



On Bullfighting

A.L. Kennedy

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An Anchor Books Original

One day, on the brink of despair and contemplating her own mortality, novelist A. L. Kennedy is offered an assignment she can't refuse—an opportunity to travel to Spain and cover a sport that represents the ultimate confrontation with death: bullfighting.

The result is this remarkable book, which takes Kennedy and her readers from the living room of her Glasgow flat to the *plazas del toros* of Spain and inside the mesmerizing, mystifying, brutal, and beautiful world of the bullfight. Here the sport is death: *matadors* (literally "killers") are men and, increasingly, women who, not unlike the Roman gladiators before them, provide a spectacle to the crowd, a dance in which their own death is as present as that of the bull. Wonderfully relaying the elements of the sport, from the breeding of the bulls and the training of the matadors to the intricate choreography of the bullfight and its strange connection to the Inquisition, Kennedy meditates on a culture that we may not countenance or fully understand but which is made riveting by the precision of her prose and the passion and humor of her narrative.

On Bullfighting Details

Date : Published March 20th 2001 by Anchor (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9780385720816

Author : A.L. Kennedy

Format : Paperback 176 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Cultural, Spain, Travel, Sports and Games, Sports, Female Authors

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From Reader Review On Bullfighting for online ebook

Colin says

I get why people don't like this book--you either expect a straightforward book about bullfighting thanks to the title and suddenly you're facing the author's depression OR you're scouring the book for clues to Kennedy's illness but have to wade through page after page of bullfighting history. Neither seems good, right? A little too balanced, leading to a noncommittal to either narrative.

And yet the book works for me. Kennedy's death-obsession finds form and, oddly, life in the hazards of the corrida. This little book does much with an idea, a tradition, and ends on a satisfactorily unresolved note: when we have faced death and lived, how do we live?

Rob says

More of a self examination than an exploration of bullfighting, it gives enough about bullfighting to keep it interesting and limits the self examination enough to keep it from getting too dull. Some humor, dark humor, but funny—and some pathos. Short enough, too. Much longer and I'd never have picked it up. It is sympathetic enough to bullfighting that I might grudgingly give the activity some respect, but still think it idiocy. The writing is a little uneven.

Tamara says

I chose this from a list of books I could read for a Spanish class (oddly, it's in English). At the start, I was somewhat disinterested--it was just another book I had to read. But when I started reading it, it really drew me in. The bullfighting world is fascinating. Violent, yes. But fascinating. It's got so many rituals.

MJ Nicholls says

A.L. (Alison Louise) Kennedy is a big writer in Scotland, known for her serious-minded novels, her frequent hints at suicide, and her second career in stand-up comedy.

I find her a fascinating figure, and a hilarious stand-up, but haven't been able to connect with her prose. There is something oblique and defensive about her books that makes them impossible to penetrate, although they're clearly soul-bearing and honest works.

This book is an awkward mash-up of confession and non-fiction. What the cool kids call *creative non-fiction*. Get hip, daddio. The story begins with an aborted suicide attempt. Kennedy's reluctance to die to the strains of the dire Scottish folk song 'Mhairi's Wedding' tells us she is too in love with the grotesque ironies of the world to end things. As an attempt to get writing again she accepts a commission to write a book on bullfighting. Hence this book, *On Bullfighting*.

So the work is as odd as this sounds. The focus is on toreros and bulls and the lusty carnage of the sport, stuffed with too much technical terminology and awkward reportage, interspersed with reports on Kennedy's own state of mind. This is limited mainly to her banal discomforts and travelogue shtick, with the occasional personal memory. (One random scene shows her discussing her grandfather's passing which proves oddly moving).

The tension lies in the title. *A.L. Kennedy On Bullfighting*. You get A.L. Kennedy, but not enough. You don't get enough personal insight that makes us care about this trip. We don't get enough explanation as to her motives for making the trek to Spain. She seems to write the book in a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. You get Bullfighting. But not enough. The information is accurate and written with flair. The bullfights are shown in their goring horror and attempts are made to explain the lust for death and suffering. But opinions aren't formed. Stances aren't taken. You could look this stuff up online.

The connections between Kennedy, the suffering author obsessed with pain and misery, and the toreros, those brave idiots dancing with death, are tenuous and the result is an uneven and frustrating work.

