



**The Chronology of Water**  
A memoir

**Lidia Yuknavitch**

Introduction by

Chelsea Cain

*Author of *Cloud Atlas**

I've read this book, cover to cover, a dozen times.  
I am still reading it. And I will, most likely,  
return to it for inspiration and ideas, and out of  
sheer admiration, for the rest of my life.  
—Chuck Palahniuk, Author of *Pogy* and *Fight Club*



# The Chronology of Water

*Lidia Yuknavitch*

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Lidia Yuknavitch

## The Chronology of Water Lidia Yuknavitch

This is not your mother's memoir. In *The Chronology of Water*, Lidia Yuknavitch expertly moves the reader through issues of gender, sexuality, violence, and the family from the point of view of a lifelong swimmer turned artist. In writing that explores the nature of memoir itself, her story traces the effect of extreme grief on a young woman's developing sexuality that some define as untraditional because of her attraction to both men and women. Her emergence as a writer evolves at the same time and takes the narrator on a journey of addiction, self-destruction, and ultimately survival that finally comes in the shape of love and motherhood.

## The Chronology of Water Details

Date : Published April 12th 2011 by Hawthorne Books (first published March 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9780979018831

Author : Lidia Yuknavitch

Format : Paperback 310 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Biography, Feminism, Gltb, Queer, Biography Memoir, Lgbt, Womens, Language, Writing

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## From Reader Review The Chronology of Water for online ebook

**jo says**

this memoir is larger than life. lidia yuknavitch is larger than life. she is smart, funny, talented in about a thousand ways (she thinks the only thing she does well is swim but of course that's ridiculous), and a barrelfull of life. she's got so much life in her, she had to use gargantuan amounts of booze, drugs, and sex to put it all to sleep. and still, she didn't manage.

as a writer, she might annoy you. some of the things she says here annoyed me. i got annoyed when she wholesale-disissed 'n ditched academia. i got annoyed when she told me how to heal. i got annoyed when she celebrated the written word, especially her relationship to the written word. she knows she knows how to write, if you see what i mean. and, in fact, she does know how to write. but it's annoying that she tells you, more than once.

but here's something else, something that's so important, it may be the most important thing about this book. people with deep trauma don't have anything. most of all, they don't have a self. they don't have a walking self, a biking self, a reading self, a writing self, a swimming self. for the longest time, all lidia yuknavitch had were 1. a swimming self and 2. a fucking-up self. the swimming may have saved her life. i mean, she puts it right in the title of her book, right? in fact, she puts it *all over* her book!

so take someone like this woman, so brutalized in infancy and childhood and adolescence that she was left only with these two barely serviceable selves. one of them built -- self-confidence, strength, life -- the other killed. you know which one won. yet, this woman managed at some point, in some way, miraculously, to pull herself out of the dark and the must and the not-life. if you think about that, if you spend even a minute thinking about that, you stop being annoyed at her book, because you *know* that this book is literally her life. it's like you hold this book, you hold her. this bragging woman, this larger-than-life woman, is also a very fragile woman.

i got my book through interlibrary loan. my university didn't have a copy and my public library didn't have a copy. WHAT! i'll return the book to the library and, on the same day, order it from my local bookstore. then, next semester or the one after that, i'll assign it to my class. i teach two kind of classes: classes about trauma and the construction of mental pain (aka "mental illness"), and queer studies class. this book works in both. if you are reading this, lidia yuknavitch (i hope you are not), 35 people will buy your book. 36 with me. some will buy it used from the big amazonian beast, so count on 20-25. not bad, huh?

but i'm sure i'm not the only one assigning this book in class. here are a few reasons:

- \* it's beautiful
- \* it's as powerful as anything you've read
- \* it doesn't pigeonhole/define/categorize *anything*: not sexuality, not child abuse, not incest, not addiction, not redemption, not marriage, not writing, not new lives (this is a major selling point for me, this freedom from pre-established narratives)
- \* it's a fantastic read
- \* it's beautifully, gorgeously queer
- \* it's beautifully, gorgeously vulnerable and hurt and broken
- \* it's beautifully, painfully honest
- \* it's beautifully, achingly real (i wish i hadn't written achingly; so cliché)

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## Debbie says

Sometimes when something is so great, you don't dare try to touch it. You don't want to leave the clouds and come back down to reality, chop it up into little word pieces and throw them together to make a confined review. It just doesn't feel right. It threatens to take the magic away.

