



Notes to Self: Essays

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'The person who loves the addict exhausts and renews their love on a daily basis' In this vivid and powerful collection of essays, the first non-fiction book published by Tramp Press, Emilie Pine boldly confronts the past to better understand herself, her relationships and her role in society. Tackling subjects like addiction, fertility, feminism and sexual violence, and where these subjects intersect with legislation, these beautifully written essays are at once fascinating and funny, intimate and searingly honest. Honest, raw, brave and new, Notes to Self breaks new ground in the field of personal essays.

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rosamund says

Emilie Pine's essays are frank and vivid, and I was completely engaged by this book. I read it over the course of a day, which is rare for me. Though they are marketed as "essays", this book feels to me more like a slightly disjointed memoir: each section focuses on a different aspect of Pine's life, but doesn't talk about the subjects in a broader context. I would associate essays with a wider study of a subject, whereas Pine's essays are strictly personal. At times, this is excellent -- I was particularly moved by the chapter "The Baby Years" where she writes about infertility -- but sometimes it made the chapters feel a little narrow, or lacking in depth. For example, the opening chapter, about her father's alcoholism, is completely gripping, but feels a little hollow. Pine touches on a variety of subjects -- the influence of alcohol on her father's life, the health system at his home in Corfu, the struggles to get treatment for liver disease in Ireland -- but I wanted her to write about these things in more depth and more reflectively. Similarly, her chapter about emotions and feminism seemed to me to have a very narrow worldview: it really only described the experience of a professional, straight woman, successful in her field. This would be fine if she had set it up to be simply about her own experience, but she seems to be trying to speak in a broader way, and it shows the limits of her empathy. All that being said, I find this book engaging and surprising: it's an arresting memoir, full of energy and detail, and it's good to see taboo subjects treated so frankly. I do recommend it: the quality of her prose alone floors me.

Shannen says

I've taken a few of Dr Pine's classes, and she's been one of my favourite lecturers since I started college. She had a knack for making me really enjoy thinking about/discussing books that I didn't even like reading, so when I saw all the buzz about Notes to Self it was a foregone conclusion that I was going to read it, and I went with the expectation that I'd at least like it/be interested in it. I was only wrong inasmuch as I completely loved it. A few times I had to stop in the middle of a page and take a breath, because the experiences were so like some that I've had, and other times I had to do the same thing because the experiences were totally different to mine but the simple truth of how they're written made me really understand what it was like. It was interesting that in one of the essays Dr Pine reflected on the concept of empathy, and her low capacity for it (both for others and herself), because this collection is one of the most empathy-inducing reading experiences I've ever had.

I adore this collection violently, because I don't know how to do it any other way. Since my first year of college I've counted Emilie Pine among my "real life" role models, a woman I look up to. Now, after reading her essays, I can't help but look up to her more, but in the way you look up to someone you're proud of for getting through their toughest spots, not an idol. I know that in theory every book is an exercise in exposing yourself, and that it takes bravery to put that out there, but Notes to Self is exceptionally vulnerable, exceptionally beautiful; exceptional. She bled on that page, and even though I'm younger, and differ in identity and experience in a lot of ways, I felt like I fly a flag of the same colour. A red that's vibrant and authentic and hard to look at directly.

It's stunning.

John Braine says

I can't do justice to such a finely written book with my comparably basic grasp of English. I adore books like this; it's a raw, honest and insightful look inwards and outwards in the face of life's many knocks. And so beautifully written. Not beautiful as in beautifully crafted florid prose, but beautiful in the truth and feeling conveyed over the course of each essay, each one adding a layer to the previous ones. In some ways, this reminded me of one of my favourites books in the last decade; *H is for Hawk*. I think *Notes To Self* was extra special for me because I could relate to quite a lot of the touchpoints; I came out the other end of the rave scene in quite a fragile state and spent most of my early twenties struggling with serious mental health issues and then over a very slow period of growth, I miraculously found myself with a Master's degree, a career and a family a decade later, then I ended up looking after a parent with many health issues and family conflict, while we went through the heartache of multiple miscarriages and infertility. So quite a lot of this touched a nerve and was expressed with such stunning craft that I just wanted to open my window upstairs, like some broken adult version of the *Never Ending Story* and point at *Notes to Self* shouting THIS! THIS! This is what it's all about.