(N.B. This text is, apparently a creative non-fiction manual. It has an intricate and divine structure that pushes into the realm of technical mastery. No idea why.)

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Update 6th Aug 2011: Attempted Original Bliss but no dice. Throwing in the towel on Alison's work.

... says

X

Kris says

This would have been four stars for the great information and insights on bullfighting, but it lost one star because of the totally unnecessary portion of the book - the author's annoying whining about her physical condition. I bought the book because I was interested in learning more about the corrida, not the aches and pains and travails of a writer. Still, the parts that actually deal with the corrida are well done and help to bring greater understanding of an unfairly-maligned grand Spanish tradition.

Mark Colenutt says

Not quite the tour de force of Hemingway's 'Death in the Afternoon' but it is an update and does give an alternative glance at the subject.

The concluding pages may not be to everyone's satisfaction but this work was in fact the work that brought the writer back from the brink of suicide and for that it is a unique reading experience which is woven into the text.

If you are daunted by reading Ernest's tome on the subject, which may go into excessive detail and often reads like a history of the subject, then the much more manageable book by Kennedy, a Scottish writer, may be exactly what you are seeking on the topic.

Cheryl says

This book has saved me several times, in so many different ways.

Liza Afonso says

A bit of an unnecessary depression drama from the author's personal life, but luckily ends up bringing the passion from Las Ventas and gives a lot of historical facts about bullfighting I didn't know about. As a truly fan of corridas I recommend it to those who want to know what corridas are all about.

Catherine says

The best passages in the book are about the history and current state of bullfighting; Kennedy has researched the subject thoroughly and has a gift of observation. She captures both the sanctity and the luridness of bullfighting in equal measure. Contextualizing bullfighting within the religious, political and class upheavals in Spain also provides great insight into the longevity of this ritual. That Kennedy couches her travels to Spain and her research into bullfighting with her personal travails is far less successful and, for me, distracting and irritating. Other authors have managed this convention better, seamlessly weaving the personal with the topic at hand. For many reasons (including her pointless diatribes against Hemingway, a well-known aficionado), I don't find her a sympathetic character in this work of non-fiction.

Robin Reynolds / October Woman says

Well, it was interesting at times, and slightly boring at times. I read it in bits and pieces, a chapter or two at a time. I realize now I knew nothing about bullfighting. I thought it was just a matador waving a cape at a bull and then sticking it with a sword. It's much much more than that, and I am now even more abhorrent of the whole "sport" than I was before.

David Hollywood says

This is an extraordinarily oblique book as it operates between the authors descriptions of her depressed personal moods and reflections about her own life's circumstances and difficulties through to a history of bullfighting, and you often wonder where the two concerns match and are related to each other. Consequently, I found it eccentrically wonderful as both a description of a person's angst about their own world as portrayed within a history of the most terrible entertainment imaginable (Bullfighting), and the depictions of its vanity in pretending it is a sport in circumstances where the bull never wins (even if he kills

or injures the matador), and the pampered and contrived aesthetics of theatrical regalia and meanderingly artificial performances related to the publicly performed mass murder of animals, as though there was a beautiful purpose to such slaughter. A great book, and often a hard read. I recommend it to everyone.

Isabel says

I never thought anyone could write a boring book about the exciting art of bullfighting but A.L. Kennedy managed it what with her constant talk about her depressions and ailments. She only seemed to remember that this was a book about bullfighting towards the last few chapters. She also got the names of some bullfighters wrong.

Maurice Mierau says

Great opening and ending. Struggle with my lack of interest in bullfighting.

Kim Stallwood says

Pulled this from my library to read as research for a new assignment I'm working on for the League Against Cruel Sports. Can't say I'm looking forward to it. Thumbed it so far. Useful glossary in the back. Going to be somewhat interesting to read if not enjoyable. Anyway, what's a respected author like A L Kennedy (who I've not read before) writing about bullfighting? Moreover, why is Jeanette Winterson blurbing that it's 'One of the best books of the year'?

Having now finished this book I can say that I'm pleased that I read it; however, it was generally disappointing, as it appears to be more like an extended magazine article than anything else. The mixing of the author's personal circumstances with her description of bullfighting is tenuous and opportunistic, ultimately lacking any real meaning. The descriptions of bullfighting and the accounts she describes of what she witnesses in the bullring are good. The work is generally informative. The glossary is useful.
