



## A Plea for Eros: Essays

*Siri Hustvedt*

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## A Plea for Eros: Essays Siri Hustvedt

From the author of the international bestseller *What I Loved*, a provocative collection of autobiographical and critical essays about writing and writers.

Whether her subject is growing up in Minnesota, cross-dressing, or the novel, Hustvedt's nonfiction, like her fiction, defies easy categorization, elegantly combining intellect, emotion, wit, and passion. With a light touch and consummate clarity, she undresses the cultural prejudices that veil both literature and life and explores the multiple personalities that inevitably inhabit a writer's mind. Is it possible for a woman in the twentieth century to endorse the corset, and at the same time approach with authority what it is like to be a man? Hustvedt does. Writing with rigorous honesty about her own divided self, and how this has shaped her as a writer, she also approaches the works of others--Fitzgerald, Dickens, and Henry James--with revelatory insight, and a practitioner's understanding of their art.

## A Plea for Eros: Essays Details

Date : Published December 27th 2005 by Picador (first published 2005)

ISBN : 9780312425531

Author : Siri Hustvedt

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Psychology, Female Authors

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# From Reader Review A Plea for Eros: Essays for online ebook

## Teresa says

I suppose I am drawn to Siri Hustvedt's writings, because I am interested in the same things she is: memory and place; the nature of art; Henry James; *Our Mutual Friend*; Dickens; and 19th-century English literature in general, all of which (and more) she addresses in this collection. I relate to her descriptions of her inner world, especially those from when she was a child and an adolescent. But Hustvedt is a lot smarter than I am, so I'm happy to have my outlook on these topics expanded by her.

When this book came out I was excited, because I love her earlier collection, *Yonder: Essays*. Upon opening this book, I was disappointed to see that the first three essays are repeats from the earlier book. I understand why her publisher reissued them, as the three 'reruns' are wonderful -- the essay titled "Yonder" is my favorite -- and I'm guessing the first collection is now officially out-of-print, plus she'd become more known since the publication of *What I Loved*.

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## Yulia says

A great book to read after *The Blindfold*, it covers a range of topics, including the boundaries and puzzles necessary for eroticism to survive ("A Plea for Eros"), the mask one must put on to survive in a crowded city and the benefits of sometimes lifting that mask ("Living with Strangers"), and the ambiguity of the distinction between males and females and how this false dichotomy helps her as a writer and as a grown adult understanding her own family (>"Being a Man"). Perhaps not a great book to read in one sitting, but worth keeping around you. Beautifully expressed, as always.

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## Holly says

The earliest of Hustvedt's essay collections (2006). Cerebral but also extremely personal. Overarching themes include identity, family, memory, gender identity, personhood and the self - especially the boundaries/fluidity between idea of the self and perception of the Other.

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## Charlotte says

This is an interesting collection of brief personal essays and literary criticism. Intriguing arguments and astute observations are juxtaposed with other claims that I find kind of irritating: from Dad's point of view, this is the optimal mixture for maximal engaging-ness, and I can't say I disagree.

Hustvedt uses a lot of psychoanalytic lit crit, which in the hands of other critics I often find un compelling. Somehow, though, the approach feels fruitful here. Her essay on Henry James's "Bostonians" gave me second thoughts about a book that I originally despised, and I enjoyed what she had to say about "The Great Gatsby." The essay "Charles Dickens and the Morbid Fragment," about Dickens's book "Our Mutual Friend," spoke to me particularly, although I've never read the book in question.

As far as her more personal essays, I didn't like some of her claims about 9/11 (does the death of some firefighters from your local fire station \*really\* mean that you, personally, were \*directly\* affected, Siri??), but I think her observations on life in New York City are some of the best I've read.

Thank you, Robin Filipczak, for teaching me to use the Denver Public Library's interbranch delivery system, so I could get this book conveniently delivered to me. :)

By the way, if anyone knows how to get a print of the painting that is on the front cover--it's by Alan Baker--please let me know. I really like it.

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### **Anna T. Wilcks says**

40% vildt inspirerende 60% kunstanalyse som jeg intet kender til og ingen holdning har til

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### **Kate Elliott says**

I feel like the title and the essay it refers to are not really very emblematic of the whole collection. I really enjoyed this work-- from her tales of childhood to the later chapters which are pretty much lit crit infused with soul.

However, I did resent having it look like I was reading a bodice-ripper on the bus.

Good book

Bad cover.

Bad title.

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### **Marc says**

"What I loved" by Siri Hustvedt was a revelation for me. That's why I wanted to read this collection of earlier published essays. Hustvedt shows she is a very self-conscious and gracious observant of the world (cf the essay about New York, 1 year after 9/11), but foremost of herself. I especially like the opening essay "Yonder", about the unreachable area between here and there, that she relates to her migration background (Norwegian), but also to her literary work. The title essay "A Plea for Eros" is a well-thought-out warning at puritan feminism to not underestimate or neglect the fundamental ambiguity and ubiquity of sexual feelings. In the final essay, Hustvedt gives us a self-analysis that to my taste is a bit too exhibitionistic, and thus a rather uncomfortable read. I didn't read the literary essays that are included in this collection.

