

NOTES FROM: *We Learn Nothing*, by Tim Kreider

SUMMARY: Hundreds of books have changed me, *deeply*, but this one will always be a favorite because of how many intense, varied emotions it made me cycle through while reading it. *We Learn Nothing* made me feel *everything*: it's sincere, heartwarming, hilarious, wise, deeply thoughtful, and *sooo* much more. I just loved it.

We Learn Nothing is a collection of essays by satirical cartoonist Tim Kreider about his near-death experience being stabbed with a stiletto, the soul-crushing yet stultifying busyness of modern life, the inexorable passage of time, and a variety of other experiences that I'm glad I didn't live through *myself*, but am glad I got to read about.

I mentioned this in the opening paragraph, but most of the essays are *hilarious* too. I can't remember laughing out loud at more places than while reading this book. Laughing, as in the "holding my stomach, wiping-away-tears" variety. Years later it's *still* funny.

The striking quality of (most of) these essays is that they're not *just* funny, or not *just* thoughtful, or not *just* sad. They're *all of those things*, sometimes in the same paragraph. Multiple times, when I had finished recovering from a bout of tearful laughter, I'd sit and think, and realize that Tim Kreider had just changed the way I thought about something. That's hard enough to do in 300 pages, much less in essay format.

By the time I looked up after finishing the last essay (which only took me a couple of days in total), I noticed that my own life had become deeper and more vivid. I started noticing more things myself, became more aware of the strangeness, absurdity, and meaning of my daily existence. Maybe we *do* learn something after all.

"I wish I could recommend the experience of not being killed to everyone."

The trick is that to get the full effect you have to be genuinely uncertain that you're going to survive

It's one of the maddening perversities of human psychology that we only notice we're alive when we're reminded we're going to die

The effect: A lightening, an amused indifference to the nonsense that the rest of us think of as the serious business of the world

"You can't feel crazily grateful to be alive your whole life any more than you can stay passionately in love forever - or grieve forever, for that matter. Time makes us all betray ourselves and get back to the busywork of living."

"But I know that it really happened, that that state of grace is accessible to us, even if I only blundered across it once and never find my way back."

We take our worst moods so much more seriously than our best, and seem to think that our depressive moments contain more unsentimental truths about our lives than our more euphoric moments

Whenever some ruined person decides to take it out on the world, you have to ask, "why doesn't this happen every day?"

"Past Tim" remains forever beyond the reach of justice. The only one I can punish is "Future Tim".

The young and the drunk are both temporarily exempt from the oppressive sense of obligation that ruins so much of our lives, the nagging worry that we really ought to be doing something productive instead

"I found myself unexpectedly in my forties in much the same way I used to wake up disoriented on friend's couches. I'm a little appalled by all the time I've lost. I don't feel middle-aged - I just feel like I've been young a lot longer than most people."

Like school, you can blow life off for as long as you want, but you still have to take the finals

There is no drinking as enjoyable as daytime drinking, when the sun is out, the bars are empty of dilettantes, and the afternoon stretches ahead of you like summer vacation

Squandering time is a luxury of profligate youth, when the years are to us as dollars are to billionaires. Doing the same thing in middle age just makes you nervous, not with vague puritan guilt but the more urgent worry that you're running out of time, a deadline you can feel in your cells.

You can't stay here: Read It Again Because It's Amazing

It turns out that when there is some conspicuous gap at the centre of someone's existence, there is probably a very specific, obvious reason for it, and the reason you're avoiding confronting it directly is that it's something you don't want to know

Knowing things about someone is not the same as knowing them

The Soul Toupee: That thing about ourselves we are most deeply embarrassed by and like to think we have cunningly concealed from the world, but which is, in fact, pitifully obvious to everybody who knows us

"I mentally wrote it off under cost-of-being-friends-with-Skelly expenses"

This is one of the things we rely on our friends for: to think better of us than we think of ourselves

"Only he and I were there in that moment; now he's gone."

