



## Elegy for Iris

*John Bayley*

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## **Elegy for Iris John Bayley**

With remarkable tenderness, John Bayley recreates his passionate love affair with Iris Murdoch--world-renowned writer and philosopher, and his wife of forty-two years--and poignantly describes the dimming of her brilliance due to Alzheimer's disease. *Elegy for Iris* is a story about the ephemeral beauty of youth and the sobering reality of what it means to grow old, but its ultimate power is that Bayley discovers great hope and joy in his celebration of Iris's life and their love. In its grasp of life's frailty and its portrayal of one of the great literary romances of this century, *Elegy for Iris* is a mesmerizing work of art that will be read for generations.

## **Elegy for Iris Details**

Date : Published December 14th 2001 by Picador (first published January 1st 1999)

ISBN : 9780312421113

Author : John Bayley

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## From Reader Review Elegy for Iris for online ebook

### Slyv says

Rather than a discussion of the descent into Alzheimer's, this is a memoir of a much-loved companion, consort, and wife. Because of the location and the era, much of it was beyond my level of affinity, and I like to get inside a book and feel comfortable. This one didn't do it. The last couple of chapters were insightful, about the methods he used to try to keep the relationship real to him when she no longer was truly in the moment.

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### Steve says

Elegy for Iris is, like the movie, like two stories wrapped into one.

The first is about the early days of romance and marriage for the book's namesake, author Iris Murdoch and her husband and the book's author John Bayley. The story starts in the 1950's with them meeting and the nature of their relationship. Murdoch and Bailey's open relationship and marriage was, what we would now call, polyamorous. That worked for them. At least according to what the author wrote, it did and there is no reason to doubt what he said.

The polyamorous relationship style seemed to end at some point and the second (and more compelling to me) story began. The real story was them coping with Murdoch's diagnosis of and decline due to Alzheimer's disease. That was the heart of the book.

I think this resonated for me because I had an opportunity in my life to go through a widow and widowers group in my 30s. It was a shame it took the death of a loved one to get there. Ironically, tragic as it was the class was an amazing life affirming, love affirming, experience.

Unlike me, most of the other folks in our survivors group had helped their spouses and partners through a long lingering terminal disease. Each of their stories was, like Elegy for Iris, a very touching and tragic love story. The participants knew in the end they would not live happily ever after and love endured.

Bailey writes about how in their youth they took marriage for granted and in the end, he said, marriage took them for granted. Lastly, my mom had Alzheimers and I could relate to this too.

I will admit my bias due to my own life story. I found it to be a good and powerful book that resonated for me.

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### Estelle says

In this poignant memoir, looking back to their meeting, "courtship" and marriage, Bayley eloquently describes his marriage to Iris Murdoch as separateness, yet togetherness, each pursuing their illustrious academic careers. Never overly romantic but never estranged, it is a comfortable companionship, made up of common interests - a swim in the river (they take their honeymoon on the continent searching for rivers to

swim in, with delightful and comical experiences), radio broadcasts at lunchtime and walks in the spring. As dementia sets in, Bayley becomes Iris' sole caretaker. He writes about the delights, anxieties and anger he experiences as she descends into Alzheimer's disease and how it somehow makes them much closer. His literary style is reflected in the elegantly constructed sentences, and myriad references to authors (many of whom the couple knew personally) and English literature.

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### **Diana says**

This was for me an introduction to Iris Murdoch. It was sad in a number of ways, firstly to witness such a brilliant woman becoming a shell of the person she was due to her Alzheimer's. I found the one-sided adoration of John for Iris sad, the fact that he could gloss over her apparent affairs, the squalid state of their house etc.

Once I started reading, I looked up references to people mentioned in the book, photos of their house and I've reserved a few of Ms Murdoch's books from the library. I guess I'll have to find out for myself if she was as brilliant as John thought she was.

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### **Peggy says**

I had to switch my four stars to three, and I'm sure it's worth four or even five stars to most readers. It's just that I had difficulty getting through the random memories and ruminations John Bayley brings to this book. Again, I lay the blame on myself rather than the author who is obviously learned, highly intelligent and intellectual (although he spends much time downplaying or protesting this). It sometimes reads like a literary circles name-dropping fest, other times is so introspective into the sort of in-depth regions of their romance, love, life together, mutual mishmash life in diminished world of Alzheimers. It was rough traipsing, a bit of a go to even finish it.

That said, Bayley has a wonderful command of the language, a careful employment of words, phrases, images. I don't guess I need to approve of his lifestyle, theirs; I probably would have enjoyed this couple very much indeed, as so many wonderful people did and have. For some reason he insists on making them seem a bit scruffy and off-putting. How many times did he need to mention their lack of interest in personal hygiene? So maybe it's just a little more personal than I needed on one level, and maybe that's also part of its charm as well. And maybe it really is worth four stars even if I didn't really LOVE it, just sort of... well, loved PARTS of it.

