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Miss Lonelyhearts, published in 1933, is Nathanael West's second novel. It is an Expressionist black comedy set in New York City during the Great Depression.

"Money and fame meant nothing to them. They were not worldly men."

"Wildly funny, desperately sad, brutal and kind, furious and patient, there was no other like Nathanael West."

—Dorothy Parker

Miss Lonelyhearts and A Cool Million Details

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From Reader Review Miss Lonelyhearts and A Cool Million for online ebook

Katie says

What a bizarre book. Maybe it's that it was written so long ago, but I just found so many of the dialogue, scenes, and situations so strange that I didn't get people's responses to anything about 95% of the time.

Daniel says

The Pole Riders Win Again

Third, maybe fourth, time that I've read this novelette. All within this lifetime, mind you, so there's no Shirley MacLaine-type Past Lives Pavilion New Age Spirituality Transcendental Meditation Exploration going on here.

And if there were, I'd probably be on my eighth reading of the novelette.

Anyway, I've read the thing several times because I simply love it. Not because I'm a dimwitted former member of parliament.

In fact, I'm still a member of parliament.

This is a great novel from a great author regardless of where you might very well stand regarding a narcissistic Christ complex whereby implied oppression banishes the individuality of devotees and undermines any stated spiritual growth.

Lori says

Miss Lonelyhearts was not a story I enjoyed. However, a story does not have to be enjoyed to qualify as a significant piece of writing. I am discovering Nathaniel West a bit late and am somewhat fascinated by his work. Writing in the midst of one of America's darker chapters...the Great Depression...West employs the spare and dark prose a reader might more readily expect from a post-modern, post-God, contemporary nihilist.

Crisis eras bring out both the best and worst qualities in people. West's focus is strictly on the baser instincts and casual cruelties we inflict on one another as members of the human race. The characters in Miss Lonelyhearts are either pathetic, deranged or cruelly manipulative. The setting tends to be bleak. The backdrop is one of a society in tatters. Today's reader can ratchet up the level of discomfort very quickly by pondering the parallels between the bleak 1930s and today's economic turmoil.

Miss Lonelyhearts is the pseudonym for an otherwise nameless man who writes an advice column for a newspaper. Initially, we learn, the idea for the column was meant as a joke, devised by Miss Lonelyheart's

vicious editor, Shrike. Time and exposure to the myriad miseries of his fellow man via the letters Miss Lonelyhearts receives each week take their toll. Miss Lonelyhearts, already a fragile psychological specimen with a Christ complex and a tenuous grip on reality, edges closer and closer to a complete breakdown as the story unfolds. He is egged on by Shrike at each turn.

This story is short, ugly and powerful. If you have never read Nathaniel West, I would suggest beginning with the somewhat more structured and palatable "The Days of the Locust" and then moving on to Miss Lonelyhearts.

Michael says

I must say at the outset that I've read this novel (or novella) one and a half times. Several years ago I decided to take Harold Bloom (a well known literary critic) at his word and discover the merits of this work.

Well, I got close to half-way through, was aware that I was getting very depressed and decided that there was too much other stuff I wanted to read that didn't put me in a down mood. Plus, I was going through some really tough things in my personal life that I think accounted my mood. Normally I like books, plays, etc. that deal with difficult and tragic themes.

So, last week I decided to return to the work after reading that Flannery O'Connor (one of my favorite American writers) said it was one of her two favorite modern novels (the other being Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*). I'm really glad I returned to it.

The title character, Miss Loneleyhearts, is never referred to by any other name. He is a man who writes an advice column for a newspaper in which he tries to embody the very essence of love (for him Christian love). After months of replying to the most heartbreaking and unnerving letters from very genuine and desperate people, he begins to spiritually unravel. We literally witness this unraveling as he loses faith in his capacity to give compassionate advice (and love) while at the same time realizing the presence of violence and evil in himself. We watch the very painful process of his very his soul draining out of him.

Since this blog is more about how stories are essential to our lives as opposed to a traditional book review, I'll confine my remarks to that perspective.

I think the story deals with the conflict....

Read more of my review on my blog: [Your Life for a Story](#).

Jamie says

I'm going to need some whiskey and gin now, please.

Well-written and deeply cynical and a little too much even for me, right now.

Brendan says

There seems to be a distinct slice of fancy-pants literature in which mokey people mokey about, do mokey stuff, and generally bemoan the lack of motivation that leads them to mokey. I'm thinking here of *The Magus* and *The End of the Affair*. In this case, West's novel focuses on the eponymous hero, an advice columnist beset by depression under the weight of the letters he receives daily. He slumps around, unable to do what he thinks right, and stuck in the rut of drinking, joyless debauchery, and did I mention moping around?