But I must come back to earth and try to describe what I felt about this book, just so I can spread the word. Many parts of her story read like a long prose poem, with amazing cadence and an ability to suck you in. It's not just poetry. Her stream-of-consciousness stanzas are secret pathways to her underbelly, which she exposes to the world fearlessly.

Yuknavitch reached into my psyche and turned something on. I don't know what that even means, but she pulled a switch. She made me see that without a doubt, art is the answer. Pain, suffering, confusion, fear, grief, and love are translated into astounding art, which just makes me shake my head in wonder. I need help describing how I feel, so I'm going to steal something from the intro (from a fan of the author):

“They say that alcoholics remember their first drink, that lightening feeling in your body that says yes-yes-let's feel-this-way-all-the-time. Well, I will always remember the first time I heard Lidia Yuknavitch read. I thought, this is how writing is supposed to be.”

Amen. This is how I felt, in spades.

A water theme prevails and she is so creative in weaving it through her story, it makes you shiver. Yuknavitch is a swimmer girl who is sexually abused as a child and who repeatedly tries to swim to safety. There is drug addiction, sex addiction, death, birth, rebirth. (Be warned, though, there is a lot of graphic sex.) But making a list of her experiences is ludicrous because it's the WAY she tells her story that makes the book so incredible. You hear her wail, you hear her scream, you hear her laugh, and you wince as you see her go giddily and carelessly down the path of self-destruction, trying to mask her pain and rid herself of it. Her story is raw, honest, edgy, and scary. And let's not forget bleak, though she does eventually find some peace and joy.

The few times she pauses her gorgeous stream-of-consciousness and comes up for air, she says something so wise it knocks your socks off, like this:

“The more a person recalls a memory, the more they change it. Each time they put it into language, it shifts. The more you describe a memory, the more likely it is that you are making a story that fits your life, resolves the past, creates a fiction you can live with.”

This book had a profound effect on me. It stirred up something good in my soul. Yuknavitch pulled me into sentences and her feelings that created them. Her sentences hum—vibrant and loud. It's sort of a raunchy, beatnik version of Virginia Woolf, but way more accessible. I can't believe I said that because honestly I can't even remember anything about Woolf. But in some weird and wonderful way, I have the same feeling of being wrapped up in her sentences and her art.

This book was so good, I don't want to pick up another one. I don't want to erase this feeling. And nothing else will be worthy.

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### **Debbie "DJ" says**

Incredible read! I have never read writing that is more beautiful, poetic, and profound. It is so rich, with words used in ways I have never seen or felt as deeply. This is a memoir that deals a lot with grief and sexual abuse. Sexual abuse that leads to severe overemphasis of the body. Lidia Yuknavitch's abuse at the hand of her father leads her down a path of extreme sexualization of her body. At times I did not know if I could read any further as the sex was so descriptive, so evocative, and massively out of control. Yet, I hung in there because this book simply would not let me go.

At an early age Lidia's father throws her into an icy lake to teach her to swim. This begins her life as a swimmer and her deep connection to water. It is her early escape and influences her life forever. Her writing is steeped in connections to it. It is through water that she loses herself and later finds herself. It showed me how sexual abuse leaves one with no self, and the journey to find that self is treacherous. I simply cannot due this book justice with my review other than to say it affected me deeply, and the author has laid herself bare, a truly heroic act.

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### **Brittany says**

This book is much too pretentious for its own good. I mean, if you like reading bullshit like 'I may have been crap at making a home and family, but I succeeded at building a wordhouse' or countless references to how we're all water and how often the author wet her pants as a child and how everything smells like urine oh my god my dead baby my dead baby return to the water what is punctuation maybe if I wasn't so obsessed with piss I would learn more about periods and how they are supposed to occur at least once a month

Then this book might be for you.

She name-drops fairly often, priding herself on being a young protege of Ken Kesey (supposedly because he thought she was hot at first, but then really really realized that she's a writer) and the lover of a feminist writer in Eugene, Oregon...