"If that moment was not true, then nothing is."

Parables of Skelly:

The Felling of the Raiment.

Now a dispute arose between the Four,
And Discord was sown among them.
But The Lord smote Skelly's garment,
So that it fell upon the Earth.
And at once the Company was
overcome with Mirth,
And Lo, their Wrath was forgotten.

The Walking in the Water.

It came to pass that they were
overcome with strong Drink,
And took their rest upon a Landing.
Skelly went alone unto the edge of
the Water,
And was lost to their sight in a Mist.
And they heard a sound upon the Water
As of a great Stone dropped into the Sea.
And they cried out unto Him, saying:
"Skelly? Where art Thou? Skelly?"
But He was no more among them.

"I'm afraid most people choose political parties based on the same question they ask about regular parties: Who else is going to be there?"

"Like a symphony interrupted by a ring tone"

"Let me propose that if your beliefs or convictions matter to you more than people - if they require you to act as though you were a worse person than you are - you may have lost perspective."

It's hard to find anything to say about life without immersing yourself in the world, but it's also just about impossible to figure out what that might be, or how best to say it, without getting the hell out of it again

Choose time over money in every situation, because you can always make more money

Most of us decide not WHAT to believe, but WHOM to believe

Good stories seldom come from happy experiences

Nothing anyone says in defence of such major, irrevocable life choices is likely to be their real reason for making them; the number and vociferousness of our rationales is only an indication of how irrational and primal those decisions are

Quite a lot of what passes itself off as a dialogue about our society consists of people trying to justify their own choices as the only right or natural ones by denouncing others' as selfish and wrong. So it's easy to overlook that it all arises out of insecurity. Hidden beneath all this smug certainty is a desperate cluelessness, and the naked 3am terror of regret.

Life is an unrepeatable experiment with no control

One of the hardest things to look at is the life we didn't lead, the path not taken, potential left unfulfilled. In stories, those who look back - Lot's wife, Orpheus, are irrevocably lost. Looking to the side instead, to gauge how our companions are faring, is a way of glancing at a safer reflection of what we cannot directly bear, like Perseus seeing the Gorgon safely mirrored in his shield.

It's tempting to read other people's lives as cautionary fables or repudiations of our own, to covet or denigrate them instead of seeing them for what they are: other people's lives, island universes, unknowable

It's easy to demonstrate how progressive and open-minded and loyal you are when it costs you nothing

"I finally accepted that I was going to have to file this under Things I'm Never Going To Understand, a mental file already crammed to overflowing."

"I wonder if this same fear isn't beneath our 21st-century intolerance for waits and downtime and silence. It's as if, if we all had to stand still and shut up and turn off our machines for one minute, we'd hear the time passing and just start screaming. So instead we keep ourselves perpetually stunned with stimuli, thereby missing out on the very thing we're so scared of losing."

All those tedious interstitial moments we can't wait to get through make up most of our lives. We don't even think of stairways as places in themselves, only as a means to get somewhere else.

Relax. What's your hurry? We'll get there soon enough - all too soon, in fact. And once we arrive, the fun will be over. So why not enjoy the company?

Laurence Sterne's Philosophy: "A defiant frivolity that declines to take the world as seriously as it tries to insist upon."

By rearranging the dreary chronology of real life, Sterne shows us the people he loves alive in their ridiculous prime, rescuing them from the oblivion of the black page.

If he hadn't come to the end of his story, he had, at least, reached a good leaving-off point, which is probably the best any of us can hope for.

"It seemed so presumptuous, like strangers showing up on your doorstep expecting you to switch religions before they leave."

Happiness comes almost from averted vision, like how astronomers can see a faint star not by looking directly at it, but rather letting their gaze drift to the space immediately next to it. It's also true that the only stars we ever see are not the real stars, in the present, but always only the light of the untouchable past.