



# Not for Everyday Use: A Memoir

*Elizabeth Nunez*

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## **Not for Everyday Use: A Memoir** Elizabeth Nunez

"Nunez ponders the cultural, racial, familial, social, and personal experiences that led to what she ultimately understands was a deeply loving union between her parents. A beautifully written exploration of the complexities of marriage and family life."

-- **Booklist** (starred review)

"Through her thoughtful and articulate writing, Nunez offers a valuable perspective on the racism that she experienced, even in America, and the damage the Catholic Church does to women who follow the 'no artificial birth control' rule. Recommended for memoir enthusiasts and readers interested in Caribbean literature."

-- **Library Journal**

"A celebration of understanding and empathy."

--**Chicago Center for Literature and Photography**

"*Not for Everyday Use* is a gorgeous tapestry of mourning and redemption. Nunez is an astonishing writer, approaching the page with both skill and heart. Her memories are well-deep and love-strong. With insights that are both sharp and tender, this is a memoir that will change the way you understand your family, and the world."

--**Tayari Jones**, author of *Silver Sparrow*

"Elizabeth Nunez has written a book about love: love of family, love of place, love of literature, and even the love of human flaws. *Not for Everyday Use* manages to be a memoir rich with tenderness that doesn't shy away from pain and loss. Reading this book was like sitting with a dear friend for a long conversation and only later realizing I'd been in the presence of a true artist. It's not easy to sound casual but attain the profound yet somehow Nunez pulls it off, page after page."

--**Victor LaValle**, author of *The Devil in Silver*

"Elizabeth Nunez, in a clear, unsentimental, hard-hitting, and direct voice, skillfully structures the story of a mixed-race Portuguese and Trinidadian Roman Catholic family around the preparations for her mother's funeral...At the heart of this story is the relationship between a mother and a daughter, a daughter who leaves home as a young girl to continue her education and make her life in the United States of America. Some of the most poignant moments are those in which the author describes her feelings of belonging and not belonging to 'home.' This is a story that will speak both to Caribbean people 'at home' and those who have left to make their home elsewhere."

--**Lawrence Scott**, author of *Light Falling on Bamboo*

Tracing the four days from the moment she gets the call that every immigrant fears to the burial of her mother, Elizabeth Nunez tells the haunting story of her lifelong struggle to cope with the consequences of the "sterner stuff" of her parents' ambitions for their children and her mother's seemingly unbreakable conviction that displays of affection are not for everyday use.

But Nunez sympathizes with her parents, whose happiness is constrained by the oppressive strictures of colonialism, by the Catholic Church's prohibition of artificial birth control which her mother obeys, terrified

by the threat of eternal damnation (her mother gets pregnant fourteen times: nine live births and five miscarriages which almost kill her), and by what Malcolm Gladwell refers to as the “privilege of skin color” in his mother’s Caribbean island homeland where “the brown-skinned classes...came to fetishize their lightness.” Still, a fierce love holds this family together, and the passionate, though complex, love Nunez’s parents have for each other will remind readers of the passion between the aging lovers in Gabriel García Márquez’s *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Written in exquisite prose by a writer the *New York Times Book Review* calls “a master at pacing and plotting,” *Not for Everyday Use* is a page-turner that readers will find impossible to put down.

## **Not for Everyday Use: A Memoir Details**

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Author : Elizabeth Nunez

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# From Reader Review Not for Everyday Use: A Memoir for online ebook

## Beth Gordon says

The backdrop to this memoir is Nunez hearing that her mother is on her deathbed and going back to Trinidad. Nunez comes across as keen and introspective. A bit repetitive at times although I find her introspection interesting. However, her introspections didn't stay with me. It felt like they fell out of my head.

I listened to this as an audiobook, and I did enjoy hearing the author narrate it herself.

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## Grace P. says

A touching memoir of the author's parents' marriage and her upbringing in Trinidad and adult life in the U.S.

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## Apphia Barton says

An endearing read. The chronology was a bit scattered - made it a bit annoying; a lot of digressing but I liked the social commentary on what i'll refer to as our post-colonial condition.

I like her writing style. I'm going to start Propsero's daughter.

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## Madeleine says

*(This review was originally written for and posted at the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography's site. I received this book from its publisher.)*

Writing about the death of a parent presents the tempting trap of invoking cheap sentimentality to tug at readers' heartstrings; sidestepping those easy clichés is the mark of a mature writer who knows how to craft a powerful tale with the arsenal of unique details that makes a person irreplaceably dear to their loved ones, illustrating the extent of the void that their passing has created. Elizabeth Nunez's memoir, *Not for Everyday Use*, takes the four days between the frantic phone call that has her rushing to her native Trinidad from her adopted home in New York to the burial of her mother and couches that surreal blur of emotions and necessary tasks in a past that goes far beyond her own lifespan in a testament to the immortality of personal history and the vivacity of one's heritage.