West certainly wields an entertaining descriptive power, with solid, entertaining metaphors and similes. His secondary characters, particularly the brutal and sarcastic editor, Shrike, bring some jauntiness to the story, but usually at the expense of any hope Miss Lonelyhearts might foster.

The discussion of the novel in my 1000 books you must read before you die suggests that the protagonist struggles with his Christianity, but I found that to be an ambiguous proposition at best — it's completely unclear to me whether he cares about Christian views at all. He's mocked for them by Shrike, but he doesn't really buy into them either. And he makes terrible decisions. Terrible.

So in the end, I have trouble understanding the fuss. Thinking about this post and the one I wrote yesterday, I'm inclined to wonder if there's something in my critical faculty missing.

Kirstie says

I would say this novella is more like a 3 1/2 but Goodreads won't allow it. This is one of those works that tells about a place in time and a certain sense of loneliness that seems timeless that never seemed to get its due recognition.

Miss Lonelyhearts is actually a man who must answer the advice letters that come into the paper...and these letters enlist his help in every topic that seems imaginable. Meanwhile, Miss Lonelyhearts himself is ensnared in his own problems, namely the adulterous situation he finds himself in. There is a great deal in here about society and religion. The writing is also a sign of the times as well and can get quite sexist against female writers, for instance, but it does indeed make me hopeful to see how far we've come as a country and a society from the 1930s anyways.

Passages I liked:

pg 9 "He knew now what this thing was-hysteria, a snake whose scales are tiny mirrors in which the dead world takes on a semblance of life. And how dead the world is...a world of doorknobs. He wondered if hysteria were really too steep a price to pay for bringing it to life."

pg 17 Miss Lonelyhearts put his arm around the old man. Tell us the story of your life," he said, loading his voice with sympathy.

"I have no story."

"You must have. Every one has a life story."

pg. 31 The physical world had a tropism for disorder, entropy. Man against Nature...the battle of the centuries. Keys yearn to mix with change. Mandolins strive to get out of tune. Every order has within it the germ of destruction. All order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while."

Rhonda says

A stunning and stark journey into the pit of darkness, this is a book one can hardly put down even though the train wreck of a conclusion is observable from the beginning.

Bruce says

Having written four books, Nathanael West died in 1940. His best known novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, was published in 1933. Miss Lonelyhearts is a bitter and somewhat callous New York City newspaperman who spends day after day reading letters from desperate readers and answering them in his advice column. Puritanical and Christ-obsessed, he is harassed by his editor, Shrike, who mocks him at every opportunity. The short novel is a parody, as calloused and bitter as Miss Lonelyhearts himself. Deeply depressed by his seemingly pointless job, he reflects that "on most days he received more than thirty letters, all of them alike, stamped from the dough of suffering with a heart-shaped cookie knife." One writer is a sixteen year old girl born without a nose, another a woman with too many children whose husband won't let her alone. He sits despondently at his desk, "his forehead high and narrow, his bony chin shaped and cleft like a hoof." (Satan?) He leaves the office. "The gray sky looked as if it had been rubbed with a soiled eraser...He entered the park at the North Gate and swallowed mouthfuls of the heavy shade that curtained its arch. He walked into the shadow of a lamp-post that lay on the path like a spear. It pierced him like a spear." "How dead the world is – a world of doorknobs." And so it goes. He visits the woman to whom he proposed two months ago, after which he disappeared; she is kind to him, he is cruel to her. Miss Lonelyhearts is a heartless misanthrope, religiously judgmental, obsessive and compulsive. When given the opportunity, he is sadistic. His life is lived primarily in his mind, his outer life being tedious and tawdry. In a bar he encountered some like-minded individuals, one of whom comments, "The trouble with all of us, is that we have no outer life, only an inner one." Miss Lonelyhearts fights with one of the men, staggers out into the snow, and beats up a frail old man.

