



What Is Left the Daughter

Howard Norman

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Seventeen-year-old Wyatt Hillyer is suddenly orphaned when his parents commit suicide, causing him to move to a small-town, and setting in motion the novel's chain of life-altering passions, including the fathering of a beloved daughter.

Howard Norman, widely regarded as one of this country's finest novelists, returns to the mesmerizing fictional terrain of his major books--The Bird Artist, The Museum Guard, and The Haunting of L--in this erotically charged and morally complex story.

Seventeen-year-old Wyatt Hillyer is suddenly orphaned when his parents, within hours of each other, jump off two different bridges--the result of their separate involvements with the same compelling neighbor, a Halifax switchboard operator and aspiring actress. The suicides cause Wyatt to move to small-town Middle Economy to live with his uncle, aunt, and ravishing cousin Tilda.

Setting in motion the novel's chain of life-altering passions and the wartime perfidy at its core is the arrival of the German student Hans Mohring, carrying only a satchel. Actual historical incidents--including a German U-boat's sinking of the Nova Scotia-Newfoundland ferry Caribou, on which Aunt Constance Hillyer might or might not be traveling--lend intense narrative power to Norman's uncannily layered story.

Wyatt's account of the astonishing--not least to him--events leading up to his fathering of a beloved daughter spills out twenty-one years later. It's a confession that speaks profoundly of the mysteries of human character in wartime and is directed, with both despair and hope, to an audience of one.

An utterly stirring novel. This is Howard Norman at his celebrated best.

What Is Left the Daughter Details

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Author : Howard Norman

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From Reader Review What Is Left the Daughter for online ebook

?Karen says

This book was so good! Loved the protagonist Wyatt, the Nova Scotia setting at the start of WWII, the ugliness of prejudice (against Germans) depicted, the U-boat attacks, the small town feeling similar to what you find in a Richard Russo novel-- everything. Bronson Pinchot narrated and he was just perfect. He is really very talented with his accents and characterizations.

I was all set to give this 5 stars but the last couple of chapters sort of fell flat for me. Even the narrator seemed less enthusiastic about it.

Lydia Presley says

In a letter to his daughter, Marlais, Wyatt Hillyer begins with the following line:

"I refuse any longer to have my life defined by what I haven't told you."

And I was drug, hook, line and sinker, into the story as told by the man himself in a 200+ page letter to his daughter.

Wyatt Hillyer's life is a jumbled mess of tragedy - from the double-suicide of his parents to the loss of his one love during a time when Germans in Nova Scotia, even the innocent ones, are scorned and treated horribly.

This book is a fantastic look at the Canadian life during the second world war, touching on the fears of old men hunched over their radios and whispering about the U-Boats to the prejudices of the young over-zealots, attacking even those speaking with an accent. And through this letter there is one, main, important theme: that of a father telling his daughter all she needs to know about her past and her fathers past.

This is no story of redemption - Wyatt's actions he claims full responsibility for and I appreciated that so very much. In a book that could have been sappy and full of self-pity, I found none of that. It was refreshing to read a character who was so open and honest with himself and the others in his life, so frank when it came to talking about the deeds he's done and the crimes he's committed.

The author Frank Delaney (Shannon Ireland) said *"If your narrator is first person, have them make errors; it can endear them to the reader."* and Howard Norman showcases this in fine form. WHAT IS LEFT THE DAUGHTER is a beautifully written, heart-rending novel that will have me thinking about its story for days to come.

Daisy says

Oh! This is one of the best things I've read. Beautifully written, one of those quietly powerful stories--I don't ever want to forget it. I underlined lots of fragments and made notes on the back pages, just a list of details

that I want to stay with me.

There's lots of classical music referred to and since that's not my genre, I would find the piece on the internet and play it alongside my reading. That's fun (and educational!). I always thought the title of this novel was pretty and intriguing. But the entire thing is pitch-perfect. There's not a wasted word, not even when a character says, "you know;" even that is necessary and adds to the cadence of the language, of the story-telling.

"The soup was delicious," I said.

"You've said that twice. The second time convinced me less, but thank you," my aunt said.

Meticulous Spelling

I lifted the trunk and placed it near the front door. My aunt went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. "I'd better bring Donald out some tea," she said. "Some tea for my husband of thirty-seven years, now sleeping in the shed."

"Don't sell yourself short," she said. "The way I see it? A poem reaches out exactly halfway, then you reach out halfway, then see what happens."

"No. Donald's dangerously tilted. Me, I'm just all envy, in case you didn't notice."