She spends so much time talking about what this book supposedly isn't that she really doesn't get to what it's supposed to be. Clearly a 'memoir' for people just like her, who want something profound to rise out of the ashes of words sloppily put on a page, often over and over.

Simply put, this was one of those books that I nearly did not finish, but soldiered through--looking down at the progress bar on my Kindle the whole time, and thanking all the powers that be that I didn't pay cover price for it.

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### **Peter Derk says**

The biggest change for me in turning 30 is that I've become a huge weeping pussy bitch.

I'm sorry. I don't mean to use those words, and I don't mean to use them like that. It's just that when I think about the way I am, when the talk is all inside, the junior high boy in me tries to take over a little bit. Adult

me knows these words aren't really supposed to be used like this. But the best adult me can do when the junior high boy is really raging is to at least pare the word "pussshole" down to "pussy." I'm trying.

I read most of The Chronology of Water in two places.

1) The bathtub in my apartment. Including lavender bubble bath. The store brand that comes in a giant bottle. It's bright purple. Pimp purple. Purple the inside of a porn limo purple. I don't know how much bubble bath to use. The first time I poured it in, the white foam spilled over the edge of the tub before the water got anywhere near the top. I'd never even thought about it, but I don't think I've ever in my life put bubbles into a bath tub before. I've been in bubble baths as a kid, but never concocted one on my own. I still don't have the ratio right. It's guess and check. I could ask my mom, but I don't really want to go pussy bitch in front of her.

The bubble bath is necessary. The bubble part, I mean. It cracked the code on sitting in the bath tub.

Here's the code:

- You have to take your entire naked body out of the equation, just floating there. Bubble screen.
- You have to start feeling the old where your body hurts and you're ready to let the warm water do something. Ready to wait.

Drinking a beer doesn't hurt either.

I sat reading The Chronology of Water in the bath tub more than once after the water went cold.

The other place I read a lot of this book,

2) A diner by my apartment.

This is where the weeping pussy bitch of a man really comes bursting out of the closet or the curtained bath tub or wherever he's been hiding.

Again, I'm so so sorry. For the pussy bitch stuff.

My mom has been making friends lately. We have breakfasts together, but the last couple of weeks she's had other stuff going on. This is good. It just means that The Chronology of Water has been my breakfast buddy the last couple weeks.

Which is how I end up sitting at a booth, old as hell couples at the booths around me, and I'm reading a book with a nude torso on the front, wiping my nose with the napkin, doing everything I can to keep a tear from busting right out of my left eye, the one that always cries first. Always. It's the one that sees better too. My eyes are different in the mirror, and the left is the one that looks smart. The sharp eye. The eye that stays closed in bright light. The crier.

Pick up this book and read the two sections starting on page 263. The ones about Lidia and her son swimming. All you need to know: Lidia is your storyteller, Miles is her son, Andy is Miles' father. If Lidia's words don't convince you to read her book, there's no way I can come up with words that will. Hers are the kind of words most of us spend forever and notebooks and notebooks looking for.

I read those two sections starting on page 263 twice. Two different breakfast trips, two different booths, same "French Combo" in front of me. Both times, same thing. With the crying. Almost crying. Maybe worse

the second time.

I don't know what's happening to me. Or what happened to the me who wouldn't ever pick up a book like this, sure as hell wouldn't cry over it. Wouldn't cry over anything if he could help it, which he always could.

That guy, he's rinsed away. At least for now.

I didn't care for the way he talked to other people. Or the way he talked to himself. That was the worst part. Weeping pussshole bitchy bitch.

But fuck, he was reliable. He got me through everything that ever happened. He was the only guy who was there for me.

We'll see what happens without him.

Read this book. I mean it. The rock collecting, the bike riding lesson. It's all here.

I'll do my best to invalidate some of the criticisms I see of this book. Some people will criticize this book because they feel the storyteller's actions weren't always right. And that is true. If you're the kind of person who needs their storyteller to always be right, to always do the right thing, and if she doesn't it's always in service of a larger lesson of redemption, then skip this one. You won't like it.

