



The Songs We Know Best: John Ashbery's Early Life

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The Songs We Know Best, the first comprehensive biography of the early life of John Ashbery—the winner of nearly every major American literary award—reveals the unusual ways he drew on the details of his youth to populate the poems that made him one of the most original and unpredictable forces of the last century in arts and letters.

Drawing on unpublished correspondence, juvenilia, and childhood diaries as well as more than one hundred hours of conversation with the poet, Karin Roffman offers an insightful portrayal of Ashbery during the twenty-eight years that led up to his stunning debut, *Some Trees*, chosen by W. H. Auden for the 1955 Yale Younger Poets Prize. Roffman shows how Ashbery's poetry arose from his early lessons both on the family farm and in 1950s New York City—a bohemian existence that teemed with artistic fervor and radical innovations inspired by Dada and surrealism as well as lifelong friendships with painters and writers such as Frank O'Hara, Jane Freilicher, Nell Blaine, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, and Willem de Kooning.

Ashbery has a reputation for being enigmatic and playfully elusive, but Roffman's biography reveals his deft mining of his early life for the flint and tinder from which his provocative later poems grew, producing a body of work that he calls "the experience of experience," an intertwining of life and art in extraordinarily intimate ways.

The Songs We Know Best: John Ashbery's Early Life Details

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Jeff says

Usually, when I have read the biography of a writer, I am already familiar with his or her work, and it is a chance to see the forces in life that may have prompted or helped shape her/his creations. I have only read the occasional John Ashbery poem, and sometimes found his work dense to the point of incomprehensibility. So reading Roffman's fine biography of Ashbery's early years is like encountering him first as an acquaintance, and I now look forward to know what kind of poetry he produced. The book covers Ashbery's childhood through the period after he finished his college education at Harvard and Columbia. There is an impressive list of his friends and lovers, include Frank O'Hara, Larry Rivers, the duo-piano team of Gold & Fizdale, etc., etc. Writers, composers, painters, dancers, and theater people all push through: it's rather like encountering a dizzying crowd at a cocktail party. Ashbury's glittering crowd are not always nice - there's a fair amount of back-biting and malicious gossip. Not hard to see why Ashbery was so glad to leave the U.S. for France in 1955, or why he ended up spending the next decade of his life there.

Mike Zickar says

A lovely biography of a confusing poet who I have always enjoyed reading. This biography is masterful in the author's discovery of original source material that sheds light on Ashbery's life. In fact, she found information about his family's life that Ashbery didn't know himself (e.g., that his father did know that he was gay).

This book celebrates the experiences that Ashbery had that led him to his unique type of poetry, a journey that seems part luck, a lot of effort, and driven by a curiosity that we could all benefit from. Reading the biography, along with the author's interpretation of Ashbery's poems, makes his own poetry seem less random and chaotic.

The biography ends at 28, right after Ashbery's first volume got selected as the Yale's Younger Poet Series winner and he was heading to Paris for a Fulbright. I hope that Roffman has several more volumes of biography in the queue!

Kevin Mckinney says

really a powerful book

Natalie says

Review published in Library Journal: May 15, 2017.

Steve Bookman says

A masterful biography by a first rate scholar. Author Roffman thoroughly and effectively deploys all useful scholarly, investigative, and writing skills to produce this important work about the background and early professional career of one of the most noteworthy living authors writing in the English language in any genre.

The reader now has access to a fine-grained enough view of Ashbery's background to truly gain an increased appreciation for the poet's characteristic devices, images, and emotional themes.

Rod says

About a quarter of the way through this and I'm quite disappointed that such an interesting subject should be given such a rote biographical treatment. Further, the attribution of passages from poems decades after the subject's childhood to memories from those very early years seems like a big reach with no real grounding in anything one might call evidence, apart from the very tenuous connection of a word that may or may not have appeared in the subject's consciousness fifty, sixty or seventy years earlier. I am skeptical. And also not particularly entertained or edified. I hoped for a lot more. But it's a relatively short and quick read, so I will persevere. Not at all what I was hoping for in a biography of one of America's poetic giants, though. It's just, well, kind of boring.

Update: it didn't really improve, sadly. Such an interesting subject, and such a disappointing execution, with too many instances of poor writing and a lack of acuity about the poetic material. Ashbery deserves much better than this.

James Murphy says

Karin Roffman was a personal friend of Ashbery. This biography was inspired by visits to his home. When she asked, he showed her his childhood diaries and later gave her access to his early papers. The book, the result of that inspiration and Ashbery's handing her the keys to his early life covers the time up to his first volume of poetry, *Some Trees*, and his sailing to France to begin his Fulbright Fellowship in 1955.

This is critical biography examining the poems at the beginning of his manhood and shows how his ideas developed. The book's invaluable for that, particularly for the insight into the poems. But I struggled with it. The early Ashbery, no matter how precocious, wasn't interesting to me. So it isn't until he begins at Harvard that I began to become comfortable and to settle in to learning what I thought I was reading the book for. The time after Harvard is even more interesting. Following his move to New York City the biography details the beginnings of friendships that would last a lifetime, including important writers and artists in their own right like Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, and Jane Freilicher.

This stands alone for now, Ashbery up to about age 27 or 28. I suppose Roffman could continue on to

present other volumes of his later life. His stature as a poet certainly deserves that kind of attention.

Claudia Keelan says

Biographies are always iffy but this one adds to a comprehensive reading of John Ashbery's early work. Karin Roffman constructs the early life of John's intellectual and imaginative wanderings through a meticulous study of his early poems and first book as they pertain to the actual backdrop of his particular family and location in upstate New York. I could almost hear him talking as I read.

Winthrop Smith says

I don't think that anyone could sit with this biography alone. It yearns for the Library of America Collected Poems so that the reader can read the poems as they are discussed. If you are not familiar with poets such as Frank O'Hara, or James Schuyler (for some reason referred to as 'Jimmy,') you will want a biography, letters, diary, along with their poems. Add in the artists, and their work. You are now beginning to get a feel for the period, for what it was like to be working then.

This is not to ignore what following Ashbery through his early years was like. He didn't wake up with pen in hand, and a vision of what words could do. He worked to get there. Hated the farm life. Explored his sexual orientation. Met friends. Had to rely into his 30's on financial support from his parents.

Cheryl says

I am glad that I am not a genius. Karin Roffman's meticulously researched biography of John Ashbery's early years makes it very clear that being brilliant is a lonely destiny. I was interested in the book not so much because I enjoy Ashbery's poetry -- it is too obscure for me -- but because much of his early years were spent in the hamlet where I live. I know many of the people and places and it was fascinating to see how someone born and raised in our rural community could reach the pinnacle that Ashbery achieved. His "other-ness" and difference from his family and early friends certainly caused him pain and created constant drama. I am not sure that I would have liked him personally -- his journals, letters and interviews seem to show a very narcissistic personality. But, watching his genius develop despite his interior doubts, petty grudges, social awkwardness and misjudged relationships was a captivating look into a world that I will never know. Roffman's book adds new perspective to the highly regarded poet.