"Sit in the car with me, Hans," I said. "I'll explain 'jiffy' to you. I could tell you liked that word. See how I'm getting to know you?"

Detour, detour, detour into late evening; finally, I was just grateful I'd left enough stew for supper a second night. Especially that French stew, because the flavors settled in more deeply. Have you ever noticed how that works with leftovers?

"I always wanted to be read to."

"Then this is your big moment."

"Good Lord, Charlie," Hermione said, "marry me."

"Do I have to tell my wife?"

"That question shows remorse in advance," Hermione said. "Forget it."

My whole life, Marlais, I've had difficulty coming up with the right word to use in a given situation, but at least I know what the right word would have been once I hear it.

'Don't forget: now and then, life can be improved upon.' letter from Cornelia Tell to Wyatt

music:

Beethoven Quartet No. 9 in C Major and Quartet No. 10 in E-flat Major

Schumann Piano Quartet in E-flat and Piano Quintet in E-flat

Schubert Impromptu in A-flat

Beethoven Sonata in F Major

Arcangelo Corelli Violin Sonata opus 5

Bach unaccompanied cello suites

my rambling notes from the back page:

platitudes
radios
philology
don't sully the sea
bridges, water
death, murder, suicide, obituary, professional mourner
library
bakery--cranberry scones
molasses tea
carrot soup
rain
ghost child
detritus gaffer (don't sully the sea)

Diane S ? says

Probably more like 2.5. This novel should have had much going for it, it starts with two suicides, there is murder, a ferry sunk by a u-boat and another death, and adultery, but there is just a depth of emotion missing in it that really bothered me. The writing was fine, the book was relatively easy to read, but the first person narrative just left me cold. It is hard to become invested in a novel, when one doesn't really feel like they know the characters in this almost emotionless novel.

Lawyer says

A father writes a letter to his daughter whom he has not seen since she was two. It is his story to her of her family, their tragedies, and their love for one another. Set against the U-Boat war fought around Nova Scotia, Norman provides a unique look at life on the home front during the Atlantic War. The sinking of a civilian ferry will bring shattering changes to the small town of Middle Economy, Nova Scotia and the family at the heart of Norman's story. Norman's use of the epistolary style quickly becomes an intimate conversation with a man with whom you want to spend an afternoon, sipping tea and eating scones, smoking an occasional Chesterfield, surrounded by the music he has come to love through the years, played upon an ancient gramophone. Even the hiss of the phonograph needle becomes part of the background noise that lures you into the story protagonist Wyatt Hillyer is compelled to tell. Simply excellent.

Roxanne says

I was very unimpressed. I expected a lot of emotion from a book set during the war, included 2 suicides, infidelity, murder and more death. I had a very hard time with Wyatt Hillyer. Wyatt is such a bystander (loser) in his own life. I just could not empathize with him from the very start when he did not show complete devastation from the loss of both his parents. I would have preferred a storyline including more depth into his parents. I love Canada, but the war issues just seemed to go on and on. I just tended to glaze over during these periods. Also, I'm not a classical music fan and this also seemed to go on and on. Thus, I'm again glazing over. It was just oversaturation of the two for me.

I did have a few chuckles (2 I think). Other than that, I don't think this book was worth my time. I know many others rated this book very high, I'm a hard sell and I think some of the subject matter was very boring to me.

Maciek says

Howard Norman's *What Is Left the Daughter* is structured as a long letter written by Wyatt Hillyer to his daughter Marlais for her 21st birthday in 1967. Wyatt's letter is a confession why he has consciously chosen to not have contact with her, and an account of his life and the events leading up to her birth.

Orphaned at the tender age of 19 when both of his parents committed suicide by jumping off the same bridge, Wyatt had to move away from the big town of Halifax to the small village of Middle Economy in Nova Scotia, where he would live under the care of his aunt and uncle and work in his uncle's toboggan business. There he meets his cousin, Tilda, also a fellow orphan adopted by Wyatt's family, to whom he feels immediate attraction. But Tilda has other plans: aims to be a professional mourner in Nova Scotia and is interested in a German student, Hans Mohring, whose parents have fled the Nazis to Denmark and who came to Canada to study philology. It's 1942 and the war in Europe rages at its full fury, and the threat of German U-boats sinking ships in Canadian waters is very real to residents of the Atlantic provinces - among them Tilda's father, who is an amateur stenographer and fanatical listeners to war news on the radio, jotting down every iota of information and growing increasingly more suspicious of Hans.