Others put this into the category of books about abuse and drinking and drugs and sex and out of control college years. Again, that stuff happens. A lot. Before you throw it on that pile, let me say something here. You can categorize anything. I was talking about Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* the other day, and I said it was post-apocalyptic. Which it is, but I wouldn't put it next to any of the books in that category. It's not a post-apocalyptic book. That describes the setting, not the book. The writing is beautiful, and the emotion of the book has so much more value than the circumstances.

*The Chronology of Water* is the same way. It deals with all that shit, you know, life shit. The way it reads, that's the real power of it. Sometimes I think people will categorize a book because then they don't have to read it that way. Don't have to pay attention. Once you decide, you can stuff it away. *Fight Club* is about men punching each other. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is about a kook. *Beloved* is about slavery. There, done, easy. This review is about a book that a guy liked. Now we can get away from it. Make the escape.

Don't run away from this one. Don't put it in a snare that keeps it from chasing after you. Read it instead. In the bath, at a diner. If you're okay being a little weepy, that is. If you've accepted your pussshole bitch self.

In case you don't read it, I want to share a passage from the interview in the back. Good for anyone who cares about books.

*Everything has been sucked up into marketing and celebrity and the almighty commodity- so if you are a writer, you are meant to sell something. If it sells, it has worth. But in my heart of hearts I just want to sneak individual books into the pockets of sad people. Or stuff pews with them! Because writing gave me a place to go and be and grow when I wanted to give up. And I'd like to jam my foot in the doorway so that others might find this place too.*

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## Meg says

“Excess Ain’t Rebellion, You’re Drinking What They’re Selling”

This book has an exceptional amount of hype surrounding it. Having supposedly created a new category labeled “Anti-Memoir,” I had some reasonably high expectations for this work.

If you take any kind of creative writing classes, or study literature at the college level you will already be familiar with the push toward legitimizing creative non-fiction memoirs. On a fundamental level I’m not really interested in that debate. If someone’s writing can hold my attention, entertain, and get me to engage with their text, I’m on board. Fiction, poetry, non-fiction, or mix genre. Good writing stands on its own and transcends any genre. However, the prose in “The Chronology of Water” is premeditated and forced. It reads like any other self-obsessed MFA non-fiction essay awaiting rejection in a lit mag slush pile. It’s another example of how this genre is failing to launch.

On a line level the prose is highly pretentious and indulges in narcissistic self-aware faux avant-garde technique applied ad nauseum. I’m all for a poignant fragment, but technique applied without reason or restraint renders the attempts into literary gimmicks (e.g. artsy-fartsy nonsense). At the line-level the book will drive an attentive reader bonkers. Anyone foreign to the MFA artsy-fartsy culture will just think there are a lot of typos and bad editing.

Which perhaps could be forgiven if the substance were weighty enough. Frankly, I feel that Yuknavitch is an unreliable narrator of her own life. I certainly don’t believe in the truth of this memoir part and parcel. I believe only in Yuknavitch’s desire to shock and awe the reader at any cost. All the up-close and personal details feel pimped and slimy. The events are not so much exposed and explored as they are posed and marketed. In the age of internet porn, no one has the luxury of being a prude anymore. Yuknavitch’s silly sex details read like teen swaggering, which would be condemned as excessive if this were written by a male, but Yuknavitch insists it is all sexy and empowering because she’s a woman. The former bad-girl turned house kitten Ph.D. recounts what a naughty slut she once was. Sexual? Yes. Sexy? Not even close.

Read any of the prurient passages and transpose the gender and then ask yourself if you’d read the same thing from a male. I’d then invite you to ask yourself if parroting a braggart legacy of misogyny is really empowering to anyone, male or female. And you can offer the rebuttal “Oh but it’s a memoir, she’s just recounting her life.” But I don’t buy it, and that comes down to a question of credibility. Yuknavitch guts her own credibility at every turn. Non-fiction requires a fundamental devotion to the truth and Yuknavitch’s tendency toward self-aggrandizing hyperbole left me in disbelief.

