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The acclaimed author of *Low Life* reinvents the memoir in a cunning, lyrical book that is at once a personal history and a meditation on the construction of identity.

Born in Belgium but raised in New Jersey, Luc Sante transformed himself from a pious, timid Belgian boy into a loutish American adolescent, who eschewed French while fantasizing about the pop star Françoise Hardy. To show how this transformation came about--and why it remained incomplete--*The Factory of Facts* combines family anecdote and ancestral legend; detailed forays into Belgian history, language, and religion; and deft synopses of the American character.

The Factory of Facts Details

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Sally says

An odd but intriguing book that blends memoir and history (mostly about Belgium) on Sante's theory that as individuals we are formed by historical accidents that take place long before we become sentient beings. As an approach it doesn't quite work--the history segments tend toward didacticism--but when Sante is writing about himself and his family he shines as a stylist and a wry humorist. His thoughts about growing up in two languages and two cultures are compelling; the opening chapter is original and amusing.

manatee says

I learned about the Walloon culture and language. I also learned what it was like to be an outsider in our culture.

This is an absolutely fascinating book of essays.

Thomas says

There are passages in this book that capture more vividly than anything else I know what it is like to sit on the border between two cultures, to have two languages in different parts of one's being. I'm interested in Belgium, so I was particularly fascinated with the book, but most of it should strike a chord with anyone who has lived in two cultures. The book also presents a very vivid portrait of the 20th-century working class in one of the most industrialized parts of Europe, and its treatment of the coming of age of a child from that background as he moves back and forth between Wallonia and New Jersey is terrific.

Lovmelovmycats Hart says

Why did I love this book so much? I can't put my finger on it. It drew me in completely. I can't wait to read Low Life.

Mira says

Luc Sante delves into his family history, his story, his formative years with honesty and humour and darkness that you can't stop. It is imaginative, visual, true, factual, surreal and touching. From the hidden places of Belgium to the half lie of living in America, his descriptions of his parents and photographs in particular (what we all read into them and what they can reveal to us about character) were incredible and spookily reminded me of the thinking I have when I look at images of my parents as children and young adults...the people they were and they vulnerable little children who grew up to hold the same smirk on their face or the same intensity in their brow. This book is about the people we are, the resistance we create to our own families and to our selves in order to forge new connections, new families and most importantly new

realities, all of which touch back to the past and owe themselves to it without being suffocated by it. Excellent.

Tosh says

One of the most unique memoirs I've ever read, but then again, Luc Sante is one idiosyncratic and special writer. "The Factory of Facts" deal with Sante's childhood in his native country Belgium as well as New Jersey, his adopted home with his family. The beauty of the book is that Sante writes about culture as the foreground to his life. Although our lives are quite different, we are almost the exact age. Both of us were born in 1954, and I recognize his cultural posts throughout the book. Whatever it's a candy company that doesn't exist anymore, or a TV show/Film - I understand the importance of items that surround one's life.

More of a collection of essays than a running narrative, Luc Sante came from a hardcore working class world, where I believe he's the only one who went on to college. A brilliant observer of things around him, he is also sensitive to the fact that he is one from two cultures - Belgium and the United States. Both are complex and multi-cultural locations as well. One chapter he discusses what it is like to live in America and think/talk in French. A lot of people think of translation as something easy as a Google app, but the fact the thinking is different, which conveys the 'fact' that language is a big part of our make-up. Signage in a department store can be something obscure and totally odd, because it doesn't really make sense in a French context.

"The Factory of Facts" is cultural history more than a straight ahead memoir, but the surroundings can tell a great narrative, when it is placed behind an individual. I have to imagine writers will find this book fascinating. I, who know very little of Belgium and its culture (only TinTin I'm afraid) I learn a lot through the eyes and mind of Sante. As a writer myself, I'm consistently reminded how important my surroundings and things are to me. Especially as a writer, and this is a great book that is suitable for those who want to write and those who do the job.

Tal says

"The past is a notional construct, a hypothesis, a poem. I hold on to its passport because it was issued at my birth, without any possibility of my assenting or not. It's not so much a document as it is a brand or a scar. I don't really endorse the past, mind you, and I don't intend to go back and settle there. My actual relation to the past is ironic, if anything, even if the irony is poisoned with sentiment; I can laugh at the past but the laughter sticks in my throat. I certainly feel more affection for it from a distance. And only from within the past can I appreciate the present, which is all things considered a dispiriting place to live. Each is a shabby, passive-aggressive dictatorship of compromise and self-delusion. Under the rhetoric, we all know this. I'm not alone because every one of us is an alien. That makes us all compatriots."

