

Bernadette Mayer



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Midwinter Day," as Alice Notley noted, "is an epic poem about a daily routine." A poem in six parts, Midwinter Day takes us from awakening and emerging from dreams through the whole day-morning, afternoon, evening, night-to dreams again: ". . . a plain introduction to modes of love and reason/Then to end I guess with love, a method to this winter season/Now I've said this love it's all I can remember/Of Midwinter Day the twenty-second of December//Welcome sun, at last with thy softer light/That takes the bite from winter weather/And weaves the random cloth of life together/And drives away the long black night!

Midwinter Day Details

Date : Published May 1st 1999 by New Directions (first published June 28th 1982)

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Author : Bernadette Mayer

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From Reader Review Midwinter Day for online ebook

Mark Desrosiers says

A calm sentence like a story. I used to know a man who had a dog and I followed their steps in the snow, I got into the habit of walking just as far as they did every day. At the same time I also knew a woman whose husband had seven guns. I used to know a woman who's the woman who married Neil Simon. I like the woman who used to work in the Lenox market, she never wears boots, then she retired...

I can't go on. I know Mayer's heart was in the right place -- and I'll probably receive a Christmas lump of coal for pointing this out -- but this is one long droning proto-yuppie diary entry utterly devoid of mystery, music, strangeness, or ambiguity. Even her dreams (apparently a framing device) would put a community college couch therapist to sleep. I laughed aloud when she said "Let me tell you / The titles of all the current books", and then actually lists a buncha seventies books in pseudo-poetic order ("*Delta of Venus, the Women's Room, / Ladies Man, Six Men, The Water-Method Man, Watership Down, / The Night People, Shepherds of the Night...*"). Almost a parody of what poetry should never become.

But again, her heart was in the right place. Which makes me wonder whether great poetry only arises when your heart is in the *wrong* place (Dickinson, Whitman, Hart Crane, Berryman), or if you have no heart at all (Frost, Bukowski, Dugan).

Anselm says

Or how I learned to be adored before britpop found a drum machine.

angela says

Midwinter is presented as an epic poem, yet the closing thoughts by Mayer call it an essay. I waiver to give it three or four stars. Initially it reads too hard, Mayer seems to be trying too hard with the opening dream sequence in which she interjects many sidebar commentaries (think Beckett) that it seems a document of a dream layered with memory. Page forward -- we get moving into "a day in the life" of the poet, the artist, the mom in 'burb hell in 1978, streets iced with snow and history. We visit a market, a library, a town squared.. where were we going on that cold day's walk..

In the end, I appreciated Mayer's calling, her ability to address many things on the blank page. This isn't confessional is as much a testament to choosing to use many pens to document life, the town's life, her memory's life, and the world's life circa 1978. She writes stream of conscious and does it well. Her words move, her thoughts don't hesitate, and in my opinion, there is certainly music in the lines. Then again, perhaps it was the mood of today, a midwinter day that kept me blizzard bound waiting to see if this is really the end...or just a dream. ~

Jimmy says

[

The Day's

A book by Bernadette Mayer
that I admire on a morning in late Fall
upon a day in midwinter
that goes mid-way
from poetry's prose to prose poetry
and through a century
of differently graded pencils, a way from
roses are violet to roses are
roses, or
as violence does a day good, a day's end
is in a sort of
dream's hay
spun to a rhythm and a play
conforming to its circular path
upon the footpath that leads away
to only leaves left undisplayed
though

Anne says

"All said is dented love's saluted image"

Antonio Delgado says

An epic masterpiece of a winter night of thoughts, dreams, memories and becoming.

kaelan says

ORIGINAL REVIEW (Oct. 29, 2013): Superficially speaking, *Midwinter Day* is almost everything I hate about contemporary poetry: free-versed, loquacious, banal (and indulgently so)... so on and so forth. Thus, I was pleasantly surprised to find that Bernadette Mayer's syntactically-scrambled sentences, when read a little more closely, have a tendency for exploding outwards in waves of heavy, focused meaning. Perhaps the comparison's a slight stretch, but it's kind of like how you can take almost any part of a Milton epic and subject it to microscopic analysis, uncovering something new and interesting in the process.

Nevertheless, it's not all readerly roses. For *Midwinter Day* is long. Long to the tune of 119 pages. And for certain neural-physiological reasons (no doubt), it remains a fact that close reading is impossible to sustain over prolonged stretches of time. Yet unlike *Paradise Lost*, Mayer's poem is not a whole lot of fun to read when you're taking it in on a purely aesthetic-level. That is, provided you're the kind of person who reads *Paradise Lost* for aesthetic pleasures. But if you are, you're probably also the kind of person who could get something out of this poem.