It’s hard to not judge when reading a memoir, especially one that is so intent on not asking for your permission or forgiveness. I’m not really interested in condemning Yuknavitch. I don’t want to be anyone’s moral nanny. I believe women can be just as narcissistically self-destructive as any man. What I condemn is the boredom of it all. How does Yuknavitch afford her Rock ‘n Roll lifestyle? At the expense of the safety, sobriety, and sanity of everyone around her and after ruining other people’s lives, she publishes an unabashed memoir of her exploits. Alcoholism, narcissism, and sex-addiction served straight with no chaser of complexity quickly becomes an easily dismissed, salaciously boring read.

In the last few essays Yuknavitch seems to sense this and goes all mushy, which I didn’t find redemptive,

believable, or satisfying either. It reads more like selling out. The transformation from hard-edged selfish addict to deep-thinking literary snob is not shown, it's told - and again, I just don't believe it. Yuknavitch doesn't pick herself up off the floor and straighten out her own life. No, she looks into the eyes of her married lover and when he tells her he wants her to have his baby - Whoomp There It Is! - She's done been saved by a man's redemptive love (insert Disney desperate lack-of-agency female chorus here). At every turn I feel the authenticity of experience is withheld, my trust as a reader trampled, and my time wasted.

I once heard a tragedy defined as a story where characters come close to transcending circumstances but fail to grow and live up to their potential. In that sense, this memoir, its prose and its "protagonist" are a real tragedy. This has that current buzz on it, where a lot of people are discussing the book - so by all means read it if you want to participate in that dialog, but don't believe the hype.

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### **Alan Scott says**

Have you ever met a drunk before? What about someone who likes drugs? What about someone who screws anything on two legs? What about someone who is all three of these things and thinks this makes them REMARKABLY fascinating, edgy, and exotic? Now add a heaping helping of unhappy childhood, a sprinkling of ex-husbands, some chlorinated pool water, some celebrity name dropping, the most uninspired introduction imaginable, and regurgitate it all back up in a writing style which is wannabe Burroughs and Acker, and you've got an idea of what you're in for here, which is boring, boring, boring, as boring as a depressed/narcissistic 17 year old's diary, as boring as one of those drunk prattlers [you know the type] who insist on yammering incessantly about that time when oh man I was sooo wasted..., as boring and as self important as any English lit grad student who ever squinted down at a page of Roland Barthes, as boring as a big, steaming pile of EGO floating on a urine-warm pool of stale beer and pubic hair, and as boring as the tired belief that it is somehow revolutionary to try to shock the bourgeoisie by waving a dead fetus at them.

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### **Lucie says**

Bold and brave,  
Raw and naked... *literally*.

Talk about letting it all hang out there.  
This woman is definitely not afraid of oversharing. ?

In this shockingly honest, unfiltered memoir, Lidia Yuknavitch says: Hey, this is me. This was my journey. The good. The bad. Like it. Don't like it. Take it. Leave it. I spoke my truth. If you get something helpful out of it, awesome.

If it bothers you, it wasn't for you.

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### **tee says**

I am sitting here in a dazed stupor, sleep-deprived and my head buzzing with the tinnitus that comes with insomnia. I couldn't put this fucking book down. I don't know if I have connected with a book like I did this one since the days when I discovered Winterson. I devoured this book. I'm still not full, I want more. I read it

in 50 page chunks without noticing the passing of time. 1am, 3am. It was less than ten degrees and yet I couldn't move to fetch another blanket. I paused at 5.30 this morning to cut up some apples to eat with a half cup of coconut yoghurt, which I spilt down the front of myself as I shovelled it in, too absorbed in Lidia's writing to concentrate on the whereabouts of my fork. I simultaneously savoured and rushed through this book, her words streaming through my head only to find that I was breathing fast, shallowly, emitting puffing bursts of exhaled air as chapters ended. Red cheeks, tingling legs. I'm still buzzing and the day has taken on that sublime surreal quality that comes with a combination of no sleep and a night of passionate indulgence. Everyone else can get fucked, I'm divorcing all my other imaginary spouses and locking myself up in a tower on an island where Lidia will read this book over and over to me until I die.

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### **Julie Christine says**

It is so fitting that the original cover of this book, which you see depicted here, arrives from the library marred by a plain, gray wrapper around the offensive bit—you know, a woman's bare breast. It is metaphor come to life for Lidia Yuknavitch's searing memoir, *The Chronology of Water*: hide and deny what is most natural, until it becomes a thing of shame.

