



A Long and Happy Life

Reynolds Price

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On its initial publication in 1962, Eudora Welty said of *A Long and Happy Life*, "Reynolds Price is the most impressive new writer I've come across in a long time. His is a first-rate talent and we are lucky that he has started so young to write so well. Here is a fine novel."

From its dazzling opening page, which announced the appearance of a stylist of the first rank, to its moving close, this brief novel has charmed and captivated millions of readers since its publication twenty-five years ago and its subsequent translation into fifteen languages. On the triumphant publication of *Kate Vaiden*, his most recent novel, in 1986, there was almost no review that -- praising the new book to the skies -- didn't also mention in glowing terms the reviewer's fond recollection of the marvelous first novel, the troubled love story of Rosacoke Mustian and Wesley Beavers and its beautifully evoked vision of rural North Carolina. It is a pleasure now to restore to print the clothbound edition of this truly enduring work as a companion volume to his brilliant book of essays, *A Common Room*, published simultaneously.

A Long and Happy Life Details

Date : Published December 21st 1987 by Scribner Book Company (first published January 1962)
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Author : Reynolds Price
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From Reader Review A Long and Happy Life for online ebook

Liz says

A small story done in a big way. The author is new to me -- I think I picked this one up because of the NC locale, which is my homeland. I loved the characters and the style, and I would like to read more of him. I'm thinking of skipping from his first to his last novel, just for a fun shock.

Laura Leaney says

Here is the story of Rosacoke Mustian, a young woman living in rural North Carolina, who is as sensitive as any poet and as deep as a spring well. She loves a boy who does not understand or need her, nor does he call her by name very often. For Rosacokes, Wesley "hadn't seen that every question she asked was aimed for the one she couldn't ask, which was did he love her or didn't he." This seems to be the emotional crux of the plot, which is woven through scenes of country life that are vivid and beautiful: a funeral, a church-sponsored picnic at a lake, a baby's death, the visiting of neighbors both white and black, watching deer, and a Christmas play. Simple stuff, but the nuance and subtle perceptions of Rosacoke's world view are profoundly human. The flight of birds marks her emotional growth – which a reader can follow in Rosa's internalized conversations with cardinals and hawks. In contrast to nature's birds is the mechanical swoop of airplanes and motorcycles that seem to define Wesley's passions. His apparent disregard for Rosacoke's heart might have something to do with that "machine between his legs" that he rides "like a snake," speeding around corners and leaving a wake of dust behind him. Or perhaps he is just an unsentimental practical young man who cannot fathom the complex mind and heart of this girl who wants something from him. The resolution of their relationship is interesting and maddeningly weird.

The writing is brilliantly Faulknerian. Rosacokes reminds me of Darl from "As I Lay Dying" in that her eyes follow the land, watch the birds, and try to make contact with the gaze of others while creating visionary poetry in her own mind.

The colloquial speech of the characters is beautiful and hilarious. After Rosacokes arrives at a picnic via Wesley's motorcycle, her mother describes her thusly: "You look like you rode in on a circular saw." You gotta laugh; what a perfect description! Later there is: "he didn't have no more will power than a flying squirrel," and "money got scarce as hens' back teeth," and Willie Duke's breasts while swimming as "God's own water wings."

I was very happy reading this book.

Janet says

What a delight to re-read this gorgeous story of troubled young love set in a precisely-evoked rural North Carolina. Coming from nowhere near there, geographically or culturally, I remember finding this short novel exquisitely exotic when I read it at age 20-ish. It's probably what caused me to move to (well, not-rural but near-rural) South Carolina right after grad school, to *see*. Rosacoke Mustian waits six long months to

determine whether her maybe-boyfriend Wesley Beavers is indeed hers. Six months of woods and death and the curt profound hospitality of her people, the intimacy between white and black folk within their strict social hierarchy, the centrality of church if not, always, of God. Oh this is such a beautiful book.

Jonathan Hiskes says

Rosacoke Mustian lives a carefully observed life in Appalachian North Carolina, responding to the web of obligations of family, church, and an undeserving suitor. This is a novel for people who like novels, thick with the rhythms of rural life and the delightful cadences of a local dialect.

Therese says

This first novel by Reynolds Price uses a close-in, sympathetic third person omniscient narrator to tell the story of Rosacoke Mustian, a young girl from a back-woods North Carolina community, as she evolves into womanhood. What struck me as brilliant and most instructive for writers who look for examples to shape a novel--especially a short novel--are the set-piece scenes that build, block by block, the narrative arc: a funeral, a church picnic by a swimming hole, a letter (that runs for 12-pages in text!), a homecoming, and finally, a Christmas pageant in a local church. The narrative patience builds a world that one leaves at the end of the book with regret, so fully has the author animated his characters through his empathetic, close-in, omniscient narrator.

