Books

Book Review: “Living, Thinking, Looking”

By Siri Hustvedt '86GSAS (Picador)

By
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“How do we see, remember, feel, and interact with people?” asks Siri Hustvedt ’86GSAS on the first page of her new essay collection, *Living, Thinking, Looking*. “What does it mean to sleep, to dream, and to speak? When we use the word *self*, what are we talking about?” To find answers, the “unaffiliated intellectual roamer” delves into psychology, philosophy, art history and theory, and, above all, neuroscience.

The essays, written over the past six years, are divided into the three sections of the book’s title, though these categories bleed into one another so liberally that it almost makes them meaningless. An essay on the French artist Annette Messager in the “Looking” section, for example, recounts childhood memories just as intense as many in the autobiographical section, “Living”: “Dolls and figures and stuffed animals that talked to one another … The funeral my sister and I gave for a dead sparrow we found in the grass.” The “Living” essays are largely dominated by Hustvedt’s fascination with her own neurological conditions: crippling migraines and insomnia. The “Thinking” essays are perhaps the most far-reaching, interrogating the biology behind the memory, imagination, perception, and imagination she explores in the other two sections.

It is impossible, Hustvedt seems to be saying, to separate art and science and experience, and it is only in our examination of their interaction that we can even begin to ask her most ambitious question: “What does it mean to be human?”

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