



Why Did I Ever

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After a ten-year silence, Mary Robison has emerged with a novel so beguiling and funny that it has brought critics and her live-reading audiences to their feet. *Why Did I Ever* takes us along on the darkest of private journeys. The story, told by a woman named Money Breton, is submitted like a furious and persuasive diary—a tale as fierce and taut as its fictional teller.

Why Did I Ever Details

Date : Published September 19th 2002 by Counterpoint (first published 2001)

ISBN : 9781582432557

Author : Mary Robison

Format : Paperback 208 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Short Stories, Literary Fiction, Humor, Comedy

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Wesley says

An ex once said I was probably the only Mary Robison queen on earth and it's a title I wear proudly. Easily my favorite writer, I revisit her work often and my (already fanatic) love deepens with each reading. *Why Did I Ever* was always one of my least favorites, something that seems extremely foreign to me now, having giggled like a numskull princess on the train over the last few days. Her humor and precision are effortless and ineffable, qualities all too mishandle or altogether missing in contemporary literature.

Libby Greene says

Necessary document. Over the summer I tried to go straight from *Infinite Jest* to *The Recognitions* (WHOO!) and floundered in it for a while, got disappointed with myself and then disappointed for other reasons, and picked this up on a whim yesterday. The copy I read is my roommate's. What god-damn luck.

Robison's narrator has one of the best voices I've ever read-- she's just an absolutely real, breathing, sharp, bristly, aching person. She's also the funniest narrator I've encountered since, perhaps, Henderson in *Henderson, the Rain King*. And her humor is basically syntactical, which is-- ugh. Both delightful and so impressive. It's one of the first times in recent memory that I've felt everything I've written while reading a book-- texts, Facebook statuses, this review-- fall under the influence of an immersive voice.

The way you, as a reader, experience Money's struggle with mental illness is visceral and brutal and tender all at once. It's absolutely beautiful and has so much to do with the fracturing of the narrative into sharp little pieces-- another one of those moments where one must in more or less equal parts both enjoy and admire the effect. It wouldn't work if it weren't tight, but boy is it tight, and boy, does it work.

Lovely also to read a stunning novel from the early aughts. Which I guess is silly to say if the last thing I read was *Infinite Jest*, which it was, but to pick up a novel by an author I'd never encountered and have it read both datedly and brilliantly is something special for which I reserve a special soft spot.

Worth it.

Rebecca McNutt says

I had heard a lot of great things about this novel, and now I understand why. From the author of the dysfunctional family novel *Oh!*, *Why Did I Ever* is comedic, quirky, creative and deeply original.

Erica says

Launched on a minimalist female authors kick (thanks Amy Hempel!) I set out looking for Mary Robison. This is her most recent novel (2001), as I haven't found anything earlier yet. It forms a loose narrative out of hundreds of tiny segments (word is, she wrote it on notecards!). It's funny, sharp, sweet, honest - an often less than flattering, but always bold and affectionate portrait of a woman, somewhere past her thirties, dating

an "idiot" who falls into the category of men who are "over thirty and less than a hundred." Her fridge is full of her daughter's methadone, her only friend is a pretentious driver's ed instructor. She's happiest when driving fast and popping Ritalins. Kind of like "Play It as It Lays" without the glamour and melodrama.

I kept wanting to read it aloud to who ever was around. The tiny chapters stand on their own: "Each and every tire squeal reminds me that I lost my cat." They do make up a novel... but not a great one. I almost wanted to lose the narration, just concentrate on the vignettes. As someone who's pretty into storylines, that's saying a lot. I stopped trying to find the plot, and figure out what's going on; let the narration be a backdrop to beautiful sentences and evocations. And really enjoyed myself.

Tao says

I like this book. It has many little sections. This book is funny and calm.

Rachel Glaser says

This reading experience was like no other. Robison's main character invites/swallows(?) the reader far into her everyday life. One moment she is reading her to-do list, another she is speeding down the highway blasting music, out-racing the cops. One time she threw her sunglasses out her car window, then proceeded to run over them 37 times. The details of our world--fabrics, rugs, paint, pets, phones, litter, drugs, gifts, laundry, cigarettes, radios, chairs, clothes, drawers, newspapers--are in the forefront here, they vividly populate the disarray and livelihood of the narrator. At one point a chair in the laundromat is described as a "shrimp-colored scoop chair" or something close to that. The narrator is the irrational, misguided, well-meaning, clumsy, nostalgic, lazy, inspired, reckless loon inside us all. It is a joy to follow her fleeting moods and deft eye document these odd moments of life. I have never felt this way reading a book--but any time the plot was close to getting started, I wanted to get back to the thoughts and stray moments, back to life and away from the story.

Kelly says

Holy hell that was fucking fantastic.

Cindy says

"Why Did i Ever" read this book!!!! I got nothing out of it! I gave it 2 stars for originality.

Ioana says

I really want to own this book and highlight the shit out of it, because it is, for the most part, just so relatable that it (almost) hurts.

And if anyone actually cares, this is probably the most telling quote of the book, the knot keeping it all together, as far as i know and care.

"There's a lot you can do with paper and scissors, if you have scissors.

I don't, and i don't really look nice enough to step outside and walk across the gravel courtyard to the office of this motor inn to borrow a pair.

But there's a lot you can do with just paper. Folding it dozens of ways.

And trick yourself out of thinking over at the side of your mind, all the stuff that's there throbbing, or whimpering, whichever's worse."

Kane S. says

Huh. This novel, told in 536 short anecdotes and non-sequiturs, is singular. Fragmented and disjointed without being incomprehensible, Why Did I Ever documents the everyday struggles of its protagonist, Money Breton. She listens to music. She doctors scripts. She argues with her friend and her neighbour. She does some speed. She shouts at cars on the highway. She searches for her cat. But this portrait of a woman constantly on the edge of something also manages to be quite funny. Rendered in plain, spare language, Money's sense of the world is dry and vicious.

