Books

Review: *My Misspent Youth*

By Meghan Daum ’96SOA. (Open City Books)

By
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It’s hard to tell what’s more captivating about the essays in Meghan Daum’s *My Misspent Youth:* the wry derision she aims at American life or the gentle humility she wraps around her part in it.

One essay is devoted to her disgust for wall-to-wall carpet, another to her hatred for dolls. (“I’m not talking about a cool indifference,” she says. “I’m talking about a palpable loathing.”) Then there are the subcultures she could live without, among them “Music Is My Bag”—people who “load up their allotted space with memorabilia, saving the certificates of participation from regional festivals, the composer-a-month calendars, the Mostly Mozart posters.” (Daum’s parents are musicians and she spent much of her childhood practicing the oboe.) There are many Bags in life, she reminds us, and the difference between Music Is My Bag and Literature Is My Bag is the $300 music stand and musical-note coasters versus the $300 dictionary stand and silver bookmarks.

These rants flow with no real rancor; hyperbolic disdain is balanced with passionate affection—for oak floors, toy stuffed animals, the feel of an oboe in her hands. Loathing for science fiction fanatics feeds her fascination with the Ravenhearts, north Californian polygamists who unearthed their philosophy in science fiction novels. However, Daum’s larger point, according to her introduction, is “the tendency of contemporary human beings to live not actual lives but simulations of lives, loving not actual people but the general idea of those people, operating at several degrees of remove from what might be considered authentic if we weren’t trying so hard to create authenticity through songs and clothes and advertisements and a million other agents of realness.” Daum subverts that syndrome with the raw

truth, confessing things most people would never admit to, much less publish: drowning in debt, the absence of grief at the death of a lifelong friend, or, in “American Shiksa,” the stereotypical attitudes that complicate her experience dating Jewish men.

While each of the ten essays has its own charm, one stands out. Much the way Joan Didion, some thirty years ago, captured the dissipated romanticism of New York in “Goodbye to All That,” Daum, in her title essay, describes her pre–New Yorker fascination with the city, the neurotic rationalizing when she got there, and the disillusion that eventually drove her to Nebraska.

She had convinced herself that graduate school at Columbia and an apartment with oak floors on the Upper West Side were her entrée to the bohemian intellectual life she had fantasized about since high school. The dream—especially her Columbia degree—left her $75,000 in debt, happily rationalized when an acquaintance with a professor landed her a rent-stabilized apartment.

“My Misspent Youth” evokes the timeless allure of New York and the naiveté of beguiled inhabitants who do things that might not make sense—but make for great stories later. The essays also chronicle the mistakes and sacrifices of a young woman hellbent on what she deems “literary legitimacy.” Since many of the essays in My Misspent Youth (her first published book) initially appeared in *The New Yorker, Harper’s, GQ, Self,* and *Vogue,* some, at least, of Daum’s frenzied efforts must have paid off.

Her struggle ends happily. Daum refers to her departure as “leaving the party before the cops break it up.” “Apparently,” she writes, “people in Nebraska also listen to NPR, and there are even places to live in Lincoln that have oak floors. Had I known that before, I might have skipped out on this New York thing altogether and spared myself the financial and psychological ordeal.”

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