Chip says

To put the age of this novel in perspective, both "A Long and Happy Life" and Barack Obama were born about the same time. I find the fact that Obama is now POTUS, this novel and Obama's similar age, and this book finding its way to me at this moment in time all very ironic. Just wanted to clear the air up front.

While I'm clearing the air, I have to concede that I've read Mr. Price's most recent novel "The Good Priest's Son." I thought it competently written but it left me with a strange feeling, like having walked through a downpour without getting hit by a single drop of rain. This feeling was even more vivid in Mr. Price's first novel. There is a plot, there is some tension and drama, but the reader never hits the issues head on. Instead we creep up on things, or strike them with a glancing blow before moving on. I've seen comparisons with Faulkner and Hemingway mentioned, and disagree on this point alone: Faulkner and Hemingway drove straight to the point and hammered it home. Price has a more genteel, and gentle, approach to storytelling which Eudora Welty adored and which I admire, even as I feel like I've missed out on what could have been something more... It isn't fair to compare Price to Faulkner - there's a difference between Mississippi South and Piedmont South, Faulkner of course representing the last gasp of antebellum charm and Price representing the vividly clinging to life ways of the hill folks. All Southern, but Price being Northern South, and Faulkner Southern South. Maybe its a distinction you have to grow up in to appreciate; but I digress...

The novel is very well done, and the better of the two novels mentioned above. The portrait of Rosacoke was especially well done. Old Mr. Isaac from "A Long and Happy Life" is an older version of the Good Priest from "The Good Priest's Son." Sam makes an appearance in both novels, becoming Aubrey in the later novel. I'm wondering too if Gwyn is an older boozing version of Rosacoke. Perhaps its the lack of detail about the players from "Long and Happy Life" that I'm missing - the idiosyncrasies that flesh out a mental

picture and breathe life into a character. This diminishing of detail makes it easy to transpose the characters from each novel with almost no conflict... a remarkable achievement considering the novels were written forty years apart.

Results of my hoard/share/donate test: I'll actually hoard this one. I like it, and expect I'll return to it again soon. I understand there is another novel and short story that continues the Mustian saga, and I would love to see what Price has done with Rosacoke.

Ed says

This is a tender story but not an easy book to read. The late Reynolds Price writes in a lyrical Southern idiom where the run-on sentences, parenthetical expressions, and rich metaphors abound. So, he's not everybody's cuppa. I went to his readings in the late-1980's when he sat in a wheelchair from an illness. This heroine Rosacoake Mustian reminds me of the intrepid but sensitive Kate in RP's KATE VAIDEN, one of the best books I've read this year. The book is short. So, if you like romantic novels set in the 1930s South and written with a literary depth to them, this one might do it for you.

Susy says

Had it not been for a book group discussion of *Hotel on the Corner of Bitter & Sweet* and the suggestion by one of our members that this novel would make a good companion piece I might never have heard of this title or its author. But I'm so glad I did. This is Price's debut novel & it won the William Faulkner Award for a notable first novel. Some reviewers have compared Price's style to Faulkner's & while Price does occasionally write a sentence as long as a paragraph or a page and then some, his prose for me was far easier and more pleasant to follow.

But it's the story that grabs the reader; a simpler time in rural North Carolina perhaps in the late 1940's or 50's. References to a time frame are limited to a photograph of FDR, and we know that motorcycles and cars - not to mention a plane - are forms of transportation. But the plot turns on the simple acts of life and death and how a sense of place forms a persona. For Rosacoke Mustian, the young twenty something protagonist, birds matter as do the deer and the neighbors. She stands on a principle of kindness and yet cannot communicate with Wesley, her perhaps boyfriend. It's a conflict that continues from the first page to the last.

The story and plot are spare but the details are rich as is the language. And it's not an easy task to write dialogue that is parochial but full of nuance. Price does a brilliant job.

I'm drawn to southern authors and this author does not disappoint. I'll have to check out more of his work (and there are lots in print) in the near future.

Sherri says

I fell in love within the first 10 pages of this book. Price is a beautiful writer, evoking time and place so clearly that, as a reader, I live with his characters, who are as finely and deeply drawn.

Clint says

Early short novel by the late North Carolina author focuses on Rosacoke, a young adult and her on-again, off-again relationship with Wesley, a slightly older, more worldly young adult in rural Virginia. Hard to read; long, obtuse sentences; unclear ending. Not my favorite.

Bob Spears says

From Terri & Henry's home.

