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Fire in the Soul: Nick Lyons: “Fire in the Straw, Notes on Inventing a Life”. Edward Curtin

By Edward Curtin
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Theme: History

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With lilacs in the dooryard blooming a week ago, I was struck by a sense of synchronicity so strong that I stood stone still and sniffed the air for its direction. I had just written a little essay about my youthful days and the first fish I caught at the age of ten and my subsequent basketball obsession. Now I was out for an early morning walk up the hill by the lake above the town across from the railroad tracks. As I dawdled in the intoxicating fragrance of the lilacs, it transported me to other springs when my blood raced a bit wilder and I met a brown-eyed girl. In another bush a catbird sang a song I did not recognize at first. For some odd reason, I associated it with Van Morrison’s tune, The Beauty of the Days Gone By. I want to write these words for you, and like the singer, raise your spirits high, so please listen to the song before you keep reading. I’ve heard that these are the days of miracles and wonders, so it is possible to pause, listen, and then continue reading. Flow with me.

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So let me tell you about my old friend Nick Lyons whom I’ve never met or talked to. Sometimes a friendship is forged unbeknownst to the friends. Lives that have intersected without meeting. I heard about his writing on fly fishing when I was reading something my forgettery has gratefully forgotten. Forgetting is a lost art. As that other fisher of intangibles Henry Thoreau said in *Life Without Principle*, “It is so hard to forget what it is worse than useless to remember.” It takes desire to forget the inconsequential. And desire to remember the profound.

The article said he had written a memoir that sounded interesting to me, for reasons I can’t explain. So I got and read the book, *Fire in the Straw: Notes on Inventing a Life*. It was published four years ago and moved me deeply for many reasons.

I felt we had met long ago in some parallel reality, two city boys, one Jewish, the other Catholic, Nick from Brooklyn and I from the Bronx, different in age and other particulars, but joined by a passionate intensity tied to great literature, basketball, and most especially by a mutual sense that life's deepest truths lurked beneath the surface, and in order to catch them, we had to develop an art of playing life well, whether that was in sports or teaching or writing. An art that could lure meaning out of the deepest depths into consciousness.

Fire in the Straw is just that. It is a beautiful and masterful book, lit up by such pellucid prose and unsparing self-examination that only an emotionally dead reader would not be deeply touched. Lyons writes in his introduction:

> Except for a moment or two, my life I suspect is rather ordinary in its details – and I have persuaded myself to write about parts of it in this brief book only for several reasons: the selfish one of wanting – sometimes desperately – to understand what I did and what happened to me, what it might mean and why, and in the thought that some of my odd journey will interest people who have lived with similar events and strivings.

That is an understatement, for the tale he tells is universal, despite all its particularities. Or perhaps because of them or the brilliant way he makes them so. The ordinary concealing the extraordinary. A life told in luminescent sentences that vibrate in the reader's mind because they were composed by an artist's loving hand.

Call it a memoir, an autobiography, or anything you like, if you are into categorizing books by content alone. Goethe wrote of the "open mystery" of every form, and although it is often assumed that form and content comprise two separate aspects of writing (and this is true for most mediocre work where readers generally concentrate on the content exclusively), the finest writing consists of a marriage of form and content that ravishes the reader in unassimilable and mysterious ways. A marriage of true minds.

Homer said it best: "Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story."

Nick Lyons heard the Muse and sings his life in this book.

It is a story, told by a man nearly ninety years-old, of a boy emotionally abandoned by his perpetually smiling and good-looking mother who sent him to a boarding school at age five;

a boy without a father but with a step-father whom he disliked and a mother whom he couldn't love;

a child aware of adult phoniness who discovers in fishing a mysterious source of solace and sustenance;

a student bored by school but in love with basketball who practices obsessively and competes fiercely in the Brooklyn schoolyards;

a young man who earns a prestigious degree at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania only to find it hollow;

a soldier in France who discovers his love of reading and his basketball talent;

then a young man trying to find himself and his vocation who holes himself up in a cheap,

tiny Greenwich Village apartment with the great books of literature that light a fire in his soul;

the professor of literature who takes on a second job at a publishing company to support his painter wife and four children and constantly struggles with debt;

and later an independent small press book publisher and writer about fly fishing; a self-questioner always trying to find meaning and a pattern in his life, a life that seemed to race ahead of him;

a devoted husband and loving and protective father who was lonely even when only one child was away; a man wildly juggling many balls for many years who finally found "success" and the cushion of money when he sold his small publishing company;

a contemplator of his soul-mate wife's paintings where he sought the manifestation in color and stroke of something that he felt he lacked;

an artist always trying to answer a Sphinx-like riddle:

Who am I? How did I become who I am today? Did I become whom "you" wanted me to be?

None of this is ordinary because Nick Lyons is not ordinary, and with *Fire in the Straw* he has written an extraordinary book.

Sitting in his dead mother's apartment waiting for the police to arrive, she a lonely seventy-four year-old that he never truly knew, his mother stiffening on a toilet seat, a sight that he only glimpsed and then avoided, he waits and waits cataleptically for the cops and the medical examiner (who, like Godot, never comes), looking at old photographs and musing about his parents' lives and deaths, a father, Nat Ress, whose death preceded Nick's birth, a mystery man, a pleaser with a "good heart" that he also never knew and never once asked his mother about but longed for still, a hole in his heart seeping sadness, thinking of photos of these two intimate strangers when once they seemed happy and in love.