Yet it would seem that Lidia Yuknavitch hides nothing. *The Chronology of Water* is ripe with shock-jock language and imagery. It is angry and lurid and reeks of booze and sex and blood. It's one of the most beautiful things I have ever read. The day I finished the book, I went and bought a copy of my own--no wrapper around the front cover, just a woman's beautiful body disappearing in a shimmer of torso, cut in half by the air above and the water below.

Water is the thematic structure around which this narrative is built—fluid from the body that spills in birth, in sex, in menstruation, in vomit and bile; water that offers healing and generates power as a strong body sluices through waves to win swim meets or meets an object of one's desire in a hotel swimming pool; water that can take life in a vulnerable moment as one's father collapses in the ocean.

But it's her body that Yuknavitch offers up for examination: a body that in the opening chapter is ruptured by birth. That experience is bookended by years of incest on one side and self-flagellation on the other, until the author meets herself full circle as a wife, a mother, a writer, a woman.

She conceals much in her narrative of abuse, but we are allowed a glimpse behind the wrapper of her shame and sorrow and witness a woman's soul torn in two by violence and fear.

“In my house the sound of leather on the skin of my sister's bare bottom stole my very voice out of my throat for years. The great thwack of the sister who goes before you. Taking everything before you are born. The sound of the belt on the skin of her made me bite my own lip. I'd close my eyes and grip my knees and rock in the corner of my room. Sometimes I'd bang my head rhythmically against the wall.

I still cannot bear her silence while being whipped. She must have been eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Before it stopped.”

Her father physically and sexually abused Yuknavitch and her sister; their alcoholic mother existed in a fog

of denial. Yuknavitch became a woman full of rage. She turned on herself, turned against her body, which had been made beautiful and powerful by water. She squandered a college swimming scholarship through drugs, alcohol, and sex with anything that moved. She punished herself over and over, for years, trying to root out the evil that abuse had buried in her.

Writing became her salvation. Time and again, as she lurches from mistake to affair, from addiction and obsession, it is writing that buoys her above the waves of her own destructive seas.

Caution must be taken not to romanticize Yuknavitch's scary history. The author as addict, the notion that one must suffer to create great art, is a cliché that works because it is true time and again. But if you can separate yourself from the literal and sink into the sheer beauty of her language, the way she wraps her arms around you and won't let you go, you will be rewarded with tears and laughter, with frustration and rage. You will feel. And isn't that why we read? To feel, deeply, achingly, painfully, blissfully.

The nature of memoir, as distinct from autobiography, is like looking down at your body in a pool of water: shapes are distorted, disjointed, appearing larger or smaller or not at all. Memoir is not a chronological connection of facts. Memoir is a work of prose, it is an interpretation of one's life just as a painting is an interpretation of a scene or a theme. Whether or not every event described by Yuknavitch, or any other memoirist, really happened is not the point of memoir; the point is to offer the reader a powerful piece of writing with experiences that elevate the personal to the universal. Yuknavitch says it best:

All the events in my life swim in and out between each other. Without chronology. Like in dreams. So if I am thinking of a memory...there is no linear sense. Language is a metaphor for experience. It's as arbitrary as the mass of chaotic images we call memory--but we can put it into lines to narrativize over fear.

This isn't for everyone. Some will read and be exasperated or disgusted or disbelieving. I get that. I get that chaos and promiscuity and addiction are ugly, messy, and life is too short to waste reading about someone else's tragedy and self-destructive behavior. That's pretty much me, really. But something about this story--the goddamn gorgeous language, the raw power of its brutality--gave me so much comfort and solace. In Yuknavitch's words, I felt the magic of self-acceptance and self-love, and the crazy-wonderful beauty of life.

“Listen, I can see you. If you are like me. You do not deserve most of what has happened or will. But there is something I can offer you. Whoever you are. Out there. As lonely as it gets, you are not alone. There is another kind of love.

It's the love of art. Because I believe in art the way other people believe in god.

In art I've met an army of people – a tribe that gives good company and courage and hope. In books and painting and music and film. This book? It's for you. It's water I made a path through...Come in. The water will hold you.”

