



Wisdom in Nonsense: Invaluable Lessons from My Father

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I broke all the rules that my dad gave me. Acclaimed novelist Heather O'Neill structures her book around ten key lessons she learned in childhood from her father. Wryly humorous and generous, she shares memories and stories that illustrate why it is good to steal things, why one should learn to play the tuba, and why one should never keep a journal. Her unusual mentors went well beyond her janitor father to include ex-bank robbers and homeless men. These eccentric teachers taught her about the circuitous alleyways of semantics and the depth of moral philosophy. O'Neill's intimate recollections make *Wisdom in Nonsense* the perfect companion to her widely praised debut novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals* (HarperCollins).

Wisdom in Nonsense: Invaluable Lessons from My Father Details

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From Reader Review Wisdom in Nonsense: Invaluable Lessons from My Father for online ebook

Heather says

I really enjoyed this. I picked up this book on an impulse while browsing at the library. I thought it was going to be a poetry book but it did not disappoint with what it turned out to be. I thought the stories were full of humor and heart. I especially like how the author broke up some of the stories to remind people that her father was not a Robin Hood and was a flawed man. These stories speak to me as a Canadian. I would highly recommend this book and am trying to find the other works by this author.

Prairie Fire Review of Books says

Review from prairiefire.ca. Review by Erin Della Mattia.

Heather O'Neill's *Wisdom in Nonsense: Invaluable Lessons from My Father* begins with a piece of fatherly advice that must have sounded, to the young budding writer, as a challenge: "Lesson One, Never Keep a Diary" (3). O'Neill tells us that while chronicling the daily events of her life made it "seem worthy of a novel," she suspects that it made her father, Buddy, feel "as though he were under surveillance"—the diaries could house unseemly information which could be used against him by a court, or by O'Neill herself later in life, to judge him. The lesson, of course, did not stick: "no matter how many journals he threw out, I would continue to write in them. I'm writing in one now" (3). Taking us into a cheeky "meta" moment of the eternal "now" in which O'Neill will forever defy her father's advice, *Wisdom in Nonsense* offers up a selection of life lessons given to O'Neill as a child which come to act not as hard-and-fast rules but as guideposts to an occasionally odd-ball yet always sincere process of reflection on childhood, writing, and the father-daughter bond. Originally delivered as part of the CLC Kreisel Lecture Series, which aims to highlight the different specificities of the contemporary Canadian experience and act as a critical forum dedicated to Canadian literature, this slim volume contains thirteen lessons over forty pages and would be most enjoyable for the more devoted fans of O'Neill's work, who will appreciate it as a companion piece to her fiction as well as to her earlier work of poetry, *two eyes are you sleeping*. Fatherhood and father-daughter relationships are, of course, common themes in her work, from Baby's drug-addicted father Jules in *Lullabies for Little Criminals* to Etienne Tremblay, the fallen folksinger and absent-father of twins Nicolas and Nouschka in *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night*. Familiar too is the backdrop of the Montreal underworld, with its petty crime and spectacles of urban eccentricity placed alongside a sort of impoverished domesticity—the world of O'Neill's childhood—which here has moments of magic created by Buddy O'Neill's persistent attention to mood, such as when he turns off the lights to enjoy a fondue dinner because he thought "you could only eat fondue in the dark, as though it were a campfire to scare away minuscule wolves" (21). Reading about her connection with her father and the way in which they lived on the margins of society comes to illuminate O'Neill's ability to depict the strange, perhaps even unexpected beauty of such bonds in her fiction. Not to suggest that O'Neill's fiction should be read biographically, but rather that her experiences of an atypical father-daughter relationship informs her writing. For instance, as mirrored by Baby's mothering of Jules in *Lullabies*, in *Wisdom in Nonsense* there is a recognition of a mutual dependency that can develop in close familial relationships. O'Neill stresses how much her father wanted her to love him, which he admittedly expressed in odd ways, such as requiring her to never watch a Paul Newman movie (Lesson Twelve) because he wanted her to think he could've been a better actor than Newman if he had been given the chance.

As much as O'Neill inevitably breaks all of the lessons given to her by her father—she does watch and enjoy a Paul Newman movie though has “never tried his salad dressing out of respect for [her] father” (33)—interesting moments emerge as her reflections on her father allow her to simultaneously reflect on her development as a writer. We get to trace, as it were, the influence of a legendary Montreal gangster on the child who would go on to become one of the most popular writers in contemporary Canadian literature. This experience is revelatory of the creation of her signature mythos, so to speak—that imagined cityscape in which it becomes logical for cats to wear bowties and disappear into mirrors, and where drug-addled pontificating becomes valued as philosophy and any object becomes worthy of a museum if you cherish it enough. Lesson Eleven, “It’s the Thought That Counts,” for instance, begins with an image of unsigned birthday cheques collected in a vinyl wallet hidden in an underwear drawer, waiting for the day that Buddy has the funds to sign them. As a child O'Neill knew that her father wanted to give her as much as he could, even if it wasn't feasible. This lesson then opens up to her love for the Anne of Green Gables series, books given to her by her father, and her “desperate, wild, brave, obsessive manner” of reading which led to the creation of “an odd aesthetic that incorporated [her] childhood reality and the high art of literary fiction” (28, 29). O'Neill similarly reflects on her father's friends—a group of homeless men, drug addicts, and ex-cons—whose very existence seems to have had a role in the formation of the author's celebrated creativity and empathy, as she wonders: “Was it because I read a lot as a kid that I had the literary skills to appreciate these characters? Or was it those characters who caused me to read in a different way? It was probably an intersection of both” (20-21). Ironically, though she may not have followed his rules, O'Neill has fulfilled her father's hope that she record his life advice to share with others, “The Pensées of Buddy O'Neill” as he terms it (29). And while Wisdom in Nonsense may not act as “the foundation of a universal school of thought” as her father had intended, it remains, above all else, a humorous and touching elegy to Buddy O'Neill.