Norman's novel is quiet and understated: true to its form the tone is one of reflection and reminiscence, proper for a recollection of an older man remembering his dramatic youth. I had a hard time caring for any of the characters, even taking into account the fact that the whole novel is a subjective presentation of a series of Wyatt's memories. Wyatt himself was too passive and spineless to be a protagonist to root for, Hans was too distant a character and Tilda never felt quite real. I expected much more of the setting, which I thought was very underused - Atlantic Canada provides for memorable locale, with its rugged coastlines, foggy shores and unpredictable weather, combined with almost Gothic fishing villages with their closely knit communities - represented brilliantly by Annie Proulx in her *The Shipping News* and by Canadian writers such as Alistair Macleod, famous for writing about his native Cape Breton Island. In comparison, Norman's portrayal seems much like a small town cliche - reducing the setting to a plastic canvas instead of a rich background.

The novel's biggest flaw is perhaps the storyline itself, which I found to be ultimately predictable and lacking novelty - even the period it's set in couldn't save it. That being said, Howard Norman is definitely an elegant writer who can craft fine sentences, and I would like to read his other novels where he hopefully does something with them.

Ron Charles says

Nobody screams in Howard Norman's new novel, although they should. This Washington writer maintains such a measured tone that his story seems shocking only in retrospect. At the time, you lean in, trying to catch every word, lulled by his voice as he describes the most ordinary lives that just happen to be punctuated by macabre accidents and bizarre acts of violence.

Everything in "What Is Left the Daughter" sounds smothered in regret, worn smooth in the closet of a man's guilty conscience. It's a World War II tale that reminds us, again, of the innumerable tragedies spawned by war but born thousands of miles away from battle. The story opens, like his most famous book, "The Bird Artist," with a confession: "I've waited until now to relate the terrible incident that I took part in on October 16, 1942, when I was nineteen."

The narrator is 43-year-old Wyatt Hillyer, who will spend the next 26 nights writing this long letter to his estranged daughter. It's a petition for her understanding and forgiveness, which Wyatt knows he can't expect. "I have no way of knowing," he writes, "if, after you've read a paragraph or two, any curiosity you might've had will abruptly sour to disgust, or worse." We never learn how his daughter reacts to this strange testimony, but you'll find it hard to resist his earnest appeal.

An award-winning translator who teaches creative writing at the University of Maryland, College Park, Norman offers a kind of rough-hewn poetry throughout, starting with that Yoda-like title, "What Is Left the Daughter." Wyatt is not a pretentious narrator -- he dropped out of high school and works as a maritime garbage collector -- but he's a determined student of language, who prizes the frayed "Webster's" he bought from a pawnshop for a dollar. There's an antique patina to his diction, although it's not pronounced: passing allusions to "mute angels," a stillborn birth as a "ghost child" or a blacksmith "taut of build." In the opening pages of his confession, he refers to John Keats and Emily Dickinson, an indication of the ardor that simmers just below the surface of his carefully chosen words.

The odd disconnect between the novel's sober tone and its outrageous plot is on display as soon as Wyatt begins: "Let me say it directly . . ." Twenty-six years ago, on the day his parents discovered they were both having an affair with the same switchboard operator, they leapt from separate bridges in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Orphaned but almost a man, Wyatt moves in with his aunt and uncle and begins making mail-order toboggans. He also falls in love with their adopted daughter, Tilda, who works as a professional mourner at funerals. (Yes, the story is marked by distinctly unusual jobs; Howard Norman and Anne Tyler should open a *Weird Employment Agency*.)

Wyatt's unrequited love for Tilda remains the foundation of his entire life -- "She was too much beauty," he recalls -- but the story is propelled by his uncle's growing anxiety about the war. Like the father in Philip Roth's "Plot Against America," Wyatt's uncle senses the danger of Hitler early but then lets it unhinge him. Hypnotized by static-laced radio reports of the U-boats prowling Canada's eastern shore, he can think and talk of nothing else. "Your aunt complains that I'm becoming more and more agitated by the day," he tells Wyatt. "Truth is, she only knows the half of just how agitated I am." Soon, the walls of his workshop are plastered with newspaper headlines of U-boat attacks, a reflection of the obsession colonizing his mind. It's a sad portrait of justified alarm and corrosive rage that ruins those he most wants to protect. (It's also a disturbing lesson on a bit of obscure history about what our northern neighbors suffered during World War II.)