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### **Jens says**

First things first, Siri Hustvedt writes beautifully (the German translation reads already very smoothly and I'm sure reading it in English would only improve my impression) and her intelligence is apparent on almost every page. In short the book is amazing.

Nonetheless, the fact that she is obviously as smart as she writes makes me judge her a lot harsher than I would judge other peoples writings, which gets particularly tricky when considering the personal nature of most of her essays in this collection. What do I dislike? I think she is blatantly wrong more often than not, I disagree with almost everything she brings up when she ventures into the land of science, where she reduces complex problems into oversimplified statements of one or two supposed authorities in the field, who she likes, mostly, as it appears because the authorities statements fit nicely into her story. It gets even worse when she reduces matters solely to her personal one. It doesn't really matter whether Hustvedt talks belittling about numbers - as it is ever so popular (and infuriates me personally) especially in the intellectual literary classes - and the importance of algebra (and the ever present subtle maybe even subconscious connotation of "but who needs it anyhow, words are what is truly beautiful and the artist tool"), she starts to dissect literature to a point (which always bothered me in school) where I have not the shadow of a doubt in my mind that none of the interpretations she brings up were even intended by the author, or she digresses into the world of psychology saying in one line no one cares much about the Freudian view these days, only to progress to dissect a dream in much a way that would have made the father of psychoanalysis happy. One might wonder why I deem this book amazing as I seem to constantly disagree with Hustvedt's opinions, well, it's simple, she always redeems herself, often in the next sentence after uttering the statement that would infuriate me, after dissecting Henry James, she'd go on talking about her Ph.D. defense and how she was asked by the committee whether she believed that James was aware of all which she saw in his work and her answer would be a simple: No (it would get more tricky, as the important part is aware as in conscious about it and she would go on explaining about her notion of writing and expressing the subconscious of the writer). Her psychological digressions would often be backed by very personal (childhood) experiences and even the apparent belittling of numbers is nullified when she goes on to explain her personal struggles in her childhood with the evil "minus sign" (and general problems with numbers). Moreover, Hustvedt makes it all points clear that she's portraying her personal opinion and she's never trying to act like an authority on the matter.

So, her opinions are as far from my own as possible (in many cases) but isn't that the best one can expect out of any book? To challenge one's conceptions, feelings, and thoughts?

I'll stay at 3/5 for this book for now but it might as well be a 5/5, I will wait till after I read some of her novels and then, potentially, revise my statement.

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## **Pallida says**

5 stars for Yonder. The rest I enjoyed, but already they fade. Maybe since I read them while eavesdropping on a plane (half helplessly, half on purpose). Yonder I read on a beautiful morning, stretched in a shaft of sunlight, alone, on a bed with white sheets, a stack of books newly acquired, a french pastry on a little plate, and a juice my wife thoughtfully brought me before thoughtfully fucking off. It was exquisite. A perfect moment of glory.

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## **Deea says**

4.5\*

Whether she talks about memory, the self, passions, feelings or words, Siri's essays from this volume really hit home with me. I could not help but highlight lots and lots of fragments from this book because they could mirror ideas that have been fleeting through my mind at times, ideas that I never could quite grasp.

She talks about places that live in our mind once we have left them in the essay/short story called “Yonder” which is my favorite from the collection. She talks about how we imagine them before we arrive and how “they are seemingly called out of nothing to illustrate a thought or a story”. She talks about things that stop being random objects once they are connected to a story, a person or a feeling. She talks about disparate memories that are very vivid in her mind while other more significant details are totally left out, making me wonder what the mind’s criteria of selection for remembering things are. She talks about her grandparents and her parents, about memories and time, about reading and seeing.

*“The place of reading is a kind of yonder world, a place that is not here nor there, but made up of the bits and pieces of experience in every sense, both real and fictional, two categories that become harder to separate the more you think about them.”*

In “A Plea for Eros”, she explores what makes us fall in love with some particular persons and not with others. And what exactly creates attraction.

*“A combination of biology, personal history, and a cultural miasma of ideas creates attraction. The fantasy lover is always hovering above or behind or in front of the real lover, and you need both of them.”*

In one of the essays she analyzes the subtle connection between words, memory and the self by applying her knowledge from psychology and neurology on Dickens’ characters that seem mad or seem to have a shattered inner world. “This story we call the self and articulate as I, Dickens tells us, is fraught and fragile, and we must fight to keep it together.” I thought that her way of applying concepts from science on characters from fiction was brilliant.

*“As the connective tissue of time, memory is certainly essential to the internal narrative we create for ourselves.”*

The essays about Great Gatsby and Henry James’s The Bostonians did not resonate much with me, the former because I am not a fan of Great Gatsby and the latter because I have not read the book, but I still could extract some really good ideas from them.

I really liked the last essay where she talks about how she met Paul Auster and fell for him and about how she would spend hours and hours in the library (I probably really liked this essay because this also really hit home with me).

