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Includes an afterword by the author

Harry Crosby was the godson of J. P. Morgan and a friend of Ernest Hemingway. Living in Paris in the twenties and directing the Black Sun Press, which published James Joyce among others, Crosby was at the center of the wild life of the lost generation. Drugs, drink, sex, gambling, the deliberate derangement of the senses in the pursuit of transcendent revelation: these were Crosby's pastimes until 1929, when he shot his girlfriend, the recent bride of another man, and then himself.

Black Sun is novelist and master biographer Geoffrey Wolff's subtle and striking picture of a man who killed himself to make his life a work of art.

Black Sun: The Brief Transit and Violent Eclipse of Harry Crosby Details

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Rjyan says

Well, Mr. Wolff sure brings Harry Crosby to life! A little ways in I was starting to get real annoyed at the condescension the author kept leveling at his subject. A little ways further, I was amused at how the author had, in this, assumed the role of The Sun-- the object of Harry's worship and obsession-- in bringing its subject to life but also pitilessly withering him with that same light. By the end, it was clear that Wolff's often-harsh judgements of Crosby are a product of his incredible affection for him, and very likely part of Wolff's own personal issues with hero-worship, one of Crosby's qualities that seems to unnerve Wolff the most.

At times the chronology is unclear, as Wolff doesn't move in a linear path through Crosby's life. He starts with childhood, but once Crosby is out of the war and living in Europe, Wolff traces and retraces the years, focusing on different relationships and interests. Dude died at 31, though, and Wolff is aiming for as comprehensive portrait as possible, so this makes sense, although I feel as if he could've helped us out a little bit more keep straight what was happening when in relation to the other whats. But all in all, this is a very engrossing and exciting telling of Crosby's story.

Nick Guzan says

Excellent and incredibly well-researched account of Harry Crosby - and, to an extent, his ebullient and far shrewder wife Caresse.

I wasn't a big fan of the non-linear layout; once Harry had left his job at the bank, each chapter takes a sprawling approach at covering one certain aspect of his life for his few remaining years. Despite this, I learned much more about the fascinating yet "minor" place that Harry and Caresse Crosby occupied among the true artists of the 1920s Lost Generation.

I appreciated that Wolff's interest seems to have mirrored mine; neither of us are particularly big fans of Crosby's poetic attempts but just rather the interesting life that he had built for himself - and then so promptly ended with Josephine - all in the name of what he believed to be literature.

Jonathan says

This is the story of a little known would be publisher and writer/sun worshiper/Gatsby like playboy and all around freak who tore up Paris in the twenties. It's a very cool book especially if you have any interest in that period

Sketchbook says

WW1 left Harry brutally shell-shocked. He was rich, handsome, charming and supported the arts while taking drugs and experimenting sexually. This bio, packed w trivia, has a Puritan-American tone, but who can't be wild about Harry?

Biographer Wolff offers exact reflections on the French, as Harry lived in Paris throughout the 20s : "The French have elevated toleration of eccentricity to the estate of a creed," he notes, while being basically conventional seekers of form and balance. The French are so damn sure of their own manners that they don't care what their guests are up to. Foreigners always come and go; they're neither threats nor inspirations. He concludes: Foreigners are invisible creatures.

AJ says

This book had about 100 interesting pages in it. Unfortunately, flipping through and finding them was a challenge. It took me an unbelievable amount of time to finish, because it literally put me to sleep more times than I can count. Also, Harry Crosby was a total dirtbag, privileged misogynist asshole.

Jane says

"Dead man walking" - that's what prisoners call out as a man is escorted to the execution chamber. If anyone was ever a literal a dead man walking, it was Harry Crosby, who spent 10 years after WWI living it up - and down - until his suicide in 1929. Rich, handsome, earnest in pursuit of whatever he did from sex to drugs to philosophizing, he lacked that spark of genius that true writers have in spite of the reams of poetry and memoir he produced. He surrounded himself with artists, but wasn't one himself, unless you consider his death a work of art. I can't go there.

Jeanne Thornton says

I've owned this book for many years because how could one not see this book and immediately buy it with intent to read? It is about a small-time publisher, poet, and mystic who leads a violent crazy life that culminates in murder-suicide on the cusp of the Great Depression!!! Hart Crane and Kay Boyle are in it and James Joyce makes a cameo even!!!!