All of this develops with a muted but insistent sense of menace, which Norman signals by a series of surreal images, such as a bed covered in broken bits of Beethoven records. "This war," a neighbor tells Wyatt, " -- all of us are coming apart at the seams." When the "terrible incident" of Oct. 16, 1942, arrives, it's somehow shocking and inevitable, and Wyatt's culpability is brilliantly complicated. With just a few ordinary characters -- all strict, upstanding people, in a remote town that should feel safe and tranquil -- Norman catches a stray spark of war that incinerates several lives.

The structure of the novel, though, puts considerable pressure on Norman's ability to maintain momentum. The act that alters the rest of Wyatt's life comes just halfway through the book, and even though it's a short

novel, that leaves the whole second half for the narrator's stunned reflection on that tragedy. "I've sometimes raced over the years like an ice skater fleeing the devil on a frozen river," he says, and that rushing survey of the years causes the story to flag as it sinks into the dark waters of his despair.

But trust him. More strange revelations await in Wyatt's plea to his daughter. The novel gains traction again as he nears the conclusion, vowing that "the truth is the truth, and in the end it can't be lost to excuses, cowardice or lies." It's a convincing demonstration of the truism he throws off so casually on the first page: "Life is unpredictable."

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/)

Jamie says

(3.5) I really liked the Nova-Scotia-in-during-World-War-II setting and the eccentric characters of Aunt Constance and Cornelia, though some parts dragged a bit. There were also really sad parallels between the war climate then and the bigoted political climate in the U.S. now.

Britany says

Wyatt Hillyer's parents both jumped off two separate bridges on the same night, leaving him alone and orphaned. He goes to live with his Aunt, Uncle, and adopted cousin Tilda, who becomes the love of his life.

Set during WWII in Middle Economy, Canada, we have another perspective of this time period. Anger and uncertainty towards Germans and living by the side of a radio, waiting and listening for any news of the war.

I listened to this on audiobook, and I have to say the narrator was amazing! He really made this book interesting and the tones he used with the voicing of the different characters was brilliant. I would recommend this on audiobook! I was shocked and surprised by the turn of events that end up happening and the downside for me would be the ending-- a little disappointed that (view spoiler)

Misha Mathew says

When I started reading the book, I was so sure it would be a 5 star read . But by the time, I had reached the middle, it became a little dull at parts. Don't get me wrong! This is still an amazing novel, just not as great as I expected.

This book is written in the form of Wyatt, the narrator's letter to his daughter - a sort of confession. Wyatt is someone I sympathized a lot with. His parents' double suicide changed his life forever. What I really admired was Wyatt admitted to all his mistakes and never held back from admitting everything to his daughter. He described his life in an unbiased, honest manner which made me genuinely care for him.

What is Left the Daughter also offers a glimpse on the prevailing paranoia during the war. Suspicion, hatred, prejudice prevailed in the hearts of people. A German was detested no matter what, even if innocent of all wrongdoings.

Though it seemed to drag at times, it is still a beautifully written book that will linger in your mind. Its heartbreaking and won't be easy to forget.

Favorite Quote:

"In The Highland Book of Platitudes, Marlais, there's an entry that reads, "Not all ghosts earn our memory in equal measure." I think about this sometimes. I think especially about the word "earn," because it implies an ongoing willful effort on the part of the dead, so that if you believe the platitude, you have to believe in the afterlife, don't you? Following that line of thought, there seem to be certain people—call them ghosts—with the ability to insinuate themselves into your life with more belligerence and exactitude than others—it's their employment and expertise."

Overall:

Haunting and thought-provoking...

Recommended?

Yes! Especially if you loved Atonement by Ian McEwan

Erin says

So if we've spent any time together you'll know that I (occasionally) refer to the book I'm currently reading as "the best book ever." I recognize I have a problem with hyperbole; I'm conscious of my excesses (most of the time). And so it happens once again that of late I've been talking up a novel as perfect and exquisite, in this case, Howard Norman's *What is Left the Daughter*. But then! Circumstances conspired such that I boarded a bus, finished the last three pages of the novel, and had an entire hour and a half WITHOUT A BOOK with nothing to do but stare out the window and contemplate the book. And the more I sat and thought about *What is Left the Daughter* the less satisfied I became, the more contrived the ending, the more affected the tone, the more moralistic the plot (as if morals were, in their own right, dissatisfying).

And so I find myself at something of a loss writing this review.

Norman does tremendous, really tremendous, work grafting small, quotidian moments together to form rich, idiosyncratic yet utterly believable characters. Tiny scenes, like that of eating lunch on a bus, paradoxically distill and explode character in ways typically reserved for the best short stories.