Gradually it becomes apparent that each chapter of this narrative is a parody of some genre of cheap novel – the tough-guy-fighter-in-the-bar, the bodice-ripper, the callous-guy-abusing-his-girl-friend, the sappy drunk, the misunderstood religious zealot, etc. West balances the chapters with each other, keeping each chapter short, such that the novel moves along briskly even as it really goes nowhere at all. The tenor is almost uniformly cheap and crass, just like Miss Lonelyhearts. And yet in the very middle of the book, while he is ill and talking with his fiancée Betty who has come to help him, he admits that the suffering he encounters

every day in the letters to Miss Lonelyhearts forces him to examine the values by which he himself lives, and that forces him to realize that he is the victim of a joke and not its perpetrator, an admission of rare insight and candor. The admission is immediately undermined by Shrike who scoffs at all insight as escapism, all religion as the irresponsible abdication for crafting one's own life.

Moving towards its end, the narrative becomes more and more disjointed, less integrated, and the trajectory of Miss Lonelyhearts' life more inexplicable. It is hard to discern, at least for me, what West is trying to project. Increasingly, religion seems to dominate the story, but just what kind of religion this is or what it is meant to accomplish is not clear.

This short novel has some creative language and images, and the episodes demonstrate interesting contrasts, but I found it hard to find a unifying theme to the narrative. I'm disinclined to read any other of West's novels, if this is acclaimed his best.

Greg says

Miss Lonelyhearts

The story is allegorical. As is common with the allegorical form, it uses religion.

The trouble with a lonelyhearts newspaper column is the sort of crossing the proscenium arch between art and life - a newspaper column and people's real life problems. There's a dual negative/positive that that involves. On one hand, the positive of allowing one to talk to a stranger about their problems, just getting it off their chest, or a cry for help, albeit to an anonymous stranger (Miss Lonelyhearts), in a public forum, which is kind of a weird space. The negative is asking a stranger to advise how to solve their problems - problems that in a lot of letters, can't be solved.

The aching sadness in the letters highlights the fact that most of the letter writers find themselves in situations not of their making. The main reason the Miss Lonelyhearts column exists is the voyeuristic instinct to read about other peoples problems. The remark by Shrike advising Miss Lonelyhearts not to recommend suicide because that would reduce the readership, is shocking. If that is meant as dark satire, that's getting too dark.

Another observation, while reading this story, is comparing the social media available during the Depression era and that of today, now overwhelmingly narcissistic self promotion.

Here's a powerful piece of writing to reflect on and come back to.

'He found himself in the window of a pawnshop full of fur coats, diamond rings, watches, shotguns, fishing tackle, mandolins. All these thing were the paraphernalia of suffering: Man has a tropism for order. Keys in one pocket, change in another. Mandolins are tuned GDAE. The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy.'

'For the first time in his life, he is forced to examine the values by which he lived. Prodded by his conscience, he began to generalize. Men have always fought their misery with dreams. Although dreams were once powerful, they have been made puerile by the movies, radio, and newspapers. Among many betrayals, this one is the worst. The thing that made his share in it particularly bad was that he was capable of dreaming the Christ dream. He felt that he had failed at it, not so much because of Shrike's jokes or his own

self-doubt, but because of his lack of humility.'

There are lots of great pieces of writing in there.

"Then he remembered Betty. She had often made him feel that when she straightened his tie, she was straightening much more". What is the symbolism here?

And so - the allegory has an oblique ending. We are not told Miss Lonelyhearts real name or how he fairs with his encounter on the stairs with Mr. Doyle.

I'll reflect on this unusual, brilliant piece of writing.

Inna says

As always, the literary choices of Harold Bloom are the best for me.

Misty says

This book was not at all what I expected, especially the identity of Miss Lonelyhearts, but I liked it a lot. The tone reminds me a bit of Invisible Man--sort of detached and ironic.

gaby says

My coming to know Nathanael West was like rounding a corner and accidentally running smack into a stranger who thereafter instantly becomes your best friend. I knew almost nothing about him before picking up this greying little 100 page book for a dollar at Black Oak. When I'd finished it a couple of days later, I was in love!

Nathanael West was born Nathan Weinstein in 1903 in Manhattan. A wealthy but iconoclastic child, Nathan dropped out of high school and got into Tufts University by forging his own transcript. After failing out of Tufts, he transferred to Brown University by using the transcript of another Tufts student named Nathan Weinstein.

Nathanael died at 37, having produced a couple of books and a couple of B-movie screenplays. He died in a car crash near Los Angeles, on his way to F. Scott Fitzgerald's funeral.

Miss Lonelyhearts was his magnum opus. Published in 1933, it is from the very first page a striking work. It follows Miss Loneyhearts, the "Dear Abby" of the day, who takes the job of writing the advice column for a newspaper thinking it'll be an ironic joke job, but who becomes infected with the extremely modern suffering of the people who write in for help. The young man is never given a name besides Miss Lonelyhearts. He immediately reminded me so much of Holden Caulfield - and in fact the whole book feels very much like a precursor to *Catcher in the Rye* in tone and message.