Robin says

I cannot understand why this book of essays is so highly acclaimed. Although Emilie Pine is a good writer, this book was an absolute chore to read.

I found myself repeatedly judging the author. I could not help judging her neglectful, selfish parents either. I wanted to feel compassion for all of them, but I simply felt annoyed. Was I really expected to feel sorry for Pine because she had to wear hand me downs rather than designer branded clothing as a child? First. World. Problems. I had little sympathy when she complained about the slimy sandwiches she occasionally had to eat for school lunches. Pine's idea of being "poor" is very different than mine.

While it is understandable that Pine suffered mental health issues as a result of her upbringing, I questioned why she chose to regurgitate every shocking, painful experience of her youth, in what seemed like a raw journal entry, to the public. Her extreme attention seeking antics as a teenager are forgivable, but this book felt like another desperate attempt to be seen.

I did not find the essays to be insightful, interesting or transformative. Other books touching on similar subject matter, such as Roxanne Gay's *Bad Feminist*, are thought provoking, whereas I found these essays tedious. Pine often came across as narcissistic to me. I did not find it surprising when she revealed in her final essay that she does not empathise with others. Strangely she wants the reader to care about her feelings, while admitting that she does not care about ours.

I wanted to like Pine and root for her to overcome her difficulties, but she didn't make it easy. At one point Pine goes so far as to criticise her colleagues at a female leadership course for choosing their mothers as role models. "No wonder you can't get promoted, I thought, meanly, if your role model stayed at home." Wow. I thought the goal of feminism is to lift women up and ensure that we have choices. Pine does, at least, recognise and name her own internalised sexism.

The strongest essay in my opinion was about her father. *Notes On Impermanence* sets the tone for the entire book. She describes what many children of alcoholics experience as they navigate their conflicting feelings

of love for a wounded parent as well as sadness, anger, confusion, loneliness, and rejection.

Redemption stories are very powerful. It would have interested me if Pine had shared more about her process of developing self worth and transforming her life. Instead it read like a long rant. Maybe the process of writing was cathartic for Pine, but as a reader it left me feeling flat.

Emer O'Toole says

This cut me to the quick - so close to the bone. Close to the bone for many people, I would imagine - for those of us with addicted parents, fraught relationships with our bodies, untold stories of teenage vulnerability and exploitation, and complex struggles to find that non-place between success and contentment. The writing's electric. It's sharp and clean as it carves through unstable, messy material; it strives for resolution, order, but it also refuses these things. It's beautiful.

Laura King says

Absolutely heart breaking. Unflinchingly honest and written so beautifully.

Louise says

Absolutely the best thing I have read in a very long time.....

Sarah says

Phenomenal. There wasn't a weak essay in this debut collection from Irish author Emilie Pine. The subject matter is incredibly personal - her parents' separation, her father's alcoholism, her miscarriage, her own relationship with her body, among others - and each essay is revelatory in some way. I found myself relating closely to some of her experiences, too, and found it refreshing to read another person's writing on things I didn't acknowledge I felt myself (until I saw it written down). I really can't recommend this highly enough.

Thank you Netgalley and Penguin Books UK for the advance copy, which was provided in exchange for an honest review.

Christine Ryan says

Essays on a life peeled back to its raw, painful, quirky core. The honesty in the writing is beautiful, heart-breaking and powerful all at once. And if this makes it sound like a difficult read let me tell you I couldn't put it down, except to shed a few tears or laugh out loud. There is much to identify with in these pages and much, also, to learn. Pine speaks to the cultural silence that keeps the bloody mess of women's lives unexplored. She does this bravely by exploring her own bloody messes. Her life-excerpts are gripping and

often hilarious. The non-relationship of her mother and her alcoholic father has some really funny moments and it was hard not to smile in recognition at the unsuccessful attempts at keeping her period from going public. Her father's near-death alcoholism, her own miscarriage and the loss of her sister's baby, along with an extended 'wild child' period in London, all make for riveting reading. At the heart of it all, though, is a brave woman. Speaking the silences.