On the other hand the setting of small town - Middle Economy - Nova Scotia during WWII reads as a cliche of every small town you've ever read (think of a blend of Richard Russo, Alistair MacLeod and Anne Tyler), complete with tiny diner and eccentric neighbours (so much so, in fact, that for the first 30 pages I wondered - truthfully - whether I'd read the book before).

The plot, too, balances the brilliant with the bland. I won't spoil the climax - as it is - but I was left gasping, shocked, and yet, convinced that it should happen that way (and so brilliant). But then the ending falls short. Another case of an author unwilling to do what is necessary in order to be truthful to the plot that's preceded and to the created characters. And with that said, the last two sentences are thematic perfection.

And Norman's book raises all kinds of interesting questions about a national literature: is it setting that determines national lit? author's nationality? duration of an author's visit? thematic preoccupations? what's

the point of national literature anyway? I'll not answer any of those questions, because I don't have to anymore.

So without being able to articulate a decisive reaction to the text I'll ask instead 'when do we stop reading?' as I have a suspicion the characters of *What is Left the Daughter* and their decisions will continue to populate my waking thoughts for days to come - and maybe that means I'm still reading? And so I can hold out hope that I'll make up my mind about the text sooner or later - except not wanting to actually have to decide. Maybe this is what we readers owe the brilliant (or the almost-brilliant in this case) books in our lives: that we take them around with us after, never wanting them to feel wholly settled, but rather perched just this side of comfortable.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

... some ancient parable or other in which an elderly woman listens to her son hold forth about how much heartbreak, sour luck and spiritual depletion can be packed into a life. But talk as he might, the man from the parable fails to address the one thing his mother is most curious about. "What of your daughter?" she asks. "Have you seen her? How is her life? Do not doubt that wonderment may be found when you find her again." Turns out, the man hasn't seen his own daughter in ages. "Rain, wind, hunger, thirst, joy and sorrow have visited her all along," the woman says. "yet her father has not." She listens more, all the while experiencing a deeper and deeper sadness, until finally she says, "And what is left the daughter?" She doesn't mean heirloom objects. She doesn't mean money. She doesn't care about anything like those. She says, "I think you have a secret untold that keeps a distance between you and her and the life you were given."

This is page one, and the beginning of a letter from a father to a daughter. A daughter he has not seen since she was quite small. It is a beautifully told, sometimes heart-wrenching story. As it progressed I sometimes I found my throat closing and my eyes spilling over with tears.

The major action of the book takes place in the early days of World War II, though it is the influence of the war on these people's lives, and their reaction to it, not the war itself, that is important. The father, and therefore the central character, is Wyatt Hillyer. Through his words, we come to know him intimately. The other characters we know through his eyes, his impressions and telling of them.

I have not read this author before, but even before I finished this, I was looking at his author page. I will definitely be reading more of him.

Tim says

Howard Norman, one of America's premier novelists, has written a tour de force with *WHAT IS LEFT THE DAUGHTER*. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator quotes the phonograph record liner notes for Casals' performance of Bach's unaccompanied cello suites, "Casals succeeds in not allowing a single note of compromised sadness." The same could be said for Howard Norman in this haunting and deeply moving

novel, written as a confession (apology, in the classic sense) from an aging father to his daughter. In Norman's other novels, there is a sense of resignation and inevitability, as people act from subconscious and deeply rooted motives. This novel retains that sense of fate and yet seems more at peace with it. Wyatt Hillyer is a matter-of-fact voice, even when relating the most distressing information, almost an observer of his own life. Norman's narration allows to to know people as we do in life, slowly and piecemeal. This is a novel to be read when one has time to give oneself over to the moment and allow another person to enter one's life. In other words, it's a great read.

Denise says

What is Left the Daughter is one, long letter written by Wyatt Hillyer to his daughter Marlais. He writes because "I refuse any longer to have my life defined by what I haven't told you." The story begins with his parents double suicide over their love for the same woman. It goes downhill from there.

I expect grief and horror from a book set during the war, but usually that is accompanied by great human courage and sacrifice. This story seemed to be all senseless acts of violence and grief inflicted on innocent people by their loved ones. There were no heroes here and I didn't find much redemption either. The characters had little depth and I never felt like I understood them. Not a book for me, but it has been well reviewed by others. Perhaps if you are interested in the history of this time then the perspective of the war from Nova Scotia could be unique.
