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Greenwich Village in the 1950s was a haven to which young poets, painters, and jazz musicians flocked. Among them was Hettie Cohen, who'd been born into a middle-class Jewish family in Queens and who'd chosen to cross racial barriers to marry the controversial black poet LeRoi Jones. Theirs was a bohemian life in the awakening East Village of underground publishing and jazz lofts, through which drifted such icons of the generation as Allen Ginsberg, Thelonious Monk, Jack Kerouac, Frank O'Hara, Billie Holiday, James Baldwin, and Franz Kline.

How I Became Hettie Jones Details

Date : Published December 6th 1996 by Grove Press (first published 1990)

ISBN : 9780802134967

Author : Hettie Jones

Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography Memoir, Biography

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Rachel says

I'd been meaning to read this for a long time, because of my interest (scholarly and personal) in the female Beat writers. But I am wary of memoir, especially by females from a male-dominated era. I already knew Hettie Jones' story and was nervous about how her side would come out on paper. And there were issues with that, certainly, the things you see coming miles away but can't do anything about, the retroactive, hindsight-mediated descriptions of scenes and relationships that can't but seem either disgustingly underplayed or just purely disingenuous...but on the whole, Jones was a better writer than other female life-writers that I've read from the period and her story was one worth telling, I think. I enjoyed the book and it gave me some interesting food for thought.

Paula says

Hettie Jones is an amazing woman. I didn't know about her first...I knew the name Diane di Prima first, knew she had an affair with LeRoi Jones, who was married to Hettie. At first, I championed di Prima because some of her beat poems were raw and real to me...but then I realized she turned her creative partnership with LeRoi into a sexual one, without any regard to Hettie, a fellow female sister in the same scene.

Thus, I was turned off by Diane (also because I read her later poems, they kinda sucked), and turned off by LeRoi (this woman gave up her whole heritage for LeRoi, and he cheats on her, has a baby with di Prima, and later divorces her because he wants to be a part of the Africanism/Black movement...because she's a Jew?).

I started to wonder: what must it had been like to be the wife with two kids, your husband cheating on you, working on poems and hiding them away because you didn't think they were as good as others'? What must it had been like to survive a divorce because you're not the right skin color AFTER GIVING UP YOUR OWN HERITAGE for him?

So I picked up this book. This is the story of a survivor. I only gave it 3 stars because even though I liked it, it's kind of a sad story. Although she makes light of every situation, it tugged at my heartstrings. I cried in some parts. I don't like it when books make me cry!

Jess Carr says

One of the best books, let alone memoirs, that I've read in a LONG time. Her prose is rife with poetry and the imagery and flow of the story from scene to scene is absolutely flawless. It presents an ideal cross-section of the beat era with none of Kerouac's rambling, overwhelming intensity, and is one of the only feminine perspectives on the movement. A must read!

Darryl says

I started leaving home when I was six and weighed thirty-eight pounds. Lying on a mountainside, where my sister and I were at summer camp, I had my hands in the air pretending to weave the clouds, as I had that morning begun weaving a basket.

Hettie Cohen (1934-) grew up in a middle class home in the largely Jewish neighborhood of Laurelton in Queens, New York. Her parents were distant and formal, but they unconditionally loved their youngest daughter. As she approached adulthood they encouraged her to pursue her desire to be her own person, free of the stifling restraints that trapped most women in early 1950s America:

Men had little use for an outspoken woman, I'd been warned. What I wanted, I was told, was security and upward mobility, which might be mine if I learned to shut my mouth. Myself I simply expected, by force of will, to assume a new shape in the future. Unlike any woman in my family or anyone I'd ever actually known, I was going to *become*—something, anything, whatever that meant.

After attending Mary Washington College in conservative segregated Virginia and graduate school at Columbia, she settled down in New York. She made friends, had several lovers of various backgrounds, and reveled in the life of a single woman in a city that allowed its youth a degree of space to shed cultural expectations and live freely. She found work as a subscription manager for an magazine about jazz records, and one day at work she was asked to interview a candidate for the job of shipping manager:

The applicant, arrived on a gust of sweet afternoon, turned out to be a young black man, no surprise. It was he who was surprised. "You're reading Kafka!" he said happily.

I sat him down and we started to talk. He was smart, and very direct, and for emphasis stabbed the air with his third—not index—finger, an affectation to notice, of course. But his movements were easy, those of a man at home not only in skin but in muscle and bone. And he led with his head. What had started with Kafka just kept on going.