Kirsty says

Personal essays; I know, I know. But these ones are actually good. Not only are they beautifully written and observed, they're actually about something. Some essay collections feel like the writer thought 'need to write an essay, hmm, what can I write about...'; Emilie Pine seems to approach it from the other way. Each of these essays feel vital, like she had to write them. I loved this book and I can't wait to read more from Pine.

Alan says

Notes for Everyone

Devastatingly raw and life-affirming. It is tagged as Essays, but reads somewhat like a non-fiction novel / memoir as there is a definite flashback/flash-forward biographical progression to the author gradually revealing more & more of her past and then stating her mantra for the future. The concluding pages were some of the most uplifting and inspiring things that I've read this year.

This is not yet generally available in Canada (or likely North America) except as an eBook, but I was lucky enough to snag a print copy via a subscription to Shakespeare and Company's Year of Reading 2018, a blind-faith subscription where you don't know ahead of time what they will send you. I wasn't disappointed by a single book all year.

Karina says

Both deeply personal and coolly self-aware, these essays talk about all the things we keep silent. Utterly brilliant and compelling.

Molly Ferguson says

This was a Christmas gift and I tore through it, careening through these intense and engulfing essays and feeling more and more that every woman I know should read this. The first, devastating, essay about Pine's father's alcoholism, was searing and raw and hard to read. The second, a long journey through her infertility struggles, offered me more insight on this condition than I have ever had. She keeps plunging ahead, including an essay about her "wild child" teen years and sexual violence, and a final essay about being a woman in the academy that every academic I know should read. I will be recommending this book to

everyone I know, and thrusting it in the hands of my creative nonfiction friends.

Canadian Reader says

“I am afraid of being the disruptive woman. And of not being disruptive enough.”

Emilie Pine, a lecturer at University College Dublin, has written a mostly engaging, honest, and occasionally brave book of personal essays about important experiences in her life. The collection opens with a very strong piece about her father’s 2013 alcoholic health crisis on the Greek Island of Corfu. (Given the state of Greek hospitals, this is *not* the place where you want to experience a medical emergency.) Years of drinking had caused veins in Richard Pine’s lower esophagus to rupture suddenly (a not-uncommon consequence of serious liver disease); he required prompt treatment, which included blood transfusions. Emilie explains how, from her home in Dublin, she had to arrange for one of his friends in Corfu to badger a reluctant ambulance driver to get her dad to the hospital. (Why would anyone want to interrupt a lovely Sunday with the family to transport a likely goner, and a stranger to boot, to a medical facility?) Hours and several connecting flights later (Corfu is not easy to get to from Dublin during the off season), Emilie and her younger sister would find their father lying in his own waste on a hospital ward with neither a doctor nor a nurse in sight. They’d be forced to buy medical supplies—absorbent pads and disposable surgical gloves—and deliver much of their father’s care themselves. Pine uses this episode as a route into a deeper consideration of the mess of emotions—love, frustration, anxiety, helplessness, and rage—that plague the child of an addict. That essay alone is worth the price of admission.

In the essays that follow, Pine takes on other painful life events and taboo topics: her infertility, miscarriage(s), and the medical community’s paternalistic withholding of important information about her own body from her; her beloved sister’s first, tragic pregnancy and labour; her parents’ separation and the stigma associated with it—divorce was only signed into law in Ireland in 1996; female blood—menstruation and its cessation; her turbulent adolescence, fuelled by loneliness, in which she repeatedly put herself in harm’s way; and, finally, her experiences in the workplace.

Although the subject matter is sometimes dark (particularly “Something about Me”, my least favourite piece, which concerns her chaotic teen-age years) Pine does not wallow in self-pity or misery. Her perspective is clear-eyed, and her prose is generally clean and unpretentious. I found some essays—the earlier ones—stronger than others, and I wish she had concluded her book with thoughts that sounded a little less like a pop psychology pep talk. Having said all this, from what I saw here, I hope we’ll be hearing more from Emilie Pine.

Niall O’neill says

I have never read anything like this, so honest, so bare. It reaches into the deepest recesses of what it means to be human, the places we do not even let ourselves go, let alone others. It has made me think differently about the world, and that is the greatest thing we can find in writing.
