

The Folded Clock: A Diary

By Heidi Julavits

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Thus was born a desire to try again, to chronicle her daily life as a fortysomething woman, wife, mother, and writer. The dazzling result is *The Folded Clock*, in which the diary form becomes a meditation on time and self, youth and aging, betrayal and loyalty, friendship and romance, faith and fate, marriage and family, desire and death, gossip and secrets, art and ambition.

The Folded Clock is as playful as it is brilliant, a tour de force by one of the most gifted prose stylists in American letters.

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The Folded Clock: A Diary By Heidi Julavits Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

From the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*:

“**[E]xquisite**.... This diary is a diary in the way that Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* is a confession, or that Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* is a journal, or that Sei Shonagon’s *Pillow Book* is a pillow book.... **[W]itty, sly, critical, inventive and adventurous.... Her prose, like [E.B.] White’s, is especially liquid, and her sentences are unimpeachable....**

[A] work so artful that it appears to be without artifice. This diary is a record of the interior weather of an adept thinker. In it, the mundane is rendered extraordinary through the alchemy of effortless prose. It is a work in which a self is both lost and found, but above all made.”
— Eula Biss

“**[S]cathingly funny**.... **[O]ddly exhilarating**.... Julavits, as we know from her inventive novels...is a pro at spinning stories.”
—Los Angeles Times

“[P]oignant.... [P]rofound.”
—Boston Globe

"[A] **cleverly crafted, thoughtfully entertaining** series of meditations on personhood and culture.... **complex and captivating**...."
— Lydia Millet, *O Magazine*

"[A]t once **artful, concise, and forthcoming**.... **Like E.B. White or David Foster Wallace** before her, Julavits might be ashamed of her little vanities and obsessions...but that doesn't prevent her from laying them bare without sugarcoating a thing.... **[T]here's not a single uninteresting anecdote or scrap of flabby prose throughout**."
— Heather Havrilesky, Barnes & Noble

"[A] profound meditation on the passing of time."
—Entertainment Weekly

"“[G]lorious.”
—Minneapolis Star Tribune

“**[F]resh**.... **[P]itch-perfect**.... Julavits manages to steer her philosophizing clear of triteness or pretension.”
—Bustle

“**[I]ntricate and delicately worked**.... The magic of *The Folded Clock* is the way it recaptures time, slowing and bending it, to create something new.... **[A]n exceptional work of art**.”
—BookPage

[B]lur[s] the lines between contemplation and revelation, fact and fiction.... **Julavits takes the novel approach of reinventing the form of the diary**.... Julavits reveals a whole lot, in **often-flawless prose**,

about motherhood, time, petty jealousies, grand debates, and the irresistible attractions of *The Bachelorette*.
— *New York Magazine*'s "8 Books You Need to Read This April"

One of Refinery29's "30 Books to Read This Spring"

"Reflections on being and becoming… Some entries are **slyly funny**, gossipy and irreverent; others, **quietly intimate**… **An inventive, beautifully crafted memoir, wise and insightful**."
— *Kirkus Reviews* (Starred)

"**Display[s] both charm and stark honesty**... The diary angle makes for a clever hook, but masks what this really is—a compelling collection of intimate, untitled personal essays that reveal one woman's ever-evolving soul."
— *Publishers Weekly*

"What can I tell you about reading Heidi Julavits' diary? **I almost missed my subway stop because I got so engrossed by her description of waiting at a subway stop.** These meditations shimmer like creatures, always feeling for the next surprise. They are ruthlessly attentive to particulars but always sniffing after bigger questions—the biggest—and **I was utterly compelled** by the big-hearted engine of rigor and wonder that drives them: her live electric mind."
— Leslie Jamison, author of *The Empathy Exams*

