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Life Of A Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke



Synopsis

In this outstanding biography, Ralph Freedman traces Rilke's extraordinary career by combining detailed accounts of salient episodes from the poet's restless life with an intimate reading of the verse and prose that refract them."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Some biographers get inside the spiritual life of their subjects and are able to capture its intimate movements in such a way that the life takes on a magical coherence and wholeness. Others, less sympathetically endowed, are content to record external circumstances and events, with perhaps some brief overtures toward explaining inner motives and passions. One would think a poet of Rilke's fierce inwardness demands primarily the former form of biography - and he does - but the latter form also offers some interesting insights, especially for readers who might be unfamiliar with the milieu he lived and worked in. This biography is very much in the latter camp. Freedman's prose suffers from frequent bouts of groaningly bad academese ("His words adumbrate the divine tension between Word and World" - yuck!), but his narrative does give the imaginative reader some purchase on the shaping forces behind many of Rilke's most powerful works. The last few hundred pages are something of a slog since you know that felicitous insights into Rilke's inner life (and there are some) will be consistently overwhelmed by a rather distant-sounding reportage of his travels, housing troubles, and publishing concerns. For a poet whose mission was to transform external vicissitude into internal truth... the effect is something like viewing a postcard of a church. Rilke was notorious for flooding his lovers with passion before withdrawing from their intimacy, and in a way

Freedman, who never really seems to get under Rilke's skin (although it is clear he would like to), takes his place among those spurned souls.

This is a sprawling, lazy account. It was moderately useful as a complement to Donald Prater's far more concentrated 'A ringing glass', but if I hadn't read that book first I wouldn't have formed much of a picture of Rilke's life. There are a few interesting stories found here which don't appear in the other book, but on the whole it is totally inferior.

This biography sensitively and thoroughly investigates the life of Rilke. We follow not only his life's events, but his intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and poetic development, all of which are closely intertwined. Freedman himself writes the tale so well--it is a pleasure to read! The book features plenty of photographs of Rilke, his family and friends. Rilke was a complicated and troubled man, but the wonder is seeing how out of such human frailties arose a transcendent body of work.

How & why would one criticize the life of a poet? Was he selfish? Yes. Godawful husband and father? yes. Great lover of women? Oh yes. Many revelations about a lost time, place, lifestyle. Encounters with legendary figures (Tolstoy, Lou Andreas-Salome, Rodin, the child Balthus). He consciously chose art over life. Accept that and you accept Rilke.

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