I'm glad I do own the copy I read. I think I'll have to go back some and find parts that are great. I can already feel that it's going to shift in my mind, that I'm going to be living with John and Iris a while. I've already quoted him in a piece of my own writing of memoirs. I'm definitely going to be reading some Iris Murdoch soon, and I'll probably follow up with some of the other authors he mentions, Barbara Pym for instance.

Okay, four stars it is!

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## **Laura says**

*From IMDb:*

*True story of the lifelong romance between novelist Iris Murdoch and her husband John Bayley, from their student days through her battle with Alzheimer's disease.>*

*Cast:*

*Kate Winslet ... Young Iris Murdoch*

*Hugh Bonneville ... Young John Bayley*

*Judi Dench ... Iris Murdoch*

*Jim Broadbent ... John Bayley*

*Penelope Wilton ... Janet Stone*

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*It's curious to see 2 characters from Downton Abbey, Hugh Bonneville and Penelope Wilton playing together in this movie. And Kate Winslet and Judi Dench are splendid playing the role of Iris.*

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## **Kilian Metcalf says**

What an unpleasant and actually repellent read this is. I love Iris Murdoch's fiction and hoped to get some insights into her personality and writing process. Instead the book is a hodge-podge of unrelated anecdotes, mostly about Bayley's needs and interests. Do I really need to know that housekeeping, gardening, and personal hygiene were not a priority for them? Or that he had to wrestle her to get her clothing off so he could put clean clothes on her dirty body? Ugh. I know that living with an Alzheimer's patient is no picnic, but surely after a life together, he could have put the focus elsewhere. All the famous people who wrote cover blurbs either don't mind this or they read a completely different book.

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## **Dominic says**

I only made it halfway through, but the first half's description of John and Iris' early relationship and early marriage felt intimate and very real. As a complete romantic, I found these pages simply lovely. I have not read any Iris Murdoch novels, but I want to now--and I plan on revisiting this book in the future someday (after I've read these novels). I'm just not ready to read about Iris' debilitating Alzheimer's and the strain it put on their marriage. Promising memoir!

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## **Ruth Bonetti says**

So sad to read of the slow loss of a brilliant mind. Does it engage the "use it or lose it" (crosswords, foreign languages) line?

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## **Kris - My Novelesque Life says**

## 3 STARS

"A melodious, affecting tribute to one of the greatest writers of her time--now stricken with Alzheimer's disease--by her devoted husband of over forty years "I was living in a fairy story--the kind with sinister overtones and not always a happy ending--in which a young man loves a beautiful maiden who returns his love but is always disappearing into some unknown and mysterious world, about which she will reveal nothing." So writes John Bayley about his wife, Iris Murdoch, considered by many to be one of the greatest living writers in the English-speaking world." (From Amazon)

The reader can feel the love John had for his wife, Iris and respect he had for her not only as a spouse and writer but as a person. A great memoir. I enjoyed the movie as well (Kate Winslet and Judi Dench as Iris).

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### **Karen says**

This was a hard book to read, but not for the reason I thought it would be. It wasn't Iris Murdoch Alzheimer's disease that was so hard to read about. It was John Murdoch's response to it that was hard. My father died of Alzheimer's disease last June; he had been an aerospace engineer, and had had a sharp, quick sense of humor. It was very hard to see my father regress into himself, but my interaction with my father wasn't about me. It wasn't about trying to make my father understand who I was, or to make him give me a smile, or to force him to confront a semblance of reality. My relationship with my father in his final days was about him. Although John Murdoch can disguise his selfishness with beautifully crafted language, his relationship with Iris in her final days was all about him.

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### **Rebecca Brothers says**

I read Iris Murdoch in college with my professor Dr. Roberta White. I loved Murdoch's brilliantly smart fiction. When Dr. White told us the author had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, my thoughts immediately jumped to the loss we would all have as her brain collapsed in on itself. I was dating the man who would become my husband, and I knew his grandfather had early-onset of the same disease. I had watched him try to talk to his grandfather, to reach the man he loved so much, and I had watched his attempts become more and more futile and painful. This book is written by Murdoch's husband and I couldn't have read it at a better time. We had just seen my husband's grandfather and it was the first time he hadn't spoken to us at all. In this book, Murdoch's husband tells the painful tale of caring for someone with this disease. But the best part for me was when he said that you have to accept that this is the person you love, and they are different, and they are still there. As a caregiver you have to forgive yourself for your grief and your impatience. It was a great comfort.

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### **Frandy says**

Touching memoir written by Iris Murdoch's spouse, John Bayley, is a splendid window into her writing. It makes one want to read more of her books and wish there could be more. The author handles her darkening days fraught with Alzheimer's disease with grace, honesty and love.