"*The Folded Clock* is a joy to read. It's **a treasure house of revealing stories**, and a thought-provoking illustration of the way that everyday encounters—with weather, landscapes, knick knacks and civilians—provoke kaleidoscopic and dramatic memories to unfold within us. They illustrate the way the past connects to and colors the present within all our lives. Heidi's great empathy for all she encounters—whether inanimate objects like old houses, antique beds and abandoned Rolodexes—or animate ones such as neighbors, dinner guests and lovers—and **her keen intelligence and wild imagination turn a 'normal' life into an extraordinary one**, full of drama, mystery, fierce affections, illicit love affairs, terrible and wonderful secrets. Heidi's reflections on female desire and friendship are gripping. **This is a book worth reading and re-reading.**"
— **Rebecca Curtis, author of *Twenty Grand and Other Tales of Love & Money***

About the Author

Heidi Julavits is the author of four critically acclaimed novels (*The Vanishers*, *The Uses of Enchantment*, *The Effect of Living Backwards*, and *The Mineral Palace*) and co-editor, with Sheila Heti and Leanne Shapton, of the *New York Times* bestseller *Women in Clothes*. Her fiction has appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, *McSweeney's*, and *The Best American Short Stories*, among other places. She's a founding editor of *The Believer* magazine and the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. She lives in Manhattan, where she teaches at Columbia University. She was born and raised in Portland, Maine.

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June 21
Today I wondered *What is the worth of a day?* Once, a day was long. It was bright and then it wasn't, meals happened, and school happened, and sports practice, maybe, happened, and two days from this day there would be a test, or an English paper would be due, or there would be a party for which I'd been waiting, it would seem, for years. Days were ages. Love bloomed and died in a day. Rages flared and were forgotten and replaced by new rages, also forgotten. Within a day there were discernible hours, and clocks with hands

that ticked out each new minute. I would think, *Will this day never end?* By nightfall, I'd feel like a war had been fought. I was wounded; sleep was not enough to heal me. Days would linger in my nerves, aftershocks registered on the electrical plain. Days made a physical impact. Days could hurt.

Not anymore. The "day" no longer exists. The smallest unit of time I experience is the week. But in recent years the week, like the penny, has also become a uselessly small currency. The month is, more typically, the smallest unit of time I experience. But truthfully months are not so noticeable either. Months happen when things are, with increasing rapidity, due. Tuitions are due, and rent is due, and the health insurance is due. A month is marked, not by a sense that time has passed, but by a series of automated withdrawals. I look at my bank account, near zero, and realize, *It must be March.*

Since I am suddenly ten years older than I was, it seems, one year ago, I decided to keep a diary. Like many people I kept a diary when I was young. Starting at age eight I wrote in this diary every day, and every day I began my entry with "Today I." Today I went to school. Today I went to Andrea's house. Today I played in the cemetery. Today I did nothing.

Recently I cited this childhood diary-keeping as the reason I became a writer. I needed to explain to a room-ful of people, most of them over seventy years old, *why.* I could have answered the question in a variety of ways. But I try to anticipate the needs of my audience. I desire to give them an anecdote customized to resonate with their life situation. This desire guides my answers more strongly than truth. What did these people want or need to hear? If I were, like them, nearing the end of my life, I imagine I'd be impatient with equivocation and uncertainty. I imagine I would desire clear stories because soon I'd be in a grave where my life would be condensed to a name, a date, some commas, a category ("Wife").

So I told a clean story. A *why* story. I said that I became a writer because on one March day, when I was ten, during the interminable gray-scale finale of a typical Maine winter, my father took me to the mall because we'd long ago run out of ways to kill time before spring. At the mall, he bought a color TV. On certain practical and emotional levels, his expenditure made sense. Our old TV was black-and-white. We switched between the two and a half available channels by using a pair of pliers to rotate a metal stub, once connected to a dial (now lost). The original antenna (also lost) had been replaced by a clothes hanger. The whole contraption was so pathetic and downtrodden, who could blame a man for trying to bring literal color into the lives of his wife and children, emotionally slogging their way through another mud season?

Unfortunately, my father did not have permission to buy a color TV. At an earlier point in time, he'd bought something else without permission, and before that something else, and now he was deeply in permissions debt. He would never get permission to buy anything ever again. Every acquisition was unauthorized. This did not prevent him from buying the TV.

My father also bought me, if I promised to write in it, a diary.

I started the diary the next day. I wrote:

Today I woke up and watched TV.

