaps he wasn't healing well.

However, this book has almost convinced me that he's made a cottage industry out of the death of his wife. There's little poetic about it. Yeah, yeah, I know it's prose, but wouldn't you think a poet's prose would have that extra edge?

This was more or less just the standard Disease-of-the-Month retelling of an agonizing death. I wanted more.

Marcia Miller says

Beautifully written and heartbreaking memoir of the author's life with poet Jane Kenyon, who, at 19 years his junior, became his second wife. The book remembers the joys and sorrows of their 23-year marriage, culminating with her untimely death from leukemia at age 47.

Cynthia says

The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon by Donald Hall

This was a difficult book to read, but at the same time it was sweet and tender. Older poet, a professor, meets younger poet, a student. They marry. They enjoy nearly twenty years together, living, with their cats and dog, their books and typewriters, in an old New Hampshire farmhouse that had belonged to the husband's family for three generations. One day the wife was diagnosed with leukemia. She lived for fifteen more months, undergoing painful, but futile, treatments, including a bone-marrow transplant. The writer takes us step by step along the road they traveled together, ticking off the milestones—the hope of recovery, the loss of that hope—up to the very fate of death. The account of her suffering was especially difficult to read, because, nearly two years ago, when my husband was undergoing radiation for cancer to make a good prognosis better, we met a 13-year-old girl in the waiting room who had a rare and lethal form of cancer. After my husband's treatment was over, we followed the girl's progress on CARING BRIDGE, a website on which her mother kept family and friends. The mother never shared the details of her daughter's suffering, which ended in her death a month ago, but now I know almost more than I ever wanted to. Nonetheless, I am not sorry I read this book. For years, *Otherwise*, a book of Jane Kenyon's poetry has sat on my shelf, unopened. I've read just a few poems as their titles have come up in Hall's book. They are wonderful. If I have one criticism of Donald Hall's beautiful memoir it is this: as Jane is about to die, husband and wife plan her funeral. "With a copy of the hymnal she chose four hymns that she loved," he wrote. How I wish he had told his readers the names of these hymns.