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## **sarah gilbert says**

I do not know what to say about the category of memoirs in which the writing resume is included as story. I do not know what to say about memoirs which treat the relationships of their lives so coldly, throwing up the one-side-of-the-story like angry paint on a wall. Lidia graffitis her life story all over the lives of those she's known, and I am not sure whether I want never to have known her or to wish that I had. Edited: I know her, now, and I feel differently.

Lidia, indeed, can write, and some of these chapters come out so much like prose poems that I would love to collect them and re-read just the parts that are beautiful and painful and honest. But she is also gripped with a need to be edgy, personal, raw, colloquial, experimental, profane. Many times I cringe at the depiction of sex between the man or woman with whom she is engaging, or at the destruction done to her body by alcohol and drugs, or at her quick switches in voice and style that interrupt, for me, the dream-story. I know now i am meant to cringe. The dipping into and out of fiction -- always done quickly, at least -- is sometimes imaginative and brilliant and sometimes jarring. The gripping, holding tight to the symbolism is sometimes gorgeous and sometimes painful.

When there is a journal or magazine that calls a theme, I blanch at the inevitable piece that defines the word and uses it again and again too much. In a book, I prefer symbolic themes should number several, so that one is not left with the feeling, at the end of reading, that one has overeaten. Edited: now I know this was not done without intention, without obsession, and I admire it as such.

So many people have picked this book as one of their top five or 10 of the year; I worry that I am missing something. Or perhaps seeing too much. I am picky about the part of a memoir in which the author makes insights about themselves; I fear that this memoir is one of those that stubbornly refuses to be insightful. I do not get my moment of realization that drinking so much vodka and Scotch is bad for one's art. (Indeed, it's defended in the Q&A section at the back; I part-admire and part-horrify at her perversion of the rehab story.) I do not get my acknowledgement that her selfishness has harmed others (in fact, the professors and ex-wives and old lovers are treated with derision).

Some books are perfectly suited to me and I fall in love with all my heart. Others are such that I can only admire querulously and from a distance. At first I thought this was the latter. I see something in this, so much in this, and it's grown on me like the skin of a fish.

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## **Hannah says**

I am in awe with this work of art; I do not know how to find the words to adequately explain why I loved this so much. How about this:

- Lidia Yuknavitch is unflinchingly honest: her destructive tendencies, her flaws, mistakes, triumphs, loves are laid bare for the world to see.
- Her command of language is mesmerizing.
- I could feel every emotion possible while reading
- She is a hero. But also highly unpleasant.

Earlier this year I reviewed Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body by the amazing Roxane Gay; that book set the

bar high for what a memoir could do – this book is similar in a way. It reads like a novel but has the emotional impact of raw, undiluted, real pain. Both women use art as a channel to deal with their deep and debilitating pain, both create works of absolute stunning beauty.

Lidia Yuknavitch tells of her life, of growing up in a household with an abusive father and a mother who slowly succumbed to alcoholism, of finding solace in competitive swimming, of failing university twice, of drug addiction, of the death of her child, of her two spectacularly failed marriages. She fucks up, a lot. She is undeniably awful, mostly to herself, often to others. She claws her way out of darkness so deep it seems to swallow her whole again, and again, and again. Her self-destructive tendencies are mesmerizing in their scope and her honesty is unflinching.

She tells this in short, fragmented chapters, with poem-like language that cuts deep and had me reeling. Always circling back to water and art, the two things that saved her. Her inventive way of using language and creating imagery alone would be enough to make this a near perfect book, her ability to channel her trauma into something this beautiful and stunning makes it my favourite of the year.

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First sentence (of the acknowledgements): "If you have ever fucked up in your life, or if the great river of sadness that runs through all of us has touched you, then this book is for you."

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## **Paul says**

Call me "old-fashioned", "conservative", whatever, but this was a very irritating book. Yes, I'm sure some of what she wrote was \*meant\* to be vexing and maybe even irritating, but it was just too much for me.

For one thing, I don't like the whole psychological attitude of "I had a rough childhood and that was my excuse for ruining the next few decades of my life". Sorry, it just comes off as whiny and immature, when there are so many others who, in the face of adversity, can rise above it in a vastly more respectable manner.