I found and reread these diaries about ten years ago. Before I found and reread them, I was proud of what the fact of my rigorous diary keeping predicted about me. I'd been fated to be a writer! I had proof of my doggedness—many volumes of it. I imagined the diaries published at some future date, when my literary fame might bestow upon them an artistic and biographical value. I believed I was born to posthumous greatness. I often imagined myself more famous when dead than when alive.

The actual diaries, however, fail to corroborate the myth I'd concocted for myself. They reveal me to possess the mind, not of a future writer, but of a future paranoid tax auditor. I exhibited no imagination, no trace of a style, no wit, no personality. Each entry is an accounting of (or an expressed anxiety about) my school performance.

Today at school I got a 100 on my math test and I finished my science assignment. I am all set for my literature report but I'm really scared!

Today I gave my report and I got an A.

Today I didn't finish my worksheet and I am in trouble.

Today I really flubbed up in my math test because we have to get 5 100s in a row and I had 2 100s but then today I got a 99!

Later, when I turn ten, the tone starts to change. I stop worrying and start fretfully wishing.

I want to have a thin lovely figure, very pretty and smart and Alec and I love each other, never sick, happy life, my family isn't killed, I am a great ATHLETE, popular, lots of friends, no pimples, a nicer nose.

Virginia Woolf wrote, "I do not know how far I differ from other people." I tend to think, based on the above evidence, that I don't differ much. Admirable, I guess, is my absence of guile or pretense. I was clearly not prepping very well for my posthumous fame, as certain people I know prep and have been prepping practically since birth for theirs. Everything written by these people—even an online exchange with a computer repair technician—is treated as archival evidence to be scoured by future scholars. If the future scholars come to care at all about me, I
wish them to know this: with certain variations (substitute *my husband* for *Alec*), the desires of my ten-year-old self have more or less held steady for the past thirty-odd years.

So I told the seventy-year-olds a story that stressed the continuity (the immortality!) of self. What I failed to mention, however, was my recent worry: As a writer, I have mistaken how to use words. I write too much. I write like some people talk to fill silence. When I write, I am trying through the movement of my fingers to reach my head. I'm trying to build a word ladder up to my brain. Eventually these words help me come to an idea, and then I rewrite and rewrite and rewrite what I'd already written (when I had no idea what I was writing about) until the path of thinking, in retrospect, feels immediate. What's on the page appears to have busted out of my head and traveled down my arms and through my fingers and my keyboard and coalesced on the screen. But it didn't happen like that; it never happens like that.

March 3
Today my friend asked me, "Am I crazy?" She is convinced that her husband is having an affair. We were in her apartment drinking beer. She seemed oddly energized by the prospect of this affair, as if we were gossiping about the maybe-infidelity of a person not married to her.

Her husband, she said, had become friendly with the single woman who used to live in the neighboring apartment. The woman had since moved to San Francisco; however, she called her husband regularly to check on her mail. Was there a package for her in their lobby? According
to my friend, her husband always left the room so he could speak to the woman in private.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Am I crazy?”

I considered the evidence. Was this all she had? I asked. If so, I was sorry to disappoint her—she really was so excited that her husband might be cheating on her—but I did not think her husband was having an affair. She was, perhaps, being a little crazy. At the worst, it sounded as though her husband had a crush on their former neighbor, and if he did, she should continue to rejoice. I’d recently heard of a study that concluded: the marriages that last are the ones in which the two members regularly develop (but do not act upon) extramarital infatuations. Here was proof of her marriage’s durability. Her husband wanted to sleep with a woman who was not his wife.

Then she told me more. A few weeks ago, her family had gone on vacation to Lake Tahoe. On the morning of their departure, her husband claimed he needed to stay in New York to deal with a work emergency. She flew ahead with their son; he flew to San Francisco a day later and spent a night in the city before meeting his family at the lake. Less than a week into the vacation, he claimed he needed to return home earlier than expected (another work emergency). He drove to San Francisco, ostensibly to catch a plane. Ostensibly, he missed it. Again, he spent the night in the city. He’d told his wife he’d stayed on a friend’s couch, but she later learned, by finding a receipt in his pocket, that he’d checked into a hotel. When asked why he’d decided against staying with the friend (she did not ask him why he had lied), he said, “I’m too old to sleep on couches.”