Finally, the real star of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is not the boyish antihero after whom it is named, but West himself and his unflinching playfulness with language. I read parts of this book aloud because the language was so physical, spectacular, and very grimcore. In one of my favorite lines, West describes that in kissing, "he drove his triangular face like a hatchet into her neck".

It does a disservice to the visceral power of this book to simply say it's the best thing I've read in a really long time, maybe years. I cannot recommend it more highly.

Edie says

Nathanael West's "*Miss Lonelyhearts*" is a story of dysfunction. The novella is divided into fragmented pieces, each composed of perverted, collapsing systems. West introduces commonplace patterns of order only to grotesquely destabilize each. He destroys nearly every social and personal structure of humanity, perverting relationships, bodies, even aspects as fundamental as gender distinction. West's language, too, is a broken system. His disjointed narrative lacks a definite beginning or end, and even within each section, dialogue is frequently interrupted and sentences often trail away indefinitely, lacking completion. "*Miss Lonelyhearts*," on a global and local scale, reads like an incomplete circle. The title character fails to complete a full revolution of any system in the novella, instead falling prey to a severely brutal brand of violence. He feels that "all order is doomed, yet the battle is worth while." The broken systems of West's narrative suggest that the inherent violence of human beings precludes the successful progress of any social system, particularly on a spiritual and empathetic level.

West's cynical view of society and human nature makes sense within the context of a Depression narrative. As *Miss Lonelyhearts* muses, "Man has a tropism for order... The physical world has a tropism for disorder, entropy." The chaos and despair of West's physical world at his time of writing prohibited man's natural proclivity for order. Neither West nor his characters seem able to overcome the distress of their surroundings, instead bleeding into the margins without finding clear meaning.

Sketchbook says

Black coffee with a taste of almonds. Drink ye all of it.

Skeptical says

Sometimes we are deprived of good works by the untimely death of a brilliant young author. Other times we heap underserved praise upon the works of authors because they die young. Alas, the latter is the case with *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Rather than being a brilliant exploration of the philosophical and moral quagmire and emotional devastation of living on the seamy underbelly of city life as so many reviewers have exhorted, *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a hodgepodge of uneven, unfinished thoughts by an author who is not yet in full command of his art. The characters are all supposed to be in deep emotional despair, but it is impossible to connect with them or their pain because so little of their lives is available to us. They are dressed up cardboard, mannequins wearing clothing. In the end, these are people we don't know and don't care about. They are riders on the subway of life. We get on, we notice they are absorbed in their own thoughts, their own pains. But the vision lingers only so long as it takes to exit the next stop. There is nothing there, no

connection to remember them by. In the end we just don't care about them. We have our own lives to live. West is not up to the challenge. In all, a very unsatisfying read. Don't buy into the hype. This could have been a fine, fine novel in the hands of a better craftsman. 50 - 60 pages is just not of enough space in which to explore such a weighty subjects.

Selena says

I made a promise to myself that I would actively work toward reading all of the books listed on the 1001 books to read before you die list. Sometimes I've pouted through the books and then there are times where the list leads me to a new author and gem that I would have missed completely.

Miss Lonelyhearts is Nathanael West's most famous book, through really, it is a novella. Miss Lonelyhearts is the nickname for the advice columnist for a magazine. (the reader never finds out Miss Lonelyhearts' real name). He takes the job and treats it as a joke – it was meant to be a joke. And then he has to read these letters. These letters that are filled with such misery and desperation that perfectly captures Depression era sentiments. It's impossible to treat the letters flippantly once Miss Lonelyhearts reads their candid and tragic tales.

More troubled than all of the folks that write these sad letters is Miss Lonelyhearts himself. He wants so hard to help them but cannot even know where to begin. He tries alcohol to numb his mind and sex to tired it but to no avail. His fiance encourages him to quit his job, his editor makes a mockery out of his emotional response to these letters and even God and religion, he feels, fail him.

I've read commentary on the book which states that, in some ways, Miss Lonelyhearts is a representation of Christ. He sacrifices himself on the verge of what is a real religious epiphany and to what end? Life goes on just the very same.

I haven't read the Great Gatsby but I've heard that it perfectly epitomizes life in post-WWII, Depression-era America. I think West's Miss Lonelyhearts should be added to that list. In its few pages, it gives across the essence of a time.