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### **Jamie Collins says**

John Bayley's memoir about his wife, award-winning author Iris Murdoch, who was still alive at the time he wrote this - but her mind was almost entirely lost to Alzheimer's Disease.

I picked this up because I liked the movie; I watched the movie not because I'd ever heard of Iris Murdoch but because it stars Judi Dench and Jim Broadbent as the older Iris and John, and Kate Winslet and Hugh Bonneville as the younger versions. That's a great team of actors, and the movie is good.

I found the book a bit unsatisfying. It's a short, disorganized collection of Bayley's memories of his wife, interspersed with melancholy bits about her current child-like existence and his frustration with it.

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### **James says**

John Bayley's memoir of his life with Iris Murdoch, the renowned writer and philosopher is a beautiful but sad story. His love for her leads him to a luminous memoir of her brilliant life and their love for each other. He poignantly describes the dimming of her brilliance due to Alzheimer's disease. *Elegy for Iris* is a story about the ephemeral beauty of youth and the sobering reality of what it means to grow old; filled with touching moments that seem almost too personal but are beautiful anyway. A literary romance was what they had for their years together.

I was impressed at the writing ability of John Bayley, it was something they shared, yet unlike Iris he remained primarily a critic of fiction and literature. Most of the memoir is devoted to happier days but in some sense the final weeks and days of her life, while sad, are treated with an even greater beauty and serenity. For those who have enjoyed the novels of Iris Murdoch this is a wonderful testament to her life and career.

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### **Cygnus says**

We have seen this movie in school and had to use it to explain the content of our classes. I read the book in the hopes to get a bit more from it and perhaps to understand the character a bit better. However, I found the characters in the movie so different than the ones I read about in this book, that - to me - I cannot compare both.

I find the literary critics of this book somewhat confusing. They all talk of this great love, but that's not what I see in this. I felt a bit uneasy when reading about the relationship between John and Iris, as if the love was coming mostly from one direction. In her dementia, Iris does say she loves John, but often it doesn't feel that way. Their marriage somehow seemed to just happen, because it seemed the appropriate thing to do, not because a great love was present. The fact that Iris seems to have other relationships at the same time puts me off. Also, the John in the book, apart from the fact that he seems to idolize Iris, is much more likeable than he is in the movie and Iris much less so. He also keeps saying good things about Iris and hardly a bad thing but such a perfect person just doesn't exist. It makes me wonder what he doesn't know about her or is reluctant to share with us.

As far as the writing is concerned, he writes in a fluent way but I found the constant jumps in time and musing about the past or literature or philosophy slowed the story down a lot. He keeps referring to things he read in other books, but I didn't want to read about that, I wanted to read what happened. I think not half of the book is a story about their life and the rest are thoughts on various things. To me, that made the book rather hard to read.

All in all, I might read it again in the far future, if only to check out some of the other books he mentions. But I probably wouldn't if it weren't for that. I might try some of Iris' books though, to see what the fuss is all about ;-)

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### **Christopher Roth says**

This book was already known to me as the memoir of Iris Murdoch's descent into Alzheimer's, written by her husband while she was still alive. (Never saw the movie.) I was less disturbed by the tragedy of Alzheimer's than by the unsettling dynamic between Iris and John and what it reveals about each of them—most of it revealed unwittingly by the author. It was already known that she continued to have a richly populated bisexual sex life after marrying John, but this is not what bothered me: after all, for intellectuals of that generation, open marriage was the default option. John is quite frank about this, and doesn't complain about it a bit, at least not overtly, but also gives no hint that he himself indulged. This might mean one of three things: either he did indulge but is rather coy about it (unlikely: you'd think he'd at least MENTION that their arrangement was symmetrical, if only to deflect anticipated questions about that), or he had no interest in doing so himself (which would explain his silence), or their arrangement was not symmetrical: she was allowed to sleep around, and he wasn't—which would be reprehensible on her part. I'm inclined toward this last interpretation, if only because—and here this becomes relevant to all the other aspects of the book—Bayley is clearly such a simpering milquetoast and is clearly so in thrall to Iris's force of personality, even in her dementia. (I'm reminded of the old man in the Jack Nicholson film "Five Easy Pieces"—who was such a domineering father in his prime that even in his utter incapacitation from dementia his mere bodily presence keeps his children terrified of displeasing him.) The book skips back and forth with the demoralizing diaper-changing rituals of daily life alone with Iris in her dementia—about which he keeps a stiff upper lip with occasional bursts of ill temper which leave him ashamed and guilty—and reminiscences about her past. A first section about how they met sets the stage, casting him as an innocent virginal schoolboy swept into the world of a glitteringly popular and sexually rapacious cult figure. Even that early on, one wonders what she sees in him. Much of the middle of the book tells, in dull detail, of lots of random tender moments and embarrassingly cute in-jokes between them, even relaying the most mundane details—which dish she used for what meal—the way teenagers do when they're first in love and worshipful, not realizing how these minutiae will bore everyone else. Bayley clearly still thinks Iris is the most alluring and interesting woman who ever lived, and himself barely worthy of her. More creepily, he doesn't manage to tell these anecdotes in a way that the least bit suggests that she felt anything similar toward him. Nor does he sell himself to the reader in a way that leaves us imagining she possibly could. A theme throughout his narration of the marriage is her taking off repeatedly to spend time away from him, mostly having affairs with Holocaust survivors, refugee intellectuals, Nobel laureates and the like—or all three in the case of Elias Canetti, whom Bayley does not name, though he's not at all concealing who it is, since he gives the old man's credentials and even lists some of his book titles, referring to him only as "the magelike Dichter" and such locutions. It's like hearing Dobby the house-elf talk about Voldemort. Nor does he say that Iris actually slept with Canetti. He recounts one meeting between him and Canetti, in which Canetti treats him like something he just found stuck on the bottom of his shoe. This is not reported with anything like anger or indignation; Bayley seems to feel this is in the natural order of things. Most readers with a casual knowledge of