Now I told her: I didn’t think she was crazy. If my husband behaved that way, I’d know he was having an affair.

But their relationship wasn’t our relationship. A couch, a crush, a hotel. What might appear suspicious in my husband might not appear suspicious in hers.

I tried to interpret her husband’s behavior using their relationship template.

I still thought he was having an affair.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” I repeated.

We wondered if she should break into his e-mail account. We were less concerned about the ethics of this breach than we were about its uselessness in court, so to speak. Reading her husband’s e-mail was the equivalent of an illegal phone tap. She wouldn’t be able to confront him with evidence procured in this manner. If she admitted that she’d read his e-mail, the marital wrongdoing could be shifted to her. She’d read his e-mail! What a trespass, what a violation! No wonder he’d needed to have an affair! Etc.

Let’s say, I said, that she read his e-mail and confirmed he was having an affair. How might she “stumble” upon further proof she could actually use? We talked about credit card receipts and whether or not a big charge at a hotel bar might signal that he hadn’t been drinking alone. I wondered if she might accidentally discover a suspicious text string. A chain of acronyms exchanged with their former neighbor that might suggest—they were speaking in code to avoid detection.

“But,” she said, returning to the possibility of reading his e-mail, “do I really want to find what I might find?”

She quoted something I’d apparently said to her last winter—that if my husband read my e-mail, he deserved to learn whatever he discovered. I didn’t remember saying this. On reflection, however, it seemed exactly the

type of thing I would say. I stood by it.

“Maybe you don’t want to know,” I observed of her husband’s possible infidelity. What would knowing get her? Her husband had slipped up once before they were married and evaded conviction despite compelling testimony against him—a statement from the woman he’d slept with, for example. He did not confess nor deny when presented with this testimony. He simply refused to admit the evidence to the court. (He refused to accept that there *was* a court.)

My friend returned to the original evidence, such as it existed. “I don’t know,” she said. “Am I just crazy?” We’d entered a loop. Each time we found ourselves at a potential course of action, we’d shy away from the exit and the loop would reboot. *Am I just crazy?*

Our loop reminded me of a recent interaction with a different friend. She’s an artist; I am not. She’d tried as an artist (as opposed to a psychologist or, I don’t know, a dentist) to demystify for me my obsession with certain objects. One of these objects is a hot-water tap handle I found in my house in Maine where, when I’m not teaching in New York, I live. The tap handle is enamel; it is cracked. I carry it with me everywhere. Once purely functional, it now serves no other purpose than to weigh down my bag. Every day, before I start writing, I draw this tap handle. The artist diagnosed my attraction to it as *l’amour fou.* André Breton, she told me, identified the affliction in his book *Mad Love.* He and Alberto Giacometti—depressed at the time—were walking through a Paris flea market in the spring of 1934; Breton feared that Giacometti might fall in love with a girl and, as a consequence of his sudden happiness or his brighter outlook on life, ruin a statue on which he was working and to which Breton felt obsessively attached. Breton worried in particular about the placement of the statue’s arms, which were raised in a way to suggest they were holding or protecting something.

He was right to worry. Due to precisely the sort of fleeting “feminine intervention” Breton feared, Giacometti fell in love with a girl and lowered the statue’s arms. (Once this feminine intervention concluded, Breton reports of the arms, “with some modifications, they were reestablished the next day in their proper place.”) What bothered Breton was not the loss of modesty implied by the lowered arms. What bothered him was the “disappearance of the invisible but present object.”

My tap handle—according to my artist friend, and also to Breton—was the invisible but present object, invisible in that I could not perceive its use or meaning, but I always needed it around. My friend’s husband’s maybe-infidelity was also the invisible but present object. My friend did not want her suspicion—which sustained the possibility that her husband both was and was not having an affair—to disappear by exposing it. She feared the lowering of hands. Still, I said to her as we drank beer, You are not crazy. You are not crazy. This is what she needs from me, I guess—the opportunity to perpetually wonder about her husband without the threat of ever knowing what, in a marriage, is or is not there.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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