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Is a Loveless, Joyless, Purposeless Life Still Worth Living?

Using quotes from various other books that have been misinterpreted, **Betsy Robinson** lands on the idea that it is possible to be fully, viscerally in love with Life itself.

Blaming circumstances or lack of purpose or swallowing the bleak books school's message that life is tragic is B.S.



I've never been a fan of what I call the "Bleak School of Literary Book Writing." In my many-times rejected and ignored short story "Metamorphosis or How to Become a Famous Writer or How to Make it Okay to Eat Unlimited Quantities of Candy Corn," the

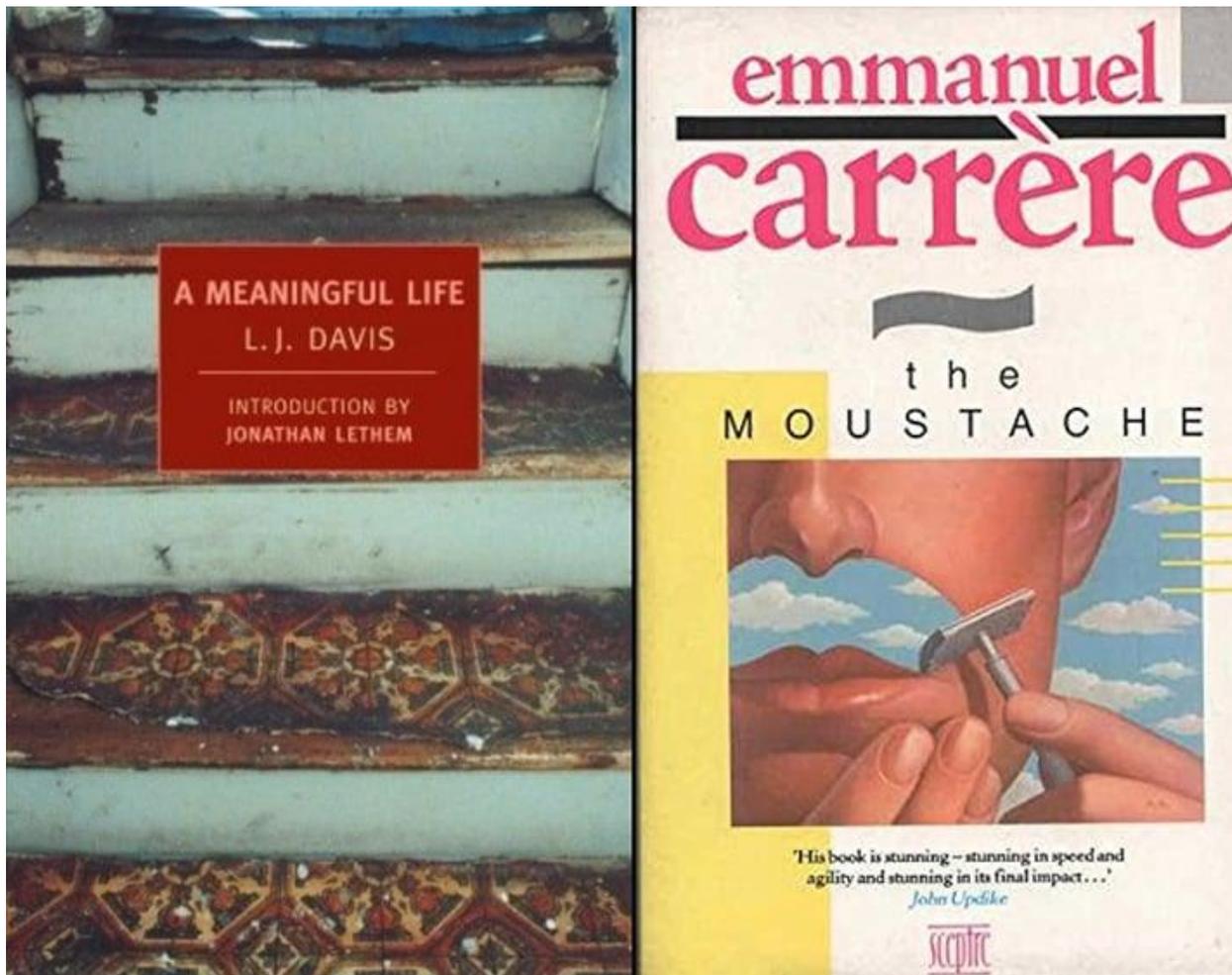
first-person protagonist (a struggling writer) defines it. Bleak fiction “ascribes to the philosophy that life sucks, there is no way out, and this is best expressed through endless lists of obscure adjectives, designed to inject just enough intellect and depth to appeal to serious reviewers and get those oh-so-important front-cover praise blurbs.”