Zippy. Sad. Good.

3.5 Letters to Sean Penn out of 5

Helen says

The writing style is interesting; Robison strings together a few hundred short vignettes, some a paragraph or two, some only a couple of sentences, and organizes them into chapters. I speculate that she got the idea for the story's basic outline, then began writing the vignettes, and finally organized them as she thought best. It's worth reading, but I can't agree at this time with the gushing praise I've seen from other reviewers. It held my attention enough to finish the book, but I didn't really enjoy it. Still, I wouldn't rule out a reread at some point to see whether I'd change my mind.

Stacy says

I loved this book. Robison has taken the little moments and distractions--no matter how mundane--that make up our existence, and crafted them into something meaningful and quite beautiful. The book was born in her effort to defeat a kind of 'writer's block', and for me it proves something I believe to be true about writing: you can only find the work by doing it.

Robison's sentences are like hard little gems, and her sense of humor and the telling detail are very fine. As a writer, this is a book I will read again and again; it feeds me with its heady mix of simplicity and complexity, with its solid and unsentimental rendering of life's struggles, big and small.

Justin Evans says

Before I get going, it's worth pointing out that I read this almost entirely because a friend of mine, who is a writer, was very influenced by this book. Left to my own devices, I likely wouldn't have picked it up. So be aware that I'm not Robison's audience.

That said, I'm concerned that there are very serious things wrong with me, and that this book brought them all out.

I don't care very much about 'consistent characters' or verisimilitude or realism or whatever. That said, this book seems to be reaching for verisimilitude at least, and I'm more than a little confused about the main character, who was married to a Latin Professor, has read Melville's 'Pierre,' and often makes off-the-cuff references to John Ashbery, but apparently does not know what the word 'tort' means.

ii) That doesn't matter at all, provided you get something else from the book, and I should be able to get something from this, since our narrator is very flippant and I like flippancy. But I'm not sure what I was meant to get out of this: there's a woman. She's writing a script for Hollywood big-wigs (this is clearly meant to be satire). She's got a new boyfriend who is rich and a moron. She's trying to deal with the fact that her son has been raped and tortured, and the criminal is coming up for trial. Also, her daughter is overcoming heroin addiction. But I don't care about any of these things, and I suspect many readers will feel the same way. All of the events are reported in the same voice, whether it's someone looking up the word 'tort' or the horrific assault.

iii) There's a nice level of reflexivity early on: our narrator has painted a fake Rothko. Her friend complains that there's no "focal point. Something for our eyes to fix on, finally, and rest upon. Something we end up gazing at." The narrator responds, "It's! A! Copy!" Of course, the same can be said about this book; it lacks a focal point, lacks anything for us to fix on, finally. The implication here is that we shouldn't look for that one thing to fix on, finally. That's a good point.

So this book gives me at least two of the things I really value in fiction, but also makes me complain about things I don't really care about. That's an odd mix.

So, the content being more or less boring, the most important aspect of the book is its fragmentary form (the part of the book that has most influenced my friend). And it is nicely done, and a nice way to stick to garden variety realism while avoiding some of that mode's worst flaws (most obviously, Robison doesn't need to join everything together, so the book is compact and engaging). On the other hand, the brevity of the fragments forces the author to restrict herself, I fear, for the worse. There's not all that much that can be said in half a dozen lines to one page, and although there are few dud fragments here, there's also very little that sticks in my mind. A lot of people are writing like this now. The form is in a pretty obviously dialectical relationship, the other tendency being very, very long sentences, an absence of paragraph or chapter breaks, and, at the most extreme, books comprising only one sentence (Vanessa Place; Laszlo Krasznahorkai). We can all learn from both forms; the best books of the next generation will, I hope, take the best of the minimalist, fragmentary approach and the best of the maximalist.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

This is not like reading Alfred Lord Tennyson, but neither is it like inhaling from a bag of glue.

Christina Sallis says

ha, loved this. so funny

give me a hit of that so i can keep coughing

'are you all alone?' i ask myself.

'all alone,' i say

I would say to my cat, 'there's no place very safe for any of us anymore.'

Vickie says

If you like for your books or movies to give you all the details and to tie things up nicely, this is not the book for you. If you find yourself laughing with the rest of the audience, this book is not for you. But, if you are the one laughing at the hysterically funny bits when most others are silent. You might enjoy this book with a sort of plot.

This was not my favorite book, but I did enjoy the offbeat humor and some of the "entries" were priceless.

Judith Podell says

One of those rare books that I like more and more each time I read it--first time around I thought it was merely clever and chic. By now I have favorite passages underlined that I read aloud to myself just for the fun of it. And yes, there's even a cat in it.

Ben Bush says

A friend is interested in vignette novels. I read this on his rec.

Will McGrath says

This is a beautiful weirdo right here.

Seymour Glass says

I was recommend this by someone whose taste (and writing) I greatly respect and admire so I was all

prepared to absolutely love it and start pressing my copy enthusiastically into the hands of my friends. Unfortunately, it took me a long while (about a third of the way in) to feel like I had any clue what the plot was, what the purpose of the at times sentence-long chapters was and why I should care about this woman. An emotional reveal gave the story more pathos and convinced me to keep reading, otherwise I'd have jacked it in.

That said, it is funny, very wry, well-observed and has lots of little relatable moments in it. And for that it gets 3 stars. I wish I'd loved it though because it seems like the sort of book you should love, it's so unconventional and quirky that it makes me feel like there's something wrong with me as a reader for not loving it.