Victoria Shepherd says

A charming and humourous “how to” book.

Lata says

Heather O'Neill's father had some funny ideas, and this tiny book of O'Neill's memories (originally delivered as a lecture as part of the Canadian Literature Centre Kriesel Lecture series) of things he had said had me grinning. He seemed like a character, and was clearly quite the influence on his daughter.

Nikki Stafford says

If you've ever read Heather O'Neill's fiction, you'll know the father figures are always fascinating, dark, and deeply flawed people. I've seen O'Neill speak and she usually has some amusing stories of being raised by her father and how his personality bled into her books. This little volume is a lecture she gave, so you can read it quickly, but it talks a lot about her relationship growing up with her father. I hope some day she writes a much longer memoir about growing up, because the little bit he came to life on the pages was dazzling.

Dani says

This was a short one. Very short! O'Neill gave this speech at the University of Alberta and I actually listened to half of it on CBC Radio. Her delivery was fantastic and I only regret that I tuned in late to the broadcast. Thankfully they also released her speech as a book. Phew!

I've never read any of her other work but I am sorely tempted. Her prose had such warmth but was also dastardly funny. I kept interrupting my poor boyfriend's own reading to read aloud bits of the speech! O'Neill captures her father and her upbringing so clearly, I felt like I was seeing it on a shelf along with all the garbage/treasure/knickknacks he had given her over the years.

Jennifer says

In which Heather O'Neill reminisces about her bizarre childhood, and her equally as bizarre (yet deeply loved) father. Everything she writes is pure magic.

Sherry Monger says

Heather O'Neill is one of my favourite authors - her quirky views on life constantly surprise and delight you as a reader. This little treasure trove of memories, helps to explain O'Neill's off beat, eccentric, somewhat skewed assessment of her environment. O'Neill's father - a janitor, thief (when not already in jail) and philosopher - passed on what he considered the essential lessons in life. The result is a bright young girl who has been admonished to never keep a diary (it can be used against you in court) and to accept the fact that she is ugly and move on..... also - she is to beware of clowns and understand that crime does pay. While there are hilarious, unbelievable lessons dutifully passed from parent to child, it would appear that O'Neill loved her Dad and her unconventional childhood.

Katie says

I've gotten to the place where I am scouring the internet for anything else that Heather O'Neill may have written.

I didn't like that other people were able to read "Anne of Green Gables". None of the other readers loved her the way I did. I wanted what we had to be exclusive. If she was a real person, she would have had to file a restraining order against me."

Finally, someone who can put it into words. :)

Zoom says

I love Heather O'Neill, and I'll read every single thing she writes for the rest of my life. This is a tiny true

book about the advice given to her by her father when she was a kid. It's funny, touching, and just a little bit sad. If you've read *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, you know there's more than a little dysfunction running through the O'Neill family's veins. That's what makes this 40-page book so worth reading.

Anne says

"Wisdom in Nonsense" is actually the text of the 2018 Henry Kriesel lecture that Heather O'Neill was invited to deliver and which the CBC broadcasts. It is freely available on the Net and definitely worth watching. As an unabashed Heather O'Neill fan I was delighted with this so-called novel about the wisdom her single-parent dad imparted to her as he was raising her. What was even more delightful is the understanding and acceptance that O'Neill expresses towards the unique circumstances in which she grew up. How many of us can say that our parent would routinely steal expensive cheese to round out a daughter's palate and in the process get banned from every purveyor of food in downtown Montreal? Not only is O'Neill a lip-slippy writer of some skill and talent - there is also generosity and wit and love in this tribute to her dad.

Jo-anne says

In only 40 pages, Heather O'Neil is able to share her love of and the life lessons she learned from her dad, who at one point she admits with full disclosure was an a**hole. "My dad was determined to take care of me properly. He made pancakes and cookies and sewed my clothes. He was actually good at that. He was a little worse at what he regarded as an integral part of parenting: the dispensing of life advice. But, nonetheless, it was one of his favourite things to do." What's not to love in a book that shares the advice "accept that you're ugly and move on", "learn to play the tuba", and "crime does pay".

R K says

I fell in love with Heather O'Neill's charm and wit from her book, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*. She has such a vivacious outlook on life due to her upbringing. We are lucky to have such an author in the list of Canadian authors; Canadian voices.

This little book is exactly what the title states. Bits and bobs of wisdom passed down to O'Neill from her father and now to us. It's definitely something to be taken with a pinch of salt, but seeing her father's fortitude to not be taken down by anything is...well...something else.

[Review Continued Here](#)

Jessie says

My only wish is that it was longer.

Brandon Forsyth says

A totally charming little book about a very particular father/daughter relationship, and, more generally, the ways our parents both mess us up and give us everything. I laughed, I cried, I wanted more.
