

A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past By Lewis Hyde

“One of our true superstars of nonfiction” (David Foster Wallace) Lewis Hyde author of *The Gift and Trickster Makes This World* offers a playful and inspiring defense of forgetfulness by exploring the healing effect it can have on the human psyche. We live in a culture that prizes memory—how much we can store the quality of what’s preserved how we might better document and retain the moments of our life while fighting off the nightmare of losing all that we have experienced. But what if forgetfulness were seen not as something to fear—be it in the form of illness or simple absentmindedness—but rather as a blessing a balm a path to peace and rebirth? *A Primer for Forgetting* is a remarkable experiment in scholarship autobiography and social criticism by the author of the classics *The Gift and Trickster Makes This World*. It forges a new vision of forgetfulness by assembling fragments of art and writing from the ancient world to the modern weighing the potential boons forgetfulness might offer the present moment as a creative and political force. Drawing material from Hesiod to Jorge Luis Borges to Elizabeth Bishop to Archbishop Desmond Tutu from myths and legends to very real and recent traumas both personal and historical *A Primer for Forgetting* is a unique and remarkable synthesis that only Lewis Hyde could have produced. I enjoy David Shields takes more but both seem to be cut from a similar genre that has emerged to address this current technological thrust that makes everything including this review a pebble into the roaring river of content. 384 “If there is a ‘work of forgetting’ it has to involve claiming or creating agency such that you the people saddled with history can work on the past rather than have the past work on you. When it comes to collective memory — the kind that calls for a national historic site — you can’t begin to remember in a way that allows you to forget until the collective itself recognizes and responds to the history at hand. An episodic discourse on what it means to forget remember and live in between these two states of forgetting and remembering - to just be and to be well significant and effective in our humanness. 384 Lewis Hyde - essayist poet and author of (most notably) *Trickster Makes This World* and *The Gift* - produces as a change of pace a thought experiment on the needfulness of forgetting. Although he does not express it outright the reader is left with the sense that this project was provoked by his experience of his mother's dementia and the struggle many children go through to lift the condition into meaning; the irony of attempting to locate reason upon its rather crafty escape. Resembling a notebook filled with random thought Hyde sets out to make the case for the importance of memory's loss; how certain amnesias strengthen focus assist in the survival of severe trauma and provide in selected instances the only road to forgiveness. The material is highly-referenced and draws deep from several wells among which include the Greeks the Arabs Buddhism Emerson Pierre Janet Nabokov Proust and historical incident - chiefly racial violence in the South (the Civil Rights Era) and the West (the Sand Creek Massacre). In fact I feel the work loses its way at the mid-point perhaps embracing this necessity of forgetting to the degree that its author instinctively misplaces the coordinates of his journey. We reach a juncture in the closing pages of his section on Creation that concludes: Writing damages forgetfulness - and so perhaps he is bowing to newly-found truths that change his course and completely lift him off the page. The apparently simple question: what does it mean to remember? Or to forget? becomes an invocation to reflection shifting from philosophical perplexity to something more troubling — the crimes of history individual and collective. While he reflects on the historical situations of South Africa or Serbia or Spain the episodes that pack the most punch belong to the American experience: the Civil War; the legacy of Jim Crow and the struggle for civil rights; the genocide against Native Americans. The format is certainly unusual for a work of nonfiction - it sort of imitates (to me) David Markson’s “This Is Not a Novel” series and the format itself is a practice of memory and forgetting. Stupid Pete! 384 This was one of the most intellectually stimulating books I've read in a long while; it put me back in the days when I was a philosophy student thinking always about big overarching challenging ideas. Lewis Hyde I learned is among other things a poet and this is evident in the mode in which the book is written: short essays anywhere from a third of a page to six pages (the book and thus the pages are small) clustered together in sections titled Myth Self