Two books that try to veer from Bleak but still slide into this School are the classic *A Meaningful Life* by L. J. Davis, even though it is filled with humor, and *The Mustache* by Emmanuel Carrère, which, for most of it, avoids the pit because of high-energy Kafkaesque plot turns. However, both books’ endings seem to ascribe to the Bleak School’s notion that if you can’t get what you want, if you can’t control life, if you can’t even agree on a common reality, life is not worth living or else it is merely a bleak and hopeless exercise to tolerate.

My outlier response to Herman Melville’s novella *Bartleby, the Scrivener* about a guy who simply refuses his boss’s demands that he work is decidedly negative rather than the customary bleak “alas, what a beaten-down soul Bartleby was.” I don’t believe Bartleby is a victim of his oppressive obligation to make money unhappily, but rather he is either clinically depressed or walking apathy, which in his case is a choice. Yes, he has an apparently loveless, joyless, purposeless life, in which (as in the earlier-referenced books) he cannot get what he wants and his death seems to be an attempt to at least control that. But I posit that all these conclusions are a kind of delusion and misunderstanding of what

life is and what it is for. And therefore they are, in a sense, false endings.



Some books' apparent bleakness is due to the readers' limitations:

Many people consider John Williams's astounding novel *Stoner*, about the life and death of a college professor, to be a bleak book, but on my fourth reading of it, I experienced an ecstatic epiphany.

Likewise, the Pulitzer-prize-winning *The Overstory* by Richard Powers, about our apparent determination to end life on our planet, left me near-giddy with joy.

It took a second reading for me to realize the positive message of Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday* about a horrific day in the life of a neurosurgeon, including a brutal family break-in and a hopeless ending for the deeply disturbed burglar.

All three books seem to me to be telling a truer and more expansive truth than those that

ascribe to bleakness.



On his deathbed, John Williams's protagonist William Stoner, a professor in a miserable marriage who has had everything he loves taken away, wonders what he'd expected of life:

"A kind of joy came upon him, as if borne in a on a summer breeze. He dimly recalled that he had been thinking of failure—as if it mattered. It seemed to him now that such thoughts were mean, unworthy of what his life had been. . . . There was a softness around him, and a languor crept upon his limbs. A sense of his own identity came upon him with a sudden force, and he felt the power of it. He was himself, and he knew what he had been." (276-277)

After making us know and feel that there is nothing that is not alive, Richard Powers writes in *The Overstory*:

This is not our world with trees in it. It's a world of trees, where humans have just arrived. [. . .] Trees know when we're close by. The chemistry of their roots and the perfumes their leaves pump out change when we're near. . . . When you feel good after a walk in the woods, it may be that certain species are bribing you. So many wonder drugs have come from trees, and we haven't yet scratched the surface of the offerings. Trees have long been trying to reach us. But they speak on frequencies too low for people

to hear. (italics sic, 424)

In *Saturday*, Ian McEwan's character Henry Perowne collapses after a 24-hour day of life-and-death drama. Determined to talk his family into forgiving the man who tormented them, a man with a deteriorating brain due to Huntington's disease, he finally slips into bed beside his wife:

"He fits himself around her, her silk pajamas, her scent, her warmth, her beloved form, and draws closer to her. Blindly, he kisses her nape. There's always this, is one of his remaining thoughts. And then: there's only this. And at last, faintly, falling: this day's over." (289)