The third-oldest in a family of 11 children, Nunez grows up with a vantage point perhaps a bit too mired in adult responsibilities at too young an age. While this has imbued her with a strong sense of familial

responsibility that remains with her through the present day, she ponders that perhaps a little less preparation for the real world and a little more parental affection might have made her a little more well-rounded in terms of the balance between her emotional needs and passionate determination to succeed. The forced retrospection that comes with death, however, shows that Nunez has long ago reached the point where she can observe her mother and father as flawed but well-meaning individuals separate from their parental roles, appreciating all the good they've done for her and accepting that their lesser moments embody the dueling forces alive in every person.

Indeed, Nunez cannot call forward the myriad roles she plays--daughter, sister, mother, woman, educator, writer, storyteller--without acknowledging that everyone else is a collection of components that are constantly fighting for prominence as different situations call for different personas. As her memoir progresses, the reader gets a glimpse of her vastness of character through all the identities roiling within; the implication is that if she wears so many hats and is pulled in so many directions, her parents and siblings must be, too. As a natural spinner of fictions, Nunez confesses early in *Not for Everyday Use* that she has a tendency to conflate facts for the sake of bettering the story: This admission makes Nunez immediately believable and even more likable, ready as she is to lay bare her inability to resist polishing reality to fit her narrative standards. But it also hints at her self-awareness and her own flaws while simultaneously underscoring the fact that she recognizes when a story needs no embellishments because of its inherent significance and emotional weight.

Being both an immigrant and a native of a former British colony that is still in touch with the dark underbelly of colonialism's prejudices have put Nunez keenly in touch with the way places leave their own individual impressions on a person just as much as living relations do. Trinidad is as alive as the people influencing Nunez's past and present, its tropical locale adding natural color to her narrative, right on down to her parents' two mango trees that serve as subtle metaphors for their decades-long marriage, having grown indistinguishable from the other save for the flavor of the fruits they yield. But it is not just the local atmosphere that Nunez captures: The class divisions, oppressive Catholicism and slowly shifting gender stereotypes of her home color Nunez's upbringing, especially by contrasting the stifling attitudes of her parents' younger days with her generation's more liberated perspective. Furthermore, it highlights the divide between the judgments cast by different cultures: Many of the Nunezes bear darker skin, the stigma of which they have mostly transcended by living in a class-based society's upper-middle class; in countries like America, their expansive educations, elite jobs and enviable salaries do little to deter strangers from assuming that their generous doses of melanin pin them as thieves, junkies and sub-par parents.

Nunez's inner conflicts are rooted in something much deeper than societies' superficial prejudices, though: She has her own family, her own gender and her religious upbringing to contend with. Reconciling her lofty ambitions, determination to leave the world in a better state than she found it, the maternal desire to be surpassed by both her son and her students in talents and achievements, and her long-held religious doubt with the old-fashioned world in which she was raised fuels Nunez's ongoing battle within herself. Ever the academic, she tackles each issue point-by-point, laying out how she came to each bump in her road via past beliefs and modern understanding, such as resenting a society where mothers were burdened with veritable litters because birth control was a one-way pass to eternal damnation, robbing otherwise strong, motivated women of a life outside the home and leaving her with a lingering sense of feminine failure when her marriage crumbles and she produces only one child.

But *Not For Everyday Use* is ultimately a celebration of understanding and empathy, as Nunez scrutinizes herself and her loved ones with a curious intensity that betrays her need to examine individuals as fiercely as she loves them. It is a demonstration of both the intellectual freedom her parents encouraged her to pursue and the strength they pushed her to discover---the end result more than justifying the means, well-intentioned

but perhaps not always flawlessly executed as they were. It is proof that family doesn't have to be in close proximity to remain close-knit. It is confirmation that blindly extended affection is but a wan facsimile of the kind of love that grows from accepting a person for everything that they are, imperfections and all.

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### **Carry On Friends says**

<http://www.carryonfriends.com/not-for...>

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### **Tom Schulte says**

Novelist Nunez has taken a painful time in her life, the death of her mother, and examined and reflected on it in ways all of us that deal with loss and a changing definition of family can relate to. The fact that her success is in American publishing and academia and her roots in Trinidad only heightens a distance any of can feel on going "back home" or reuniting over the pall of a loved one. Her honest and wide-eyed telling makes this a winner for me, and I really appreciate the reference points to *Outliers: The Story of Success* by Malcolm Gladwell.