Can't comment too much because there's a conflict of interest here and because talking about this book makes me a little nervous. I would say read it because it gives a glimpse into what Luc's aesthetic and teaching style is, which is half-personified by that quote above. If anything, you can read some exquisite essays.

Crissie says

Caught my interest - Sante is an in-between person, a third-culture person writing about that experience.

Muhammad Moneib says

A Sentimental Yet Informative Journey to the Past

History and archaeology are such interconnected fields. Both are fascinating, filled with mystery and surprises about our ancestors and their long forgotten lives. Both tell us more about ourselves and give us lessons about our future. Still, both yield their fruits in the form of ruins and fragments, like separated dots on paper that a child has to connect in order to form the picture, or tiny traces of evidence a detective has to link together in order to solve a mystery. In this book, Luc Sante assumed the role of the child, the detective, and the archaeologist in order to find in his past traces about his present and to show us that no matter how the past seems distant, its effect is accompanying us everyday.

Luc was born to working class parents in the Belgian city of Verviers in the 1940s. His father had just reached the managerial levels after a long struggle as a factory field worker. With such a promotion came a relative relaxation and luxury that wasn't to last for long. Being an experienced field worker, Luc's father lacked the formal education usually partaken by managers. So he was standing on a shaky ground that when the crisis loomed near, he was eventually out of his job, pondering about emigration.

In the 60s United States, we are presented with a child trying to cope with two very different worlds: home and outside, his parents and his school, Belgium and the USA. Luc gives us extensive details of the process of his Americanization, and how he managed to live a double life in both worlds, without feeling fully integrated in either of them. For him, the outside world meant freedom and discovery, but it also meant alienation. So his relation with his past remained intact, albeit faded, providing him with a shelter when needed and the sense of uniqueness he always felt when outside.

This attachment to the past translated into a visit back to Belgium almost 20 years after the last time Luc was there. Under pressure from his parents and from a small, but growing, feeling of curiosity inside him, he returned to his native soil, comparing its state to that during his childhood, gathering memories and digging for relics of his subdued Belgian personality. There, Luc recognized the remnants of his Walloon tongue and revived his dormant French. He realized that Belgium, much like him, was living a duality of being lost between two languages: French and Dutch, with its native tongues of Walloon and Flemish being all but gone. This and other similarities, perhaps, made him more interested in being more than a tourist in his homeland..

Thus, this visit was one of the main factors that led Luc to start his extensive research about his family and his country, an effort that culminated in the writing of this book. He was able to track his name up to eleventh century, showing that all his ancestors (most of them were illiterate factory workers) had hardly moved outside the proximity of his native town. Weaving his town's history with his own, he produces a fabric of impressive self consciousness; the threads ranging from the social movements of his ancestral struggling workers, up to the fear of war that haunted many of his ancestors, especially his parents.

Being a book about someone's own heritage, it is predictable to find it somewhat sentimental, especially when it is written by an emigrant. The air of nostalgia seems to be driven not only by the author's childhood memories, but by also the constant feeling of loss accompanying the advancement of time. Luc doesn't hide these feelings. In fact, he describes the present in general as a "disheartening place to be," and that his relationship with the past is "ironic." The irony comes from his desire of studying the past, when he knows very well that it will remind him of what he doesn't have anymore. And that's, perhaps, why he feels disheartened by the present.

Nevertheless, the book is very informative about specific issues like the history of Belgium, its languages, and political reality. But this information comes in fragments, surrounded by a stream of tiny details of names, Belgian routes, and prolonged descriptions of old pictures, that can only make one wonder why the author didn't save himself (and us) the trouble by just including the pictures or maps themselves instead of describing them literally. With the narrative jumping from one subject to another and then back to previously discussed subjects, the book feels like a huge exercise of controlled free writing, that is as if the author had let his mind wander freely back and forth within a defined network of routes. Add to this the cryptic chapter titles, that while sounding artistic, made me squeeze my brain hard just to remember what was the chapter's general idea, if there was any.

What's remarkable about Luc Sante's life is the abrupt changes he faced at an early age, which exposed the ruins of his past over which his present was built. Thus, this book is the result of his excavations, with the washed writings on the old walls hinting to a human who is no less a product of his experience than a product of his genes, if not more. Only through a journey to our past we can gain such insights at our present. And just like reading about Luc's, it is a rewarding and entertaining journey, even if with the side effect of occasional headaches.