The problem is that Harry Crosby is actually not that interesting. The story is riven with a single deus ex machina--the inexhaustible fortune of Harry's family, which continually steps in to help Harry and Caresse buy race horses or go on flying lessons or spend weeks masturbating to the sunrise while devising sick acrostics for his name. It's interesting that the story makes no bones about the fact that Harry is kind of bad as both a poet and a publisher, and illustrating the ways in which one gets along in the world as a kind of bad poet and publisher who is nevertheless very wealthy and free with money--the extravagant sex & mysticism wastes that Crosby gets up to, crossed with weird efforts at reform and business success. It's the story of someone who wants passionately to be an Oddball Genius but who is not that smart or talented, and it's kind of rare to see that rendered so well, but, um, it is not that satisfying a story, I guess? RICH KID SQUANDERS FORTUNE ON PRETENTIOUS WASTES OF TIME. DOG BITES MAN. Except . . . in Paris! In the Twenties!

The trouble is that this is a biography written from a basic place of condescension rather than awe maybe. Both elements are there, but the former is firmly in control, and that gets in the way of what's wonderful about this book.

Also there is not nearly enough about Caresse Crosby? Would love to know if anyone has good book recommendations about her, because she seems generally like the better Crosby. I mean she hung out with Anais Nin and tried to start a world peace center at Delphi and ran an art colony in a Roman castle and also she invented the bra and possibly the paperback.

I think my main beef with this book is its structure. A story that's fundamentally about a kind of perpetual antithesis--man rejects Boston in favor of worshiping the Sun as a death god--should really follow a slightly more chronological pattern than this does, with Crosby's exploits grouped mostly by thematic association. I really wanted more of a sense of how this life was actually dissolving in the act of its flowering, and jumping back and forth throughout the Twenties to trace various affairs didn't do it for me totally?

The parts about how small press publishing worked in Lost Generation-era Paris are awesome. Basically if you were rich and had access to paper stocks you could make cool zines with your friends! This is also an element I enjoyed in the Diary of Anais Nin, Volume II (clean version.)

Ken says

Stellar writing on Wolff's part, though you have to tolerate the subject because he's a bit of an ass. It's the old separating art from artist thing, only in this case, separating biography from subject. Enjoyed best the setting (20s Paris, for the most part) and the cast of characters (lots of Lost Generation folk, to whom I feel an affinity of sorts).

Mike Lester says

This guy had it all. Money, mansions, cars, planes, his own small press, lavish parties with famous friends, a beautiful wife, a beautiful mistress, even a dog named Clytoris. He also had a death wish. *Black Sun* is a fascinating look at the the life and lifestyle of Harry Crosby, the original Jim Morrison. Harry wanted to fly his plane straight into the sun. Jim wanted to break on through to the other side. Well, if he had, he would have found Harry sitting there, relaxing, drink in hand, saying 'What kept you, old boy?' Wolff does an admirable job of chronicling Crosby's lifelong flirtation with death that culminated in a murder/suicide with his mistress (whether it was murder/suicide or a mutual suicide pact remains unclear--there was no note left behind, and the passions of Crosby's mistress ran along similar lines, so we may never really know). And hey, relax, I didn't give anything away there, so no spoiler warning is needed. A great book about a fascinating individual. Highly recommended. 5 decadent stars.

Rachel Hope says

This is biography as written by a novelist, not a historian. Wolff is a masterful wordsmith. His biography is unconventional and elliptical, often eschewing chronology by circling back over the same times again and again. Wolff describes himself as working within the romantic biographical tradition in the book's 2003

afterword, which is definitely worth reading by anyone interested in biography as a genre. The result of his approach is fascinating and wonderfully readable. The subject, Harry Crosby, is not necessarily likeable (and sometimes, I think Wolff let him off too easily), but his extreme hedonism and his transformation from innocent Bostonian to decadent cosmopolitan are compelling. Wolff's main point, I suppose, is to explain why Harry Crosby killed himself. As someone who has experienced the aftermath of several suicides, this question holds a great deal of meaning to me. Ultimately, I think Wolff does as good a job of answering why as anyone can.

Patricia says

The lives of Harry and Caresse Crosby are stranger than fiction and almost beyond belief except for the evidence. Working backwards from Harry's suicide aged 31 with his girlfriend, this book recounts his short life during which he participated in every risk-taking activity possible: drugs, sex, gambling and what could only be described as "wild living". This book is worth reading for the description of the Beaux-Arts (Four Arts) Ball in Paris in 1928. Money was no object and Harry Crosby indulged all his senses in whatever excesses were available. Living in Paris during the 1920s, he and his wife founded Black Sun Press as a vehicle to publish not only his work but that of others of the Lost Generation: Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce and others. He seems to have been tolerated by this literary set only for what his money could provide, and although his verse was described as doggerel by some, it was actually quite good. This book is a bit heavy going in spite of its fascinating subject, and would really only appeal to aficionados of the Paris ex-pat American set of the early 20th Century. It should be read after reading the biography of Caresse Crosby which I have reviewed elsewhere.

