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Fifty Days Of Solitude



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DORIS GRUMBACH



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable BookFaced with a rare opportunity to experiment with solitude, Doris Grumbach decided to live in her coastal Maine home without speaking to anyone for fifty days. The result is a beautiful meditation about what it means to write, to be alone, and to come to terms with mortality.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I first read this book about 3 years ago. I don't read many books by writers about writing, and I don't read many autobiographical books by writers, period. However, I read the first few pages of this book, and I was captivated. She moved herself into an isolated country house for 50 days. Grumbach's style is simple, plain, and direct. Her book is a study of one person's solitude; as such, it works well as a personal "coming of age" story. That may strike you as odd, because Grumbach is probably in her 50's or 60's, but it's a personal journey story, a tale of one person's finding herself, of imposing a solitary life upon herself. It's about solitude, and adjusting yourself from a more frenetic way of life to a simpler way of life, socially. I generally don't read this sort of thing at all, but I loved this book.

This slim, spare book touches on many of the gravest issues of our time while avoiding both smug solemnity and grinning uplift. Grumbach's voice is considered, flinty even, much like the wintery Maine landscape detailed in the book. As her days of solitude progress she writes of history, piety, AIDS, the experience of aging, the borders between the individual and the community, and the often

invisible lives of women. She watches everything and lets that observation live on the page without forcing conclusions onto it. This is a profoundly religious book, and a profoundly feminist one. It wrestles with sacredness, without the silly cliches of so much writing about "the sacred". Its rectitude and honesty are a rebuke to much of the fuzzy-minded writing out there.

Isn't it every writer's dream to have fifty days of solitude? Seven weeks of blissful nothingness, with no demands on one's time or space? Well, that's the kind of "vacation" Doris Grumbach took during one Maine winter. While she did make some inroads on the novel she was working on, she found herself spending more moments in personal reflection -- about past experiences, about friends and family members, about being alone, and about writing in general. The result is this slim volume of musings. Readers who are writers will get the most out of these pages. Anyone considering spending some time alone will benefit as well. For it is only after we know who we are on our own, that we can understand our connections with others.

I'm finished with the book, and it's hard to summarize it. I'd call it a mish-mash. I was under the impression that this would be a journal of Grumbach's 50 days of solitude, that we would learn how she coped with being alone. I thought it sounded like a fascinating experiment, and I wanted to know how she spent her days. But her daily life was sandwiched in between stories of people she knew--quotes from them on solitude or sad stories of untimely deaths. Very much different than what I thought it would be. I felt cheated in a way. I think her title for the book was false advertising. What she writes about her daily experiences might fill less than half a dozen pages, and the rest is filler. Some readers might enjoy hearing about her various friends and acquaintances, but if you're more interested in how the author coped with her isolation, I think you will be disappointed.

Excellent. As one experiencing cheerfully self-imposed solitude hopefully to continue to the end of my life, I have become more interested in reading accounts of others who have reflected on what it means to be completely alone with one's self and one's thoughts. Each entry in Grumbach's book is a meditation. If you are in a hurry, this is not the book for you. Take time to savor! Many references made of books, works of art, photos, and various remembrances of events in her life. It is especially interesting to note her regret that her life is coming to an end as she writes this journal in 1993. Remarkably, she is still living (and writing) in 2016. I usually donate books I am not planning to re-read, but this one stays on my bookshelf permanently.

Grumbach gives readers a journey into the inner life of reflection, via her 50-days alone in a house in rural Maine. To me the tone of this book was very literary, somewhat bibliographic, and with spirituality held far in the background. In my own life, this book sits in the shadow of her later book THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE; which I found to be more focused on spirituality, and very thought provoking questions about suffering, the experience of God, and God's absence. But in FIFTY DAYS those topics are skimmed over in favor of reflections rooted more in art and literature. But for those who are interested, I did see in FIFTY DAYS OF SOLITUDE, the seeds of many of Grumbach's more developed reflections written in THE PRESENCE OF ABSENCE.

This is an OK but, but not a really good book and I had to force myself to go on instead of being pulled in by a well laid out and interesting book. Although Fifty Days of Solitude isn't the complete solitude we envision and, often, long for, I give Doris Grumbach credit for seeking solitude by the means in which she was able. Her partner on an extended business trip, Doris takes this time to wind down, hibernate and recharge often going to lengths to avoid people in quest of this solitude. Her lack of external conversations and internal chatter seemed to give her confidence by way of heightening ones attention when we slow down and not force ourselves to say anything. There are interesting observations that she highlights as a result of her quiet time, but the book overall feels choppy and doesn't have a natural flow. I much preferred, "Drinking the Rain" and "Listening Below the Noise" written by other authors. " At first I found I missed another voice, not so much a voice responsive to my unexpressed thoughts as an independent one speaking its own words. On occasion, I spoke aloud, only to surprise myself. My voice sounded low, toneless, and coarse. I thought: it would be agreeable to be answered in another, more pleasing tone, even to be contradicted, gently. There was a reward for this deprivation. The absence of other voices compelled me to listen more intently to the inner one. I became aware that the inner voice, so often before stifled entirely by what I thought others wanted to hear, or what I considered to be socially acceptable, grew gratifyingly louder, more insistent."

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