The man was LeRoi Jones, a former college student and aspiring writer, who had recently received a dishonorable discharge from the US Air Force on suspicion of harboring Communist beliefs. Roi was hired, and he and Hattie began a friendship that grew ever closer, until they became lovers and inseparable companions several months later.

The two moved in together, living a bohemian lifestyle initially in the East Village. As Jones began to gain recognition for his writing, with Hettie's support, the couple was exposed to Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. They frequently attended jazz performances at the Five Spot, a now defunct club that hosted several top modern jazz musicians for prolonged gigs, most notably Thelonious Monk's

quintet that featured John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy. After the two founded Totem Press, which published the work of several Black Mountain poets, and created the literary magazine *Yugen*, their apartment was frequently filled with writers and avant-garde artists, which provided endless hours of entertainment but left them at the edge of poverty.

After Hettie became pregnant for a second time with Roi the two decided to marry, with the support of their friends and his family, but against the wishes of her parents and the conventions of 1950s America, including many residents of the city of New York. Hettie gave birth to a daughter, Kellie, who was soon followed by another daughter, Lisa. She and Roi shielded them from overt racial prejudice for the most part, but the loss of Hettie's income combined with Roi's inadequate earnings, unwillingness to help Hettie with family responsibilities, and increasing time away from home to spend time with fellow writers and lovers, including the poet Diane di Prima, began to erode the deep love the two once shared. As Jones became more active in the Black nationalist movement and in supporting its leaders, writers and artists, he began to distance himself from his white friends, and from Hettie, who still loved and supported him despite his changing beliefs and numerous infidelities. The assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 was the final straw, as Roi left Hettie and his girls and moved to Harlem to participate more fully in the Black Power and the associated Black Arts Movement, which he founded and participated in for the remainder of his working days. He later changed his name to Amiri Baraka, and he continued to have a very successful career until his death earlier this week.

Hettie, to her credit, dusted herself off and became an award winning poet and author of nearly two dozen children's books, chaired the PEN Prison Writers Committee, and supported feminist and minority artists and their causes. She continues to teach Creative Writing at The New School in NYC, and she raised two successful daughters: Dr. Kellie Jones is an associate professor in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia, and her sister Lisa Jones is a poet, playwright, former columnist for the *Village Voice* and collaborator with noted filmmaker Spike Lee. (I was very familiar with and loved Lisa Jones' articles in the *Village Voice* in the 1980s and 1990s and her work with Spike Lee, but I didn't know until this week that she was LeRoi Jones' daughter.)

How I Became Hettie Jones is one of the most moving and unforgettable memoirs I've ever read. The fierce love that Hettie and Roi shared was richly portrayed, their life together in the East Village in the late 1950s and early 1960s deeply resonated within my Bohemian soul, and the slow dissolution of their relationship nearly brought tears to my eyes. I cannot say enough good things about this book, and I cannot recommend it any more highly.

Veronika says

Jones writes as if she is speaking to an intimate friend -- one of the best memoirs I have read. She speaks not only of her struggle to 'become' amid personal obstacles, but that of a woman's in an age where women were not supposed to socially and/or politically 'become' or have free will. Though much has changed, her words still demand that the reader be aware of any and all obstacles preventing one's own 'becoming.'

Craig Werner says

Interesting to re-read this shortly after Dianne Di Prima's memoir of much the same period. The obvious connection between them is both women's connection with LeRoi Jones (Hettie Jones as his wife and mother

of two children; Di Prima as mistress and mother of children). But that's superficial; the real value of both books is their fiercely honest and intelligent portrayal of the difficulties, and ultimately possibilities, facing women in the artistic and political milieu of late 50s and early 60s New York. Di Prima's commitment to independence is more immediately striking, but Jones managed to forge a path that, while quieter, is every bit as significant. If you're just reading one, go with Di Prima, but they work beautifully together (and should be complemented by Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters*).

Annie Smith says

This is an eye opening look at the men and women who were at the cutting edge of the Beats in NYC. I was fascinated by the evolution of their lives and consequently the world around them. After finishing the book, I immediately googled Hettie and of course LeRoi (whose name is changed now) Hettie became a survivor going on to lead writing workshops for women in prisons. She also still lives in the building that she and LeRoi lived in just before they divorced and fought a large hotel wanting to evict her and tear down the historic building. They built around her! Hettie is a writer and poet in her own right after coming into her own after the divorce.

