



At Seventy: A Journal

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May Sarton—poet, novelist, and chronicler—occupies a special place in American letters. This new journal chronicles the year that began on May 3, 1982, her seventieth birthday. At her home in Maine, she savors “the experience of being alive in this beautiful place,” reflecting on nature, friends, and work. “Why is it good to be old?” she was asked at one of her lectures. “Because,” she said, “I am more myself than I have ever been.”

At Seventy: A Journal Details

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Stacey Lozano says

May Sarton lets us into her seventieth year of life. I was intrigued by the idea, and it was interesting to read her thoughts, ideas, and actions from that time. I got to know her and her writing process better, though the process was not the main focus. The main focus was simply getting through her days, but she was as busy and constant as ever.

Rebecca says

I started reading this on my mother's 70th birthday: August 7, 2017. Sarton started writing it on her 70th birthday: May 3, 1982. Many of the book's themes were familiar to me from other Sarton journals I've read: her acceptance of aging and the sense that she has become more herself over the years; the joy she takes in her pets, gardening and visits from friends; the tyranny of her correspondence; and the fleeting nature of the muse, who is sometimes an abstraction and sometimes a very real person – here, a younger woman, it seems, whom I have not yet identified but will expect to learn about in the Margot Peters biography. (Speaking of which, Sarton must have changed her mind after writing this about biographies: “Several people unknown to me have written lately to ask whether they could do mine, and my answer is always the same. ‘Not till I’m dead.’”)

In the year this book covers, Sarton was returning to a project she'd had on hiatus, a novel about Anne Thorp (what would become *The Magnificent Spinster*, which I plan to read soon). As always, there are far too many quotable lines about the writer's life, but here are a few:

“what a style transmits is a vision of life, and this may come through to a reader whatever the subject may be.”

“writing for me is a way of understanding what is happening to me, of thinking hard things out. I have never written a book that was not born out of a question I needed to answer for myself. Perhaps it is the need to remake order out of chaos over and over again. For art is order, but it is made out of the chaos of life.”

“good writing takes a certain kind of psychic energy. To summon it each morning, I must wake unblurred, rested”

“There is always some sleight of hand going on in writing autobiography. So much has to be left out, especially things that might hurt or dismay people. But in a novel one can say everything. The novel is often autobiography distilled and/or transcended.”

Bethany says

This is the second May Sarton journal I've read and I have to say I'm growing quite fond of her. Admittedly, I'm haunted by the thought that she wouldn't like me very much, that she would find my fidgety, foolish youth cloying to spend time with. May Sarton makes me long to be wise and 'old' and therefore "*more myself than I have ever been*".

I always have to smile when she writes things like:

"For the first time in weeks I have three whole days to myself, and it is heaven not trying to take in and commune with someone else."

That sounds like a thought I'd express. I could definitely envision myself turning into her 40 or 50 years from now. I can see me now, living alone with a cat, a dog and a deep desire for continued solitude (though still treasuring the visits of various friends).

Though I still have quite a few left, I'm going to be sad after I've read all her journals.

Cindy Jacobsen says

I've been slogging through this book off and on for a month. I love journals, personal growth, day-to-day living, but this book was a disappointment. How many lunches/dinners/rainy days/"I need to be alone"/"I am alone"/I need to be alone/I had lunch with...etc ... can one write about? I had really looked forward to this based on other reviews, but it did not speak to me. I am approaching my sixtieth year and understand milestones; this was not a book that offered any depth. To be fair, her descriptions of her gardens and home were beautiful and maybe that is enough. I'll revisit it another time.

Carrie says

Read this when you are about to turn 30, and 40, and 50, and so on.

Jane says

May Sarton's sensitivity and independence, her devotion to the art of poetry and novel, her friendships with women, her passion for gardening on the coast of Maine, all add up to a fascinating read by a woman who decided to choose a life of literature and sometimes felt a clash between obligation to others' needs and her own need to create. She describes the political conflicts of the 1980's as well.

John says

I started the series of journals with the second installment *Journal of a Solitude*, covering one of her last years in NH; she makes the decision to move to ME during that time. There's a section in this one dealing with some NH folks who were covered in the first book *Plant Dreaming Deep*, so I was mildly concerned that I hadn't read that one earlier, but no big deal. I had been going to college in Maine during the period covered here, and don't recall the weather as having been as severe as she describes, but I was further inland. On the one hand, I did find her reminiscences of folks from her past daunting - the names just keep rolling along, although she is pretty good at "introducing" new people with proper context. I'm not an animal person, but enjoy the antics of her dog and cat (Tamas and Bramble). Nor am I at all a gardener, but those who are horticulturally inclined should love these journals for that aspect alone!