She freely admits (more than once) how she would drink and drive, ultimately resulting in her tragic head-on collision with a woman who she describes as a "5' tall brown skinned pregnant woman"—yes, six or seven months pregnant, at that. Oh, and that's just the tip of the iceberg; there seem to be decades of her life that were a mere blur involving every kind of drug, every kind of sexual deviation (including some weird fetish involving \*breaking into people's homes\* to do it there, along with stealing their alcohol and drugs), every kind of crime (possibly short of murder), and so on. The whining goes on and on for half the book, where you watch her unapologetically throw her life away, throw her scholarship away, throw everything that matters away... with zero remorse.

And the "zero remorse" carries through into the present, where you can't help but feel as though she would do it all again the same, given the opportunity. It also carries through in her storytelling, in how she seems to think that things like "slitting the tires of Republicans" and "steal[ing] all the heads of roses" from gardens, is not something about which even now she should be remorseful or express any fault.

Then there is the bitter, but almost ironic, story which opens the book with the tragic birth of her stillborn child. Inexplicably, though, that one life lost tugged pretty seriously at her heartstrings, while her \*multiple\* abortions seemed to have, in contrast, zero effect on her.

Also, there was the smattering of transparent, unabashed, overt name-dropping all over the place (Ken

Kesey, Kathy Acker, etc.) and what antics she was up to with them that just seemed like too much. Some of it was clearly legitimate to her life's story, but some of it just seemed like exactly that: transparent, unabashed, overt name-dropping.

And, finally, there was the issue of her writing style. While her poetic prose was at some points really captivating and powerful, quite often it was just over the top like someone who learns a cool trick and just can't stop repeating it and ends up abuses the crap out of it. It almost seemed too forced, like "look at me, I'm writing a future \*classic\* because I'm using such heterodox methods and style and such outrageous words and ideas!" Had she toned it all down and made it more subtle, it would have been a lot more meaningful and the emotions a bit more believable to me.

Yes, there are those who would call me "callous" for this review, given the troubles she might have faced, whether physically or psychologically, but, again, I'd have a much easier time accepting this had there been even a small sense of remorse or regret for all the opportunities wasted, the lives hurt, and the damage done to others. But, no; it was all about "me me me". Quite contemporary in that sense.

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### **Roxane says**

The Chronology of Water is stunning. I read it in three hours, ignoring everything. It is a book that literally cannot be put down. I can't think straight to talk about it the book is so good so just read it already.

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### **Thomas says**

I consider Lidia Yuknavitch a hero for writing about her experiences of child abuse with such candor and rawness. The first half of *The Chronology of Water* stunned me: her vivid descriptions of growing up with an abusive father and a passive mother felt both gripping and heartbreak. Yuknavitch penned such great scenes about her childhood, using powerful verbs that rocketed me into her past as if I witnessed it with her. The way she writes about her emotions as a child, too - the terror, the helplessness, the rage - all resonated with my own experiences of child abuse and captured her younger self so well. For the rest of the memoir, with great honesty, she writes about how she coped with her trauma: with lots of alcohol, lots of sex with women and men, a few marriages, and her more healthful vices, swimming and writing. Throughout the book, she positions her physical body as a source of suffering, pleasure, and joy, describing her sexuality as well as the death of her first child with great sorrow, passion, and nuance.

I so wanted to give this book five stars from the first 50% but the latter half of the novel lost some of the narrative tightness I so loved from the beginning. It felt more like a description of events that just so happened rather than the tight, careful construction of the first part of the book, or of a couple of my favorite memoirs about childhood abuse and recovery, such as *An Abbreviated Life* by Ariel Leve or *Hunger* by Roxane Gay. I also groaned at the whole plot about a man's love and marriage saving her. While I respect her path to healing and feel happy about her growth, I just find the trope of romance as redemption overplayed.

Still, an important memoir I would recommend to anyone interested in trauma, queerness, and writing about the importance of writing. Again, I applaud Yuknavitch for her courage in sharing her story, especially with such a distinct and unapologetic voice. The parts about art as a source of healing really resonated with me as well.