Raymond Maxwell says

I really enjoyed reading this book. An old friend recommended it to me many months ago and I ordered a used copy, but it sat in a stack until we reached the unit on the Beats in a MOOC course I am taking for the third time, ModPo (Modern and Contemporary American Poetry, Coursera:Penn). So I started it to get more insight into the Beats and the New York School and I couldn't put it down. We all need motivation, inspiration, and renewal and this memoir contains all and more in spades. It also reveals the seamy side of a time we might tend to over-romanticize, but in a very human and uplifting way. As a librarian, I can say it is a narrative chocked full of meaty and juicy metadata. As a poet, I can attest that it is a wonderful cross-sectional slice of poetry, music and art - live and breathing. I love this book!

Melinda Lewis says

Some maybe be scouring the pages for juicy bits about Amiri Baraka - but I think despite everything Jones is quite fair in her representation of him - as somebody complicated, confused, and taken in by accolade. He is not the subject of this book; rather, this is about how we are acted upon and changed through our interactions with others, our spaces, and cultures regardless of whether we grant permission or want to change - it happens and we continue to move (direction tbd).

Kathleen Hulser says

A young girl in toreador pants and mules with her nose in a book and her ears in a jazz club. Hettie Cohen met LeRoi Jones at the jazz magazine where she worked, launching an energetic team of Beat poets. They founded Yugen magazine, one of the many little magazines that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s Village. Philip Whalen, Diane diPrima, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso were friends and contributors. Jones and

Cohen, a happy couple sauntered from their Morton St. apartment over to Cafe San Remo to split a salad and lots of free bread and butter. They hit the Five Spot Cafe to hear Thelonius Monk, and the other hep cats playing jazz. This wonderful little memoir traces the daily life of the Beat generation through the eyes of its forgotten women: like Joyce Johnston and Diane diPrima, Hettie Jones slipped through the cracks of our collective memory. This volume fills in some of the texture of that moment in history when Village bohemians claimed downtown as a free creative zone.

Megan Alvarez says

This is the great memoir of Hettie Jones (obviously), who was the wife of famous beat poet Roi Jones, who is now known as Amiri Baraka. She tells the story of her life as an unconventional woman during the 50s and 60s, struggling to find her place and role in the world in New York City during the Beat era - a white woman married to a black man, hanging with Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, famous Harlem jazz musicians, and the like. Really great book!

Alisa says

Obviously, you can see the length of time it took for me to get through it. And, for me it was a waste of time. Again, I don't like reading memoirs because I'm not in a position to evaluate someone else's life. However, I did not find this book interesting in the least - it presupposes a lot of knowledge about a particular time and place. I only read it because it was lent to me by a dear friend who really really likes it.

Sarah says

"But then I feel a chill on my arm, and now we've come to the reading of sins. I look down at the machzor for ones that apply to me. Here's one for arrogant mien, one for haughty eyes, for obdurate brow, I beg forgiveness. For the sin of breaking off the yoke, v'al kulom eloha slichos - yes, that's the one - for being someone these people could not influence, or hold, forgive me, but this is America... sometimes you have to go on the road."

In the end, though, Hettie made quite a lot of sacrifices trying to lead a "free" life... Having read Joyce Johnson's memoir, I tackled the words of her best friend Hettie - fellow traveler of the Beat scene in NYC. She details the love of poetry, jazz, and each other that brought her and husband LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka together, as well as the forces that pulled them apart. The irony that these two rebels could feel so much societal pressure! But for the most part, Hettie focuses on the day-to-day details, whether making spaghetti for 100 Beat artists or raising two daughters in a world hostile to interracial marriage. A fast read.

Margie V says

Well, this is a must read for memoir lovers such as myself. Also for anyone who grew up in the 1950's-1960's and still remembers it. This book takes the reader back to the heyday of downtown New York City. The beats, the hippies, the radicals, the intellectuals and all others searching for America in post WWII era are represented in this beautiful little book. It has a highly personal voice (it IS a memoir) but at the same

time seems almost like an historical narrative. A fabulous tapestry of life in peripatetic times in a peripatetic city!

Pamela says

This memoir has great poise and beautiful style. Wife of LeRoi Jones during the Beat Generation, Hettie was obviously able to hold her own and create a niche for herself among the turbulence of the times. It's interesting to note the parallel struggle occurring...a Jewish, white girl (dealing with her own religious persecution), married to a black man subject to racism at its apex...all the while hanging out with folk like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, as well as witnessing jazz musicians such as Billie Holiday and Thelonious Monk. Great stuff.
