

A Little Life Book Review

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Weekly Contributor: Writing Scene

A book I'd never recommend to anyone. This week I'm changing it up and reviewing a novel I read this month called *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara. It follows four friends who each had their share of childhood hardships but it mostly focuses on the character Jude St. Francis: a man who lives his day to day life remembering his past and feeling miserable because of it.

Trigger warnings for this novel: Sexual abuse, child sexual abuse, scary verbal abuse, psychological manipulation and gaslighting, kidnapping/imprisonment, self-harm, a violent accident, ableism, drug use, addiction, grief, and loss of a loved one.

“And I know you work hard. But Jude, when you're with your clients, you have to show a little life: they're paying to be with you, you know—you have to show them you're enjoying it” (Yanagihara, 473).

To Potential Readers

This book is a little over 800 pages (depending on which copy you get), and it is jam packed with tragedies. Thankfully, it gives you some breathers, but even those are tough to get through. For instance, even the main character who finally experiences a happy situation doesn't last for long.

This article will contain spoilers.

Themes

A Little Life consists of torturous content which some people don't particularly enjoy as a literary technique; however it definitely leaves room for piles and piles of themes. I'll discuss three that I think are the most obvious.

One's childhood trauma might never be fixed or healed, haunting them for the rest of their life.

A Little Life displays this theme by living through Jude's head and his memories. As a child, he was neglected by his parents whom we never see in the novel. He lived in a monastery where he was brutally beaten by the Brothers and Fathers for his tantrums and misbehaviors. There is one brother, Brother Luke, who is the kindest to him. He never hit him and always gave him toys. That was until they both ran away and Brother Luke made Jude a child prostitute (at

eight years old). As we go through his life, we see the silence and refusal to speak of his past that burdens him each day.

Someone's inability to accept happiness and joy due to the consistent words of hatred thrown at them.

This theme is seen throughout the book when Jude experiences the love of his friends. When their help is offered and given, he feels guilt and embarrassment because he believes he's pathetic, unworthy, and disgusting. He constantly feels he is undeserving of the love that's given him. For his whole life, he had never participated in a willful, consensual romantic relationship until a man named Caleb entered his life. Even at that time, he hardly consented to it. Caleb grew abusive, calling him ableist names, beating him, and violating his body. The last interaction they had was when Caleb brutally beats him, stripping his clothes, and calling him deformed. After years of (very little) growth, he is taken back to square one of his self worth.

Addiction can break relationships beyond repair.

Occasionally, the novel follows the other three friends, and in chapter three of the section called Vanities, it follows JB's abusive friendship with a man named Jackson. JB was consistently getting high. At the end of the chapter, he was extremely high to the point he refused his friend's help. He was so upset that he did an impression of Jude (who is disabled and has a limp), and slurred his words, claiming he was Jude St. Francis. After that, Jude couldn't find it within himself to forgive him until he attempted to kill himself, writing a letter of forgiveness.

Final Note

Reading this book took me about two weeks... I wouldn't recommend doing that if you decide to ignore my first warning about not reading it at all. While reading this, I questioned my own thoughts, my own wellbeing, and self-worth. The way we get into their heads, mostly Jude's and his adoptive father, Harold, made my mental health a little weaker. I had prepared for the worst so I wouldn't cry, but eventually I let myself feel the book. I sobbed, having to set the book down.

Don't read this book unless you want to weep uncontrollably.

"He experienced the singular pleasure of watching people he loved fall in love with other people he loved" (Yanagihara, 145).

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