Recommended, but not as a stand-alone. If you pick up a copy of this one, I suggest you read the previous ones in order first.

Miriam says

So apparently, I want the life of a semi-retired poet/writer. To garden, take walks, OWN A HOUSE BY THE SEA, correspond with my many admirers and friends, travel and read my poems to appreciative audiences. Better get on that whole "writing" thing then.

Linda Robinson says

A friend recommended this book of the many Sarton tomes she's read, and I'm glad she did. Quite personal, and I felt like a welcomed friend invited for the weekend. It's a comfort to know that I may perhaps look forward to more serenity and appreciation of beauty as I approach 70, even though the garden will be more of a challenge. A lovely walk by the shore with an accomplished writer.

Ellen says

Although I love gardening and noting the weather, her journal wandered too much back to the same places: her visiting friends and admirers, her garden, and the weather. At the halfway point, nothing remarkable had happened and no huge "ah-has" I kept a paper and pencil handy to write down pithy observations on growing older, but what I mainly got was repetition of the same routine.... That is okay for me, but not interesting enough to read about. I'm switching to Gloria Steinem's book, *Doing Sixty and Seventy*.

Anne says

May Sarton wrote of herself as a literary outsider and I have not known anyone else who reads her. I read many of her novels and journals, including this one, over 30 years ago. And, re-reading this now, I am anxious to read and reread more. From her I get a longing to think deeply and to center myself. I feel the urge to read thoughtfully and to use my own creativity. She doesn't tackle world problems, in general, though she mentions them, but she looks inward and to her friends. Her writing soothes me while making me ready to do creative things.

Rita says

A lovely book about a writer's daily life at the age of 70. Maine's rugged climate plays a major role, and Sarton makes huge efforts to have a lovely flower garden in the very brief summer. I was amazed at how MANY visitors she had, and how many times a year she flew or drove to places to sign books or give talks.

At first I wasn't certain I wouldn't get bored, but soon I was enchanted. I think she tried to give as honest a picture as she could of her life in that year. She says she craves solitude, yet obviously she also craved company and always terribly enjoyed spending time with her many many friends.

Having enjoyed reading several of her novels I was curious to see the person behind the writer too.

Mary says

At seventy-two, it's time for me to read this again. I have read several of her journals and they all make me so happy that I moved to Maine.

Trisha says

Although May Sarton would have wanted to be remembered for her poetry and the novels she wrote, today she is probably best known for her journals. I discovered them when I was a young woman in my late twenties and was captivated by the way she wrote about her solitary life, her love of nature and beautiful things, the relationships she valued, her ability to pay attention to the significance of what often gets overlooked, and the joys and struggles of the creative life. When I first read "At Seventy" which she started on her seventieth birthday, I promised myself to read it again when I was that same age. That was over 30 years ago and I have just finished re-reading it (having started it over a year ago on the first day of my own 70th birthday.)

It was interesting to read this book from my perspective as an older woman because of what Sarton said about the benefits of growing older (it's an exhilarating time of life because we are so much more in touch with who we really are.) I could also relate to what she said about the importance of decluttering our lives and the satisfaction of making order out of chaos, the love of reading, the joy of tending a garden, as well as the pleasure that comes from paying attention to the world of nature from one season to the next. But this time around I noticed that she seemed a little too pre-occupied with herself – how her writing was perceived by others, how the audiences at her poetry readings applauded her, etc. I also found it less interesting to hear about the many people she was constantly entertaining overnight or driving off to meet for lunch or talking with on the phone – especially since she so frequently wrote about how much she needed and loved solitude.

But what impressed me as I read the book this time – just as it had the first time – was what it revealed about the significance of keeping a journal (something I began doing as a result of reading May Sarton's books and have been doing ever since.) I also loved the fact that she was a faithful and dedicated letter-writer. In fact I treasure the hand-written letter I received from her many years ago in response to one I had written to her. Enclosed was a signed copy of one of her poems, a thoughtful gift from a writer I have always admired.

Marilynn says

Boring, self indulgent book.