John Arfwedson says

Price is what used to be called a "writer's writer", which means (more or less) that his command of diction, style, voice, and such is high and his command of plot/narrative momentum is low. When I first read one of his novels nearly 40 years ago (and now recall little of it), I was dazzled by the skill set. In "A Long and Happy Life", he writes in the classic Southern hothouse ways: in love with place, with atmosphere, with eccentricity, with wanderingly offbeat characters, and, of course, very much in love with language.

This is a novel of consciousness and imagination. And it is 19 year old Rosacoke's c. and i. we spend all our time in. She is a half-appealing/half-annoying character, in that Price's evocation of her inner and outer worlds is brilliant, but also in that we spend too much time in those worlds, without relief and without enough story to carry us along. It takes half the book for something significant to happen to Rosacoke, which is too long to languish in the forests and rivers and bird-conscious regions of her ploddingly step-by-step point of view. Rosacoke's "problem" is that she is "over-the-moon" about Wesley, a few years older than her, a fella who's now out of the military and selling motorcycles. These two are okay characters but not all that inherently fascinating as people. What holds us is the vision and the language and the style, not the story and the plot and the what-might-happen next.

Wesley is fatally inert, a dead cliché of a character. We want to know more about him and should but Price never gives us that and the story's overall effect/balance is badly compromised by this lack. What might've made the novel memorable is if Price had found the imaginative wherewithal to write half of it from Rosacoke's p.o.v. and half from Wesley's. But he isn't up to that.

All Rosacoke all-the-time becomes narratively oppressive. I'm all for beauty in prose and sensibility ("Beauty, Beauty, Beauty! by God") but it's not enough to sustain a too-languid story, nor particularly to hold the modern reader in place. Price's interest in the poetic/emotional dynamics of Rosacoke's inner life is one thing...but it's not enough things.

The ending is muddled, unconvincing, unsatisfying, abrupt. Price makes a hash of it (Wesley comes through, quite against character). He doubtless had the ending in mind all along but once the page count told him he was there he didn't really know how to pull it off...so he just stopped. We're left out on a limb, a bit baffled, and there's old Rosacoke with us...sorta confused her own self.

Steve Kreidler says

Hate to admit that a debut book written in 1962 by one of the most formidable and respected southern writers of all time just made it to my reading table, but I am so happy that death did not find me first. This is the kind of book I pray for every day. Price's prose is like licking a thesaurus made of honey. Not a word wasted, not a word unused.

This story of the struggle of a young woman living in mid century rural America rings of dust and sweat and resolve and resignation. I won't spoil your pleasure in allowing this plot to creep up and surprise and thrill and horrify you.

And now, of course, I have to read all the 40 or so novels of Price's that I've not yet devoured.

Suzanne Moore says

A long and happy life is something we all want, and it is foremost in Rosacoke's young mind when she thinks that's what Wesley can give her. Set in the rural mountains of North Carolina, a couple of years after WWII. Wesley comes back from the war and takes a job selling motorcycles. Rosacoke will risk her life by riding on the back of Wesley's bike, because she wants to know if he loves her. Rosacoke tells the story from her perspective full of poetic and descriptive detail. Wesley's aloofness about a romantic relationship with Rosacoke is frustrating not only for Rosacoke but the reader as well. I found myself anxiously turning each page to see if there would be some sort of awakening about these character's feelings for each other. Rosacoke keeps her emotions bottled up and even ends up losing her virginity to Wesley in an attempt to get a commitment from him.

Other surrounding characters and scenes that fill the story give Rosacoke plenty to reflect on. The funeral of a young black mother, leaving behind an orphan baby, Rosacoke's brother and sister-in-law's stillborn child, and finally Rosacoke's unplanned pregnancy that brings Wesley around to doing the right thing. I loved the Christmas play scene where Rosacoke is recruited to play the part of Mary. Her mind is not on the script, but somehow she pulls it off ... on auto-pilot, I guess. While holding the baby who represents the Christ child she draws on emotions she has after realizing that she, herself, was with child.

Our book club read this novel and had some mixed views. I found it a slow start, but once I was inside the mind of Rosacoke, I began seeing the world through her eyes and it was thought provoking. She self-analyzed and projected her opinions about everyone else in reflective thoughts. I enjoyed her stream of consciousness. I look forward to reading other novels that Price has written about Wesley and Rosacoke's life together.

Charlaralotte says

Another 50 cent bargain book, but how amazing!

Wonderful dive into the stifling world of a young woman in small town in the South. Fantastic feeling for the anguish and confusion surrounding her love for a carefree boyfriend who never provides what she needs.

Similar in some respects to "Lie Down in Darkness," though too brief to create monumental portrait of

tragedy.

Had some problems with the ending. Found Christmas play a bit metaphorically heavy-handed and not completely effective. Though maybe I just wanted a substantially more tragic ending to fit my mood.