On a marginally related note, I've been reminded of an interpretive strategy proposed by German electronics guru/radio artist Felix Kubin. "Every time I am undecided about something," he once told an interviewer,

I'd rather decide to do it than not to do it. And if I can't find a system to understand something, but it fascinates me, I keep listening to or watching it [or reading it] in order to understand. Often, after a year or so, it becomes one of my favourite works.

A solid philosophy. And it's why I plan on someday returning to this strange, tedious and perplexing work of poetry. ***/5

UPDATE: On December 22, 1978, Bernadette Mayer penned *Midwinter Day* in its entirety. Exactly thirty-six years later, I decided to (re)read the poem under comparable circumstances.

It had been about a year since I first trudged my way through Mayer's long poem, and yet I found that my general impressions hadn't changed much. It still struck me as esoteric, sporadically lyrical, and (at times) quite trying on the ol' attention span. But I also found that I had a greater appreciation for Mayer's overall project—of creating an epic about domesticity and routine.

And this is perhaps what makes *Midwinter Day* so simultaneously attractive and alienating: that more than any other literary work I've ever read, it impressed upon me a set of values and worries that weren't my own. For even though I'm a bespectacled young atheist from the 21th century, I fancy that I can on some level relate to the puffed-up masculinity of Homer, the imaginative theology of Milton. But tantrums, grocery bills, daycare—even if I *can* identify with such things, it still feels somehow *wrong* to immortalize them in poetry...

Yet that's precisely the point, isn't it? As I read through *Midwinter Day* for the second time, I began to realize that my own approach to literature was founded upon untried assumptions, that it was steeped in ideology. Poetry—I always used to tell people—took you outside of yourself. For me, *Midwinter Day* did just that, and the result was profoundly unsettling.

Daniel says

this book is the shit. it's one poem (over a hundred pages long) written over the course of one day. an unbelievable accomplishment, and one of the most engaging poems i've ever encountered.

Michael says

My full review can be found on my blog.

A long poem about a short day, Mayer's six-part work purports to document the daily routine of the woman writer raising children. Mayer herself has claimed to have written the poem in a single day, the day the poem takes place on, and the poem often references the conditions of its composition. But *Midwinter Day*'s claim to spontaneity, to recording life simply as it is, is transparently artful—the epic revels in artifice and cleverness. Prose alternates with verse; ambiguous syntax breeds a multiplicity of meaning; affected rhymes pepper the poem; allusions on the levels of both form and content occur frequently; bizarre formatting choices abound. For all of the poem's ingenuity, though, Mayer does remain invested in the concept of poetry as sincere expression, even if she recognizes it to be an unattainable ideal. With her hyper-autobiographical subject matter and her painstaking attention to detail, Mayer attempts to capture the experience of daily life in her poem, without destroying it. *Midwinter Day* might be viewed, then, not as the attempt to chronicle life but as the self-conscious probing of what it means to write about the everyday or stake a claim to sincerity, as a woman poet.

StrangeBedfellows says

I suffered through this book when it was assigned in American 20th Century Poetry. This book is a prime example of why I don't care for a) American literature, b) American poets, c) 20th century poets, and d) any torturous combination of the three. Little more than pages and pages of free-writing, Mayer would like to pass this off as some innovative, poetic experiment. I say, not.

Janmf says

Still reeling from the commitment. It's a short book, but a long poem and a focused read. I think on balance I loved it. It's specificity which seemed often to be an entirely recognizable reflection of my own experience. It is a poem of a mid-winter's day in the life of a 70's poet with two children and a husband - also a poet. The story of her dreams, the story of her day and then back to her night a day lived in a red-brick apartment building, in a small town. It's by turns beautiful, random and mysterious. Definitely a book that needs two readings at least to feel that you've been fair to it. Walt Whitman comes to mind towards the end with her lists and her desire, it seems, to include the whole world in this one day.

Vicky says

What is *Midwinter Day* by Bernadette Mayer?

"a book that would translate the detail of thought from a day to language like a dream transformed to read as it does, everything, a book that would end before it started in time to prove the day like the dream has everything in it, to do this without remembering like a dream inciting writing continuously for as long as you can stand up till you fall down like in a story to show and possess everything we know because having it all at once is performing a magical service for survival by the use of the mind like memory" (p. 89)

Annotated Brilliance of Bernadette Mayer

- in particular, the first 760 lines
- tough gang-wear or raingear
- I lost my color wheel when I died
- My daughter has a teddy bear / Fuck this shit!

- what do you hear when I listen?
- boundary of your favorite cup
- smiling tiger nothingness puzzle
- From the outside these agglomerations [shopping malls] look like artless spaceships / Buried into the ground surrounded by cars and some trees in space / And one of the problems with them is that such blatant flatness / Creates winds so fierce in winter one cannot walk
- long unapologetic inventories of food, visual art forms, the shops in town, things to learn re: science/technology, a shout out to friends, a list of current books in store

Tags

#amazing #epic #winter #ulysses #december22 #lastbookof2014 #firstbookof2015

twrctdrv says

Midwinter Day is an epic poem that describes the events of one Midwinter Day, from dreams in the morning to thoughts at night. In between, not much else happens: a walk through the city, a temper tantrum, two meals, drawing, and some dancing. Instead, Midwinter Day gives as pure of a glimpse into Mayer's head as it can, and as the poem goes on, the clarity and feeling of this grows. By part five, you're there with her watching your daughter's dance and wondering where this all fits into the whole whatever business.