Evan says

It seems I've given too many five-star ratings lately, but what can I say? I keep picking great books. Nathanael West's high reputation rests on a less than prolific output, including this very short novella - easily readable in just a few hours, but not quite as fast a read as you might think due to the intricacies of West's analogies and language and expressionistic allusions, quite a few of which are way out there and deserve pondering. After reading this and "Day of the Locust" I have to agree that West was a master. It would seem apparent to me that John Kennedy Toole must have read and been influenced by this, based on the sentence: "He begged the party dress to marry him."

Like "...Locust," the main character here is sleepwalking through a sort of freak show hell of modern urban America during the Depression. In many ways, by contrast, "Locust" is a model of restraint, with relatively less grandiose surrealism than exhibited here. This book is a tour-de-force, maybe too much so for some readers. With its freaks, and unrequited hopes and sexual frustrations and sudden outbursts of senseless violence, this book and "...Locust" are very much of a piece. One can see certain obsessions of West's in

both. The grisly and pathetic failed goat killing in this book, very sad and disturbing, reminds me of the cockfight in "...Locust." The book ends on a critical point of action, even as the action is still going on, abruptly---with no lingering over aftermath. As with the other novel, this appears to be a trait of West's style. He ends it, unapologetically, and asks us to fill in the rest. Having the columnist get a hook up through his column (and the circular karma moral conundrum that results) is just one of the hooks that makes this book remarkably modern and contemporary, and valid for today's readers. -EG

Maggie says

Written during the Depression, these two novellas carry similar themes, but are written in very different styles. Miss Lonelyhearts tells of a newspaper columnist who writes an advice column. Despite the moniker, he's male. He thinks of himself as a Christ-like figure to his readers, yet he struggles about believing in Christ, and his fluffy generalisations about life seem unequal to the real burdens of his writers. His boss Shrike is a cynic, treating the whole column as a money-making joke. Miss Lonelyhearts' own interactions with the people around him ends mostly in depravity, violence and sex. Finally he achieves a state of moral high ground, but it is an apathetic state, as close as he can get to being Christ-like yet far removed from it. Right at the end, as a man hurt by him comes to kill him, Miss Lonelyhearts rushes to him in a loving embrace, and he is shot and killed in an act reminiscent of Christ's death.

A Cool Million is about Lemuel Pitkin, an honest, good-hearted, poor boy who, spurred on by the encouragement of ex-president Mr Whipple and the American Dream, seeks his fortune in New York to protect his house from being sold. Instead of prosperity, he meets injustice. He loses his teeth, an eye, a leg and his scalp, is imprisoned twice and beaten up multiple times, sees the girl he fancies forced into prostitution, and is finally killed. The story ends with him being celebrated as a martyr for the American Dream.

The two stories are similar in mood yet vastly different in their writing styles. Miss Lonelyhouse requires more effort and reflection to identify the motifs and analogies, but A Cool Million is a harder pill to swallow because you shudder with every sentence to read of how Lem will next be tricked or beaten or otherwise unrighteously dealt by. Each has its own unique tone. Miss Lonelyhearts is written mostly in an objective, clipped, newspaper-like tone which contrasts sharply with the heartfelt, ungrammatical letters written to Miss Lonelyhearts. A Cool Million on the other hand has an easy, light-hearted, almost fairy tale like tone that clashes with and highlights the bitterness of Lem's fate.

I wouldn't say either story is easy to read. They are bitter and painful, and there is almost no hope of redemption. But they are stories written by a brilliant author in an era that unfortunately made them wholly appropriate tales.

Crystal Beran says

There's something horrible about this book, in the way that Miss Lonelyhearts goes through the motions of humanity. He's got an almost robotic quality, as if his programming instructed him to try on a series of masks, logically discarding one when it proved not to fit.

Miss Lonelyhearts is the man who answers the Dear Abby letters for his newspaper. Each day he is greeted

by a stack of papers upon which the essence of human suffering are written. He responds in every way possible through out the book, which makes it a truly fascinating exploration of our condition and our ability to cope with the suffering of others. He connects, he disassociates, he uses humor and violence. "He felt as though his heart were a bomb, a complicated bomb that would result in a simple explosion, wrecking the whole world without rocking it."

This is a beautifully written and haunting text. As Miss Lonelyhearts went responded in different manners to the pain of his readers, so too I responded to his pain with indifference, disgust, compassion and commiseration. To bring out such a range of reaction in the reader, to make reality a mirror to this text is the brilliance of *Miss Lonelyhearts*.