Michelle says

5 for life interestingness, 3 for book interestingness.

I haven't even attended one interesting orgy or done any of the more interesting drugs or written any interesting terrible poetry -- boy, this guy sure was interestinger than me.

Christine says

Best written biography I've read. The research is very good as well. Harry Crosby is not an appealing character, but I read this as a study of the lost generation ex-pats and their Paris literary enclave. By centering his research on someone who was on the fringes, Wolff gives us a different perspective than that provided by studies of the better known and more successful participants.

Lance Grabmiller says

I have been intrigued by Harry Crosby since I first heard about him 20 or so years ago. Was overjoyed to see New York Review Books had republished this old biography of his.

Once one gets past the boring bits at the beginning (a very conventional, very privileged, very boring Boston Brahmin upbringing) it becomes an incredibly fascinating ride. Occasionally impossible to put down, not for the brilliant writing but the story itself. Like watching a train wreck in not-so-slow motion.

It starts to get a bit confusing chronologically about halfway through, as the author moves the chapters forward mainly through people or subjects. Makes sense in many ways though as Harry's last 8 years or so are such a wild ride that a chronological retelling might actually be more confusing.

I have lined up to read Caresse Crosby's autobiography, *THE PASSIONATE YEARS*, later this year. This book characterizes the autobiography as pretty loose with the facts but capturing the spirit of the time very well. Can't wait.

Sarah Beth says

"PLEASE SELL \$10,000 WORTH OF STOCK. WE HAVE DECIDED TO LEAD A MAD AND EXTRAVAGANT LIFE" (4).

Born in 1898 to a wealthy and prominent Boston family, Harry Crosby did indeed live a mad and extravagant life. He hated conventions, was famously generous, and never imperious. He hated holidays because "they were arbitrary periods of freedom which were given rather than taken, and because they were occasions for artificial merriment" (104). He always dressed in black and was repelled by the touch of strangers, although he had numerous lovers and sincerely claimed to love both his wife and several other women at the same time. Harry considered himself a sun worshipper, intrinsically linked love and death, and despite his seemingly fickle devotion was found charming to his many lovers and to anyone upon whom he cast his attentions. He introduced Hemingway to "lion tamers and clowns at a Spanish circus temporarily in Paris" (182) and got drunk with William Carlos Williams and then with E.E. Cummings, "whom he met in a hotel lobby" (268). Causing a great scandal and his family's anger, he finally convincing his great love Polly to divorce her first husband and marry him, then recreated her with the new name Caresse. Harry was a prolific poet, but by all accounts not a very good one. He is best known for his socially shocking death and for establishing the Black Sun Press that published books by Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Crane, Pound, Proust, MacLeish, and Kay Boyle throughout the Twenties.

At the age of 31, Harry scandalously killed his lover Josephine (another man's wife) and then himself in an apparent joint suicide, although no note was left behind. Yet Harry, through his writings and conversations, had many times declared his intent to die young and by his own hand; "he never let up with his talk of death and love, the two always mixed in his imagination, with mutual suicide apprehended as the most sublime of couplings" (83). Harry and Josephine both made their intentions clear over and over. The night before their death, Josephine brought Harry a letter. The last line read "Death is *our* marriage" (285). Harry finally found a woman willing to do what Caresse would not - immortalize their love through mutual suicide.

In many ways, Harry achieved what he intended through his death - he immortalized his life and his writing. Indeed, the author admits that his interest in writing this very biography was largely spurred by the way that Harry died. Yet Harry's story feels very unfinished, if for no other reason than the almost endless list of literary ambitions Harry left incomplete: "He had plans for a novel, with dialogue 'crisp and epigrammatic,' whose heroine's life was to be 'built upon the fact that once upon a time she had sold a bouquet of roses to the Queen of Roumania.' [...] He fiddled with his diary, intending to translate it into a cohesive autobiography, and perhaps to embellish it with fantasy. He planned to write a biography of Rimbaud. He

considered a play based on Walter Berry's life. He wanted to write an essay about Polia Chentoff and her work, and to extend into a book-length monograph the essay on sun dials he had written for his mother..." (277).

It's hard to summarize Harry's life, because while very short, it was filled with frantic activity, great exploration, and numerous well known individuals. I truly enjoyed reading about his nearly unbelievable life story, although I enjoyed the chapters covering his writing and providing in-depth analysis of his poems and writing ability far less intriguing.