*“In college I retreated to the library. I have always loved libraries – the quiet, the smell, the expectation of imminent discovery. In the next book I will find it – some unspeakable pleasure or startling revelation or extraordinary nuance I had never felt or thought of before.”*

“Some words, sentences, and phrases sit forever in the mind like brain tattoos.” And so do most of Siri’s ideas expressed in this book of essays.

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## **Bunnyhugger says**

Siri Hustvedt is such a beautiful and evocative writer. (Her first novel, The Blindfold, had a huge impact on me). This is a collection of 12 essays written from 1995 to 2004. I love the way she seamlessly weaves imagination with reality - for me there is exhilaration at discovering someone who captures the inner world

so well (or at least mine!) My favorite essays were "Being A Man", "9/11 or One Year Later" and "Notes on a Wounded Self." I didn't enjoy her literary criticism as much, finding it a bit dry - I think she is best when she sticks to the personal. All in all, I'd highly recommend this book.

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### **Charlotte J. says**

I read 'Living, Thinking, Looking' about a year ago, and fell in love with Hustvedt as an essayist, loving her already as a novelist. During my recent trip to Paris, I stumbled upon 'A Plea for Eros' in Shakespeare and Co., and had to buy it. The book itself will always be connected to Paris for me now - from the location-specific stamp in the front the staff kindly offered to memories of reading the first couple of essays aloud to my boyfriend lounged on benches on Place Dauphine and in the Cimetière Montparnasse, beneath the cenotaph to Baudelaire.

The essays themselves are on the whole not as academic in tone and focus as those of 'Living, Thinking, Looking', but weave between stories of Hustvedt's Norwegian-Midwestern upbringing, her life in New York City as both a young woman, writer, mother and wife, and stories of the stories of others - Fitzgerald, Dickens and Henry James. The language flows, as always, impeccably, and the tone ranges from the humorous to the grave without losing integrity.

Why, then, only four stars? After writing this, I'm not quite sure, but I've decided to stick to my gut feeling. I maybe do feel that this collection is less coherent than 'Living, Thinking, Looking', and apart from common threads and themes I do not see an overarching connection between all of them, making the collection somehow a little weaker. I do really recommend it, though, especially for the thoughtful and inspiring essay on Dickens and the side-splittingly funny "Eight Days in a Corset".

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### **Joan Winnek says**

The collection of essays is fascinating--the only one I didn't finish was "Charles Dicken and the Morbid Fragment," because I'm not into Dickens. I did skim it and was rewarded with some nuggets of psychological insight. I particularly enjoy Hustvedt's autobiographical writings. "9/11, of One Year Later" moved me to tears.

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### **Beanslover Jacob says**

I got this book because several of my friends read and loved the blazing world. I think I will still read that, but I found this collection of essays hard to get through. I liked all the stuff about childhood and family, but I didn't love the literary analysis stuff (I just don't usually like reading things that remind me of having to write essays for school, although hers are obviously better and more insightful than anything I ever wrote). Basically, I think she's brilliant and talented, but I couldn't get into the book as a whole. Maybe it's true that I was impressed by her writing but bored by the content?

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## Blair says

After nearly two months of trying to get through this, I'm giving up. I love Hustvedt - three of her novels are among my all-time favourites - and it isn't even that I thought there was anything specific wrong with any of the essays I read (although none of them made much of an impression on me either), I just couldn't summon up any enthusiasm or motivation to finish reading this.

I did make a lot of notes on this when I first started it, so might write a longer review later.

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From a Tumblr post, November 2014:

Siri Hustvedt has been near the top of my list of favourite novelists for quite a while, with three of her books among my all-time favourites. You might, therefore, assume (as I did myself) that I'd adore this collection of her essays, but you'd be wrong. I can't remember the last time I had such a struggle attempting to finish a book. I dragged myself through eight of the twelve essays and finally abandoned the whole thing in the middle of the piece about 9/11.

It's not at all that the book is bad or poorly written in any way, but I completely failed to get to grips with it or find anything about it that could sustain my interest. 'Yonder', which opens the book, I found interesting because it's personal - it's about Hustvedt's family, linking parts of her own history with ruminations on how and what we remember, formative understandings of language, and the significance of certain stories - but it was also slow going. I found the base of 'A Plea for Eros' (the essay) significantly underdeveloped; it basically says desire is complex and hard to understand or define in narrow terms, which is fine, and difficult to argue with, but I'd like to have seen further exploration of this idea. The anecdote that bookends this essay also seems trite at best, distasteful at worst. And apart from that, I can't even remember any of the others I read. My overall feeling was that there were some really interesting ideas and themes here, but I much prefer Hustvedt's exploration of them in fictional contexts to her essays.

Perhaps it's an issue that some of the pieces are dated - many were originally published in the late 1990s, and a few address issues that have become widely discussed in recent years, making their scope seem very limited now. I wondered for a while if the problem lay somewhere between my own reading abilities and the book's format, whether I'd just become so accustomed to only reading non-fiction in the form of online articles that I'd developed a faulty attention span. But I've recently read and enjoyed Roxane Gay's essay collection *Bad Feminist* and Jamie Bartlett's study of the internet, *The Dark Net*, so it would appear I am somewhat capable of reading longer volumes of non-fiction. Just not this one.

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