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### **Ami G says**

I appreciate the memoir about focusing on Nunez family history however, she kept referencing to her other books that are published. I felt this book was disorganized. I felt like there were too many retrospective memories. Nunez would jump back to the subject she was mentioning earlier before digression.

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### **Irene says**

Nunez's trip to her childhood home in Trinidad for the funeral of her mother is the context for this rambling memoir. Nunez reflects on her parents' 60 year marriage, her strained relationship with an undemonstrative mother, her experience of racism in both Trinidad and the U.S., the inspiration for her novels and much more. This had the feel of someone working through resentments and tensions from the past. She seemed to want to blame and complain while immediately denying that she was blaming or complaining about her mother's parenting style, her Catholic upbringing, racism, her large family, being sent to college in the U.S. at age 18, her philandering husband and so on and so on and so on. After 6 decades of life, I would have expected a more mature tone and a more focused narrative line.

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### **Lauren Francis-Sharma says**

This book surprised me. I didn't plan to read it now or finish it so quickly. I wanted to know more about Nunez. However, the author writes less of her own personal journey but rather, through examining her

parent's love for each other, their deaths, their pasts, her country's rich history, we come to know Nunez and possibly even more of ourselves.

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### **David Dacosta says**

Rating: 3.5 stars

*Not for Everyday Use* lives up to much of the high standard established in Nunez' previous literary outing, *Boundaries*, a novel which brilliantly examines the plight of a Caribbean immigrant navigating the complex terrain of life in America. Switching gears from fiction to reality, has revealed that much of the source material for Anna's parents in *Boundaries* and its predecessor, *Anna-In-Between*, was borrowed from Nunez' real life. The aging couple depicted in the two novels are essentially fictionalized versions of her actual parents.

It is quite apparent early on that Nunez is supremely proud of the academic and professional successes of herself and ten siblings. After about the third or fourth mention though, this praise begins to take on the not so pleasant air of conceit, pompousness even. There is an unspoken reality about people of African ancestry who hail from the Caribbean. A deep seated inferiority complex, stemming from slavery and the decades that followed, plagues too many from the region. The need to overachieve academically and acquire money and status typically becomes an obsessive pursuit to try and rid themselves of this psychological condition. Nunez candidly traces the origins of this mind state within her own family.

*Not for Everyday Use* engages for the most part. The Nunez family's Trinidadian roots, like millions of others based in the Caribbean, are intertwined with the island's centuries of colonial indoctrination. This family saga is largely the overall narrative of African displacement throughout the diaspora.

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### **Barbara Kellam-scott says**

An award-winning novelist who teaches fiction writing takes us along on a return to Trinidad when her mother dies. I had hoped to learn about her heritage, but we mostly learn about the novelist and her pain.

See my full review at <http://voices.yahoo.com/book-review-n...>

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### **Micki says**

I received Ms. Nunez's book as a First Read. Her families story is interesting and she gives insight into how class and race was and is perceived. Many times she repeats explanations and back story which detracts from the main story. She mentions her other novels many times which could persuade the reader to read them or maybe discourage them from reading them. As in some memoirs, there was no incidents to cause tears...a factual memory of her mother's death.

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## **Camille Alexander says**

### **Not Just a Memoir**

What Elizabeth Nunez has managed to do, again, is wrench emotions from me that I thought were long buried. I wept openly when she writes of singing "Be Not Afraid" as the gravediggers worked on her mother's grave. I went back to Layperouse watching both my grandparents' graves being dug. This memoir is a must-read for those of us, the children of the Caribbean Diaspora, who are constantly in the process of reconciling home and away. Nunez tells us that it is okay. That we don't have to reconcile every feeling. We can simply feel and be done. As her father said, "That's that."

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## **Claudette Alexander says**

This memoir was about the events surrounding the death of Nunez mother. The reader gets an insight on the strong hold religious beliefs have on residents of the Caribbean.

It appears that Nunez harbours some resentment for the failings of her mother. She is a grown woman but still laments about what her mother did or did not do for her in her growing up years. The memoir goes into the emotional turmoil emigrants' face when they leave their families to seek a better life in America and the misconceptions that families left behind have about life on the other side. Being a Caribbean emigrant myself I so understand the emotions.

Nunez repeats in every other chapter the professions of her siblings and father. Alright, alright, we get that your siblings and father were achieving professionals but there is no need to remind the reader in every other chapter.

There were some chapters that invoked a long yawn and some areas make for some interesting reading.

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## **Beverly says**

this was a 3.5 read for me

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