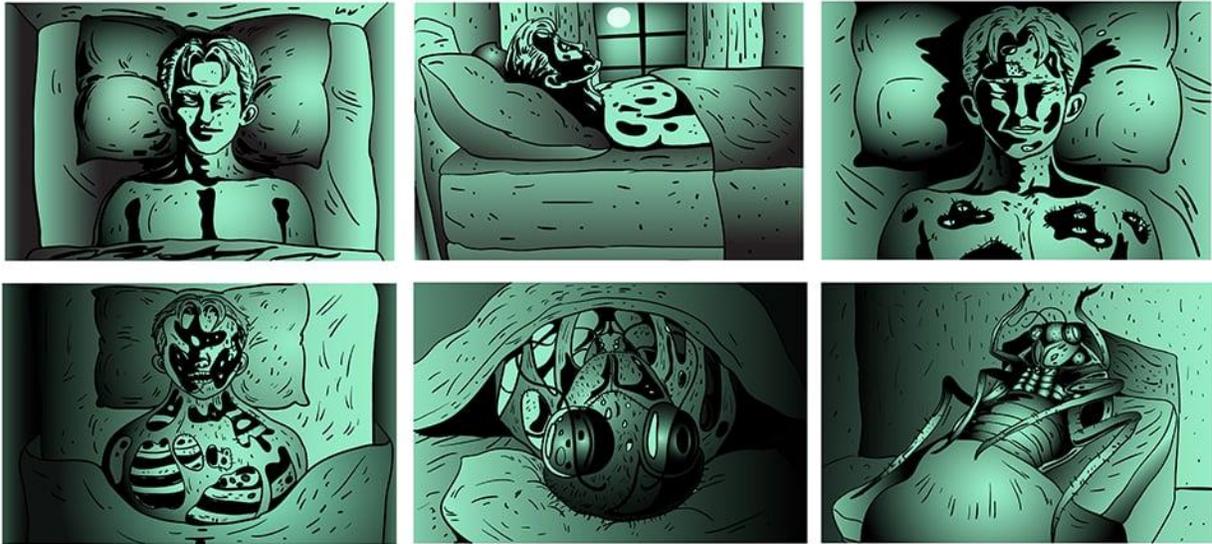


The first time I read this novel, I thought Perowne dies from an earlier chest blow. This time I realized nothing of the sort happened. Like William Stoner, he realizes the truth of what he is—Love. And like Richard Powers's voice as narrator of *The Overstory*, he accepts that Life *is*.

Is love possible without connection to another human being? In *A Meaningful Life*, nebbish Lowell Lake, despite his marriage, never truly connects to anybody, but like Bartleby, he seems to me to be willfully blind to the life all around him: all the people struggling to survive in the slum house he's been renovating. Instead he believes he is so invisible that he can get away with a literal murder, and he apparently does. Is he invisible because

nobody confronts him about his actions, or is he invisible because he can't see himself, and therefore he denies the existence of life, and therefore love of life?

In *The Mustache*, the unnamed protagonist experiences his reality being denied by everybody around him, and rather than let this torture go on, he ends himself. I can certainly relate to his pain at this level of division. Our current culture is playing this out—we cannot agree on what truth is and whether right and wrong are even important.



But I believe there is a truer truth than concluding that life is not worth living. It is that “Love is because Life is.” There is no possibility of ending it. Maybe we cannot know what our purpose is. Maybe we will never see fruits from our labors or feel our impact on anyone else or even agree on what is happening, but still “Life is.” There is no getting rid of it. Cells live. All matter lives and moves. When it leaves one form, it moves into another: acorn to tree, wakefulness to dream, solid into liquid; matter to gas; ashes to ashes . . . The cells in these forms, including consciousness (thoughts have energy and movement), are alive! So rather than condemn as meaningless that which we cannot understand, why not marvel at the mystery: Life is! We are! If only for a few years, a blip, we exist in this form. Why not revere the miracle, understanding—like Stoner, Powers, and Perowne—what we really are . . . and, through our awe, loving—loving life itself?

About the Author

Betsy Robinson

Betsy Robinson writes funny fiction about flawed people. Her novel *The Last Will & Testament of Zelda McFigg* is winner of Black Lawrence Press's 2013 Big Moose Prize and was published in September 2014. This was followed by the February 2015 publication of her edit of *The Trouble with the Truth* by Edna Robinson, Betsy's late mother, by Simon & Schuster/Infinite Words. She published revised editions of her Mid-List Press award-winning first novel, a tragicomedy about falling down the rabbit hole of the U.S. of A. in the 1970s, *Plan Z* by Leslie Kove, when it went out of print. She self-published the short story referenced in this essay ("Metamorphosis or How to Become a Famous Writer . . .") in her anthology *Girl Stories & Game Plays*. Her articles have been published in *Publishers Weekly*, *Lithub*, *Oh Reader*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Prairie Fire*, *Salvation South*, *Next Avenue*, and many other publications. Betsy is an editor, fiction writer, journalist, and playwright. Her novels *Cats on a Pole* and *The Spectators* will be published by Kano Press in 2024.



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