Melany Dillon says

The work starts off a little slow, and continues to trudge along until the end. Most of the pages are filled with trivial things: the speaker chopping onions, having a beer, and playing with her kids. It's banal enough to make us wonder what exactly is the nature of this unfamiliar work. Eventually, Mayer addresses the purpose of it in the final page: "From dreams I made sentences, then what I've seen today, / Then past the past of afternoons of stories like memory / To seeing as a plain introduction to modes of love and reason, / Then to end I guess with love, a method to this winter season / Now I've said this love it's all I can remember / Of Midwinter Day the twenty-second of December." So, Mayer wrote this as a tribute to memory, love, reason, and a single day in the thick of Winter. I'm not sure if this makes the work more meaningful since the reason for its existence has become more explicit, or less meaningful since part of its mystique has been deconstructed. Regardless of this, it doesn't pack a punch. In other words, it doesn't really stand for anything, except maybe a commitment to the idea that even the boring, monotonous events in life are appropriate material for literature. There's insightful lines here and there, sure, but they often get lost amongst the chatter about groceries or how the snow looks outside. When the day turns to night and Mayer ends the epic poem, we don't really know what was particularly significant or meaningful about December 22nd. We may know everything about that one day, but we've sacrificed gathering a sense of what it meant.

Paul says

I was introduced to this book by the lead assistant to the professor for Coursera's and UPenn's course Modern and Contemporary American Poetry, who generously spent part of her Midwinter Day (and a couple of preceding days) this year leading a discussion of the book on the ModPo forums. I have read most of the book at least twice now, and I feel like I'm only beginning to discover it. There are passages on just about

every page that leave me in absolute awe of the poet. The book is a long poem that was supposedly written in one day, on December 22, 1978, and is a moment by moment account of her day that beautifully captures her internal experience of each moment from pre-waking dreams to ordinary events of the day, and back to dreams again - but it is much more than that. In the end, I think it is a celebration of life in all its mundane, boring, and repetitive glory.

There is a lot in the poem about cycles, starting with the title, which refers to the marking of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, and the traditional death of the old sun and the birth of the new. Mayer expresses a certain ambivalence about the cycles of her own life - her home, her town - day after day the same sights, the same relationships, the same actions - and yet there is something profoundly wonderful in every moment. I think the whole poem could be seen as a quest for what that something is, and in the final stanzas I think she shares the answer that she found. After all the introspection, all the close examination of her internal life, all she remembers of it is love.

From dreams I made sentences, then what I've seen today,
Then past the past of afternoons of stories like memory
To seeing as a plain introduction to modes of love and reason,
Then to end I guess with love, a method to this winter season
Now I've said this love it's all I can remember
Of Midwinter Day the twenty-second of December

Welcome sun, at last with thy softer light
That takes the bite from winter weather
And weaves the random cloth of life together
And drives away the long black night!

This book will not suit everyone, but if you enjoy modern poetry, or if an introspective contemplation of daily life with family and friends appeals to you, I highly recommend it.

Carrie Lorig says

my life is fucking different is fucked different now that i've read this you idiot clouds. call me storm leather or don't bother to try my desire at all.

Melissa says

Difficult to rate Mayer's experiment. It took fortitude to get through this bad-boy and I finally finished on December 22nd--so fitting. Here are some of my favorite gems:

"Now that our days/ Are full of normal parts/ It seems we have all lived forever so far...And it's as if/ Today I had someone else's dreams."

"Winter one better do me one better one faster one ice one day"

"I wonder why we write at all/ These trees have seen all this before/ But they are glad of an encore"

Pineapple says

Everything is happening now, in the moment, and that's become a cliche, but it is still true. This is a long poem all in one day. The domestic is epic.

Kristin says

A really poignant, and simultaneously fiery, portrait of a single day. Really wonderful use of pacing.

Mitch says

A classic example of Bernadette Mayer's interest in time and perception. In an attempt to write down every thought she has in a single day, Bernadette ends up getting sidetracked down different alleys of memory and belief, her personal life intrudes on the purity of her mental life, and the two blend together into a sort of philosophical soup. Similar to *Studying Hunger and Memory*, this book has a somewhat more lyrical bent. I might add that this work is infinitely more satisfying than any of Kenny G.'s experiments, partly because Mayer allows herself to be distracted from her program, and partly because her mind is so much more interesting than his. oops. Did I say that?
