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Advancing Women In Leadership

A Book Review

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At Eighty - Two
May Sarton

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May Sarton's final journal, *At Eighty-Two*, calls to mind Eleanor Roosevelt's *My Day*, though their days were quite different.

In essence, Sarton's journal is about approaching death. Specifically, it is focused on the impending final days of this prolific poet, novelist and journalist. Even though one brings to the reading experience enormous empathy and sympathy, the overall result is exceedingly depressing. Sarton writes in such detail about the multiple facets of her illness and especially about her overpowering depression that the dark aura of the book is inescapable. Not even her rich vocabulary and fresh turn of phrase relieved the overall gloom. However, one would have to be totally without feeling to criticize the book's content in a censorial way because of this sober tone.

All her journals are fraught with numerous reference to good food and her passionate appreciation of flowers, and this last journal is no exception. As usual, much of the culinary delights and radiant blossoms emanate from a plethora of friends with whom Sarton shares them.

Along with her sustained attention to food and flowers is her preoccupation with the weather and animals. Her day by day description of the weather is tantamount to an official forecaster's report. Perhaps some circumstance made it necessary for her to remain in Maine during the long winters that she found so disturbing. Her description of the winter landscape and of the house she occupied is so vivid that it becomes virtual reality not only to those who have experienced them directly but also to the vicarious

travelers.

Some relief from the severe climate came from her love of animals. In this last journal, a very handsome cat named Pierrot offers her comfort and companionship. Not long before she died, she sent her manuscript about Pierrot to Norton, her publisher. Her previous book about cats, *The Fur Person*, has sold more than one hundred thousand copies.

Sarton's deep devotion to pets did not make her oblivious to the suffering of humans throughout the world. She was particularly moved by those who were trapped in horrendous ethnic wars about whom she wrote with great sensitivity.

While her life is characterized by many simple contradictions and complex paradoxes, the sustained presence of dichotomies comprises the leitmotif. The core dichotomy pertains to the universal experiences of solitude and loneliness. The compulsive and compelling concentration on her work so characteristic of the workaholic made a certain amount of solitude necessary. However, the supreme irony may well be that in reality it is work that interrupts the flow of life rather than *vice versa*. While Sarton wrote that "...solitude is the richness of self and loneliness the poverty of self" ... in the midst of her desired solitude, she suffered loneliness of cosmic proportion. Because of her severe illness this last journal is inundated with more than the usual number of compound sentences in which the expression of pleasure in the first half of the sentence is canceled by repeated references to her prodigious overwhelming exhaustion.

Above all else, the substantive presence to poignancy created by her awareness of the failure to receive acceptance by her peers and the critics permeates the entire journal. Not even her popularity among students, teachers and a large segment of the general reading public offered sufficient compensation. She longed to be known as a serious and accomplished poet, although her forte was really as a spinner of tales. Late in life and late in her career, she was awarded the Levinson Prize for Poetry in 1993.

With the recent death of the eminent Canadian author, Robertson Davies, whose *Deptford Trilogy* is one of the master-pieces of the 20th century, and the passing of May Sarton, the literary world and those who love it are reeling from the double blow. Like large trees, literary giants take a long time to grow, and in the interim, there are fewer places to rest in the shade and read. As a final gift, May Sarton shares with us the many books she was reading as well as her opinion of them. For this and her own books, we are grateful.

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