For his father had died when Nick's mother was six months pregnant with him, and the fact that both mother and son had survived a very difficult childbirth was a miracle. Ah, to exist!

> I did not find myself a part of the life seeping from the prints at first, then, as the images begat other more fluid, moving, images in my mind, as I sorted through them in some nagging urgency to make sense of them all, some meaning of them, I found the racing of my mind slow and slow again, just as I once had to slow down my life, which had been slipping steadily, inexorably, through my hands. I had not been able to control it once. I had been rigged up, like a puppet, playing a role that had been written out for me, a hostage to an alien script.
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> Hadn't there been something small and mysterious, like a small flame in damp straw, hidden inside me? I had scarcely known how to fan it forth. And why? For what reason? I had always done what I had to do, little more. I did what I was told. I smiled when I was supposed to smile. I tried desperately to remove those bands from my chest, that extraordinary, constant, unyielding pressure. I kept looking at the little curly-haired boy in those photographs, now one, now four or five, now almost in his teens. . . . I looked at the photographs and they were part of some drama I could not quite understand, scattered and inchoate, and they were part of me and not a part of

> me and I tried to let them come closer but I still had a passive center, a place that could let an arrogant police captain swipe some of my mother's few possessions and say nothing.

But the passive puppet becomes the man who keeps fishing in words. I dare anyone to not be caught by them. He flicks them out softly, like a fly over a running stream, and although some seem innocuous and part of a pedestrian telling, they suddenly flash and a crack opens in a mystery that stops you, that sends a shiver down your spine.

He tells us about his mother's burial with these words:

> A couple of diggers leaned on their shovels, a discreet distance to the left. The rain had turned all of the exposed soil to mud. I turned my head slightly, to the stone just to the left of where my mother's stone would go, and there, with some dates, the last one in March 1932, three months before I was born, was my name, Nathan Ress [Nick's original name before the hated step-father changed it].
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> It was just an old stone, with some dates and a name. It wasn't much and I'm not sure why, but I felt a heavy shock of disbelief and recognition and felt that the drama was done.

But it wasn't. His story continued and continues still as he approaches his ninety-second birthday. We learn of his last journey to the basketball court to try to revive his youthful hoopster dreams, an amusing but futile effort; the death of his half-sister Annie, who suffered abuse at the hands of her father Arthur, Nick's hated step-father; and the last dreamy years with his beloved wife Mari, to whom he was married for fifty-eight years, whose presence, stated or not, remains a light-motif throughout the book.

At one point about twenty years ago when they were in Montana and he was modelling for her, he writes:

> It is a rainy day and Mari is painting her Big Enigma, a brown hump like the mountain, me. She painted me, nearly forty-years ago, naked, in college. She was always partial to cheap models who did not have to be flattered – herself, me – and I was cheap as dirt, thin then, and would sit for a smile though I couldn't hold the pose for three minutes.
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> Now I am a mountain of a man, graying by the hour, but I can sit for days, reading or fussing with a few sentences. Mari says under her breath that I have everything her regular models have, only more of it. . . .
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> Flashes of the forty years we've had of it together, the tensions and the falling-offs, the quiet moments, nights of passion, delusions, illusions, and, with our children, the great hungry city, the endless pressures of money, of a life crying, like the house of D. H. Lawrence's rocking horse loser, "There must be more money."

But with the ease that more money eventually afforded them, life – their lives – went on as they tend to do, softened by money but still the same. The years passed and Mari died, as did one son, Paul. Nick sits by "the sorry little pond" he built on the Catskill hillside near their summer house in Woodstock, New York. He keeps fishing, always fishing, always fishing.

> I like to sit on the dock in the heavy dusk and toss food pellets or pieces of bread to who will have them. Sometimes I think of Nat, Rose, Arthur, or Annie, and a fire, and classrooms and offices and books and a tiny, snot-green room in Greenwich Village, and sometimes I think of Ice Pond, which I first fished more than three-quarters of a century ago, a close friend or two, and fish in the murky waters of my past. And always now I think of Mari and Paul. . . .
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> I am flooded with questions I cannot answer. . . . She was here and she is gone, and Paul is gone, and their absences are raw and pungent and their memories precious. . . . Tonight I lumber back from the pond – a bear of a man, garrulous, bearded, often impatient with myself, walking with a rolling gate and a cane, with titanium hips and too much belly. . . . In the darkened glass of the studio [Mari's], suddenly mirrorlike, I catch a glimpse of an old fellow with a beard and uncombed hair; he looks a little like a badly tied trout fly, but not someone who once thought he had no life. I smile. . . . There is a noise below me, in the sloping field, a whirring of wings. It is merely a flock of crows rising from the high grasses, making the air tremulous in their departure, like all those years of fear and doubt and striving, of joy and love, rising, fluttering, and then, in a crazy crowd, gone.

"Sing in me, oh Muse, and through me tell the story."

Yes, the beauty of the days gone by.

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This article was originally published on the author's website, Behind the Curtain.

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