Murdoch's life will know that she had a decades-long love affair with Canetti, and that he is the inspiration for a type of character that appears in each of her novels: a charismatic but vaguely sinister and almost superhuman Svengali- or Manson-like emotional and intellectual manipulator that is the center of some circle of enthralled admirers. The fact that Murdoch would be attracted to someone like that—understandable, in a way, if that's your trip—but then keep Bayley as a husband does not reflect very well on her. She didn't want a husband so much as a pet. A pet who shuffles around in slippers and makes tea for her after she comes home all tired from an exhausting vacation on the Mediterranean with an actually \*interesting\* man. It is not clear that Bayley understands how sad this dynamic is, or that Murdoch herself comes across as a pitiless Canetti-type emotional user as well. Some reviewers interpret this book as a kind of revenge against a now-helpless Murdoch by revealing all of her infidelities. But this interpretation overestimates the English capacity for understatement, attributes to Bayley a level of subtlety that he clearly doesn't have, and also misunderstands the mores of that generation, for whom that kind of free love is not technically infidelity—nor, crucially, anything about her life that was ever at all a secret. Plus, it assumes—incorrectly, I think—that Bayley would have the balls to stand up to Iris like that—even when she can't say a word in protest about it. Ultimately, this book is very depressing, but it's the narrator that is pitiful, not the subject.

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### **Cindy Jacobsen says**

This 'elegy' (a poem of serious reflection, typically a lament for the dead) certainly is a reflection of a life gone as it tells the story of Iris Murdoch by her husband John Bayley. It rambles around the years circling back to her Alzheimer's disease. For a relatively short book it felt like it would never end.

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### **Audrey says**

Elegy for Iris is charming, heart-wrenching, and ultimately inspiring. John Bayley writes with great love about the quirky courtship and subsequent marriage he shared with his wife, the novelist Iris Murdoch. I was struck by what seemed to be Mr Bayley's own unreliable voice as narrator. I found myself aching to hear Iris's version of events. Of course that is the tragedy at the heart of the book; Iris Murdoch succumbed to Alzheimer's Disease. Bayley's great contribution are wry descriptions of his very particular coping methods as the spouse of a dementia sufferer. He has his own trials as he helplessly watches his formerly brilliant wife almost literally disappear. Nature, and especially water images abound; couching the courting and aging couple in the soft forgiveness of pools, rivers, and the fluidity of their mutual love. A sweet, beautiful book.

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### **Bryan says**

John Bayley was told by a woman in similar circumstances to himself that “being married to someone with Alzheimer's disease is like being chained to a corpse”. Unfortunately in this self-indulgent memoir of 40 years of marriage to Iris Murdoch it seems that Bayley himself has been the perpetual corpse, meekly and dutifully trailing along after his formidable wife and responding to her every demand. Even when she fully succumbs to dementia he fails to respond to the frustrations of the situation, preferring to relish his role of carer for an endearing “idiot child”. While beautifully written and obviously intended to be a tale of a great and enduring love, I found Bayley's imbecilic doting increasingly annoying. I have always been a great fan of Murdoch's novels, but I am unsure about how much I would have liked the author herself – particularly in

her seeming ability to turn an intelligent man into such a pathetic milksop! Perhaps Bayley's slipping occasionally into past tense when referring to Iris, despite the fact that she was still alive when he wrote these memoirs, indicates some kind of subconscious longing to finally be free? he must have been so tempted to lace her tea with rat poison!!!!

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