Nation and Creation (my favorite). In the Nation section Hyde explores whether forgetting has a beneficial role to play in the cases of US lynchings the Holocaust and the treatment of Native Americans and if so what shape that takes. As I approach my mid-60's I realize that the value to me of memories rooted in my past is that they are integrative gathering back up into the folds of my skirt past experiences that have fallen away and become lost and hidden and giving me a feeling of my whole self over time suddenly reintegrated and restored if only for a moment. Hyde spends several pages writing about Proust's Remembrance of Things Past which I only struggled through in French; I think I might get a lot out of reading it again this time in English and with over 40 years more of life experience under my belt. I got the feeling that their minimization reflected how painful it is for Hyde to recall these incidents and how frightened he is to think that he might be facing the same fate. After reading one of the sections I laid on my bed and listened to a song that feels viscerally attached to a moment in time almost 10 years ago and I felt really comforted by Hyde's ideas; that time is one big soup all swirling around and happening at once that nothing is really gone and that forgetting is okay that when we mark a grave we can go back to it but we don't have to. It also turns inward using the author's own life and memory as a canvas upon which to extol the virtues of a concept too long taken as an evil, A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past It might have been four stars but I forgot: You can access things differently through this type of impressionistic snippet writing: Contrast this with all the things we cannot forget and that is the sense I pulled from Hyde's work: Only then can you both claim an identity as your own and enjoy the privilege of forgetting about it: I kept it by my stationary bike reading 8-10 pages a day. The only problem is I couldn't get a sustained workout in—I kept stopping to highlight passages or write notes, I've spent a number of years researching the literary structures of memory and invented memory, I expect I will pick this book up again and read it through with an entirely new perspective and context, This is one of those books that presents its thesis very plainly deliberately and with a wide range of examples: So very satisfying! 384 A fascinating exploration of memory myth and culture. Brief mention is made of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission but I didn't feel he'd finished processing this: It may be that he is choosing to forget not only his aim but his book. 384 Trickster Makes This World: Mischief Myth and Art is my favorite book on the once-fashionable subject of "creativity, " It's a sparkling example of what it claims to analyze playful wide-ranging transgressive inventive: Lewis Hyde's new book is quite different — it's an extended meditation on the ethics of remembering/forgetting a collage of history mythology anthropology and imagination, The dominant mood (at least for me as I was reading) is grief compounded of confusion and anger and occasionally insight, Hyde's style of reflection is in the American mode echoes of Emerson Thoreau and Whitman sound across the pages: Even today — at least in my experience — most Americans have not come to terms with these aspects of our history, Individuals may be permitted to forgive and forget; a society must aim for justice and remembrance and only then does it deserve the right to forget to invent itself anew: This isn't a book to hurry through and it will disappoint those who try. Those readers willing to wander and linger within Hyde's always interesting circles of thought to remain within complexities without demanding a simple solution will be richly rewarded. 384 not really sure about the lukewarm takes I thought this was excellent: Some of the takes were definitely more interesting than others but it's an incredible new way of writing this probably means I have to go and read The Gift now: One of my great regrets in reading this is not taking Prof Hyde's creative nonfiction class in college: They are not so much essays as ruminations on forgetting and the role it has played or plays in each of these arenas: But they are not really just ruminations either because Hyde has obviously done a lot of research to support his thinking--either that or he's really knowledgeable: So what you have here is philosophical/poetical thought clusters all related to each other by the theme of forgetting, Hyde is neither for nor against forgetting; he simply shares thoughts and information on the role of forgetting in history creativity and personal/psychological experience. Personally I have lately been thinking about the meaning of the oft-maligned nostalgia and sentimentality: Finally I also personally connected to Hyde's sad brief references to his mother's dementia which were very thinly sprinkled throughout the book, A Primer

for Forgetting has a lot to offer both your head and your heart, sometimes this book was a little heady but the great thing is that it's just these little vignettes so if one doesn't make sense the next one probably will. i dogeared nearly half the book for quotes/ideas i wanted to write down. there's so much good stuff to uncover in here about memory time God and the human condition: this book was a beautiful way to round out a bizarre and confounding year. This was an interesting exercise in collage. There is no self-forgetting without self." 384 I found myself reading this book slowly. Never did I consider the importance and value of forgetting. 384 What a great book a fun and insightful read.and then his reader as well. One cannot know.I may not be ready to forget quite this much. Hyde explores what happens when we try. The results are hardly encouraging. 384 really good. 384

