



Remembering Elizabeth Bishop: An Oral Biography

By Gary Fountain

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This book interweaves more than 120 interviews with relatives, friends, colleagues, and students of Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979), one of America's finest poets. Among the interviewees are numerous intellectual and artistic figures, including John Ashbery, Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Giroux, Clement Grenberg, Thom Gunn, John Hollander, Mary McCarthy, James Merrill, Katha Pollitt, Ned Rorem, Lloyd Schwartz, Anne Stevenson, Rosalyn Turek, Helen Vendler, and Richard Wilber.

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Editorial Review

From Kirkus Reviews

A multivocal treatment well suited to the complex and dappled life of one of America's premier modern poets. Members of Bishop's wide circle of friends from literature and the arts (among them John Ashbery, Robert Giroux, Helen Muchnic, Anne Stevenson, Ned Rorem, and James Laughlin) recall with eloquence the poet's intelligence, her reserve, her anxiety, and her peculiar intensity through the stages and stories of her accomplished and troubled life. Born to a mentally ill mother and a father who died when she was eight months old, Bishop (1911-1979) spent her early years living with family members in Worcester, Boston, and Great Village, Mass. Recollections by her childhood friends reveal a very intelligent but odd personality--shy, and often embarrassed or pained by common experiences. Several contributors comment, however, on the order, discipline, and companionship she found at the Walnut Hill School between 1927 and '30; there she began to write plays, short stories, book reviews, and poetry for the school's magazine. From her Vassar days, Bishop is remembered for her strong mind, arch wit, sometimes taciturn demeanor, and her talent for writing. With Mary McCarthy and others, she launched the alternative literary magazine *Con Spirito*, which created a sensation on campus and brought her to the notice of the Ivy League literati of the time, eventually yielding an introduction to poet Marianne Moore. After graduating from college, Bishop traveled to New York, Europe, Key West, and Rio de Janeiro, and through several lesbian love relationships, the most sustained of which with Lota de Macedo Soares. Friends recall these adult years as difficult, sometimes drunken, but also rewarding for Bishop as a person and a poet. After her lover's death in 1967, Bishop's life took shape around a series of teaching appointments at the University of Washington, Harvard, and finally New York University. Although a few of Fountain's (English dept. chairman at Miss Porter's School) and Brazeau's (*Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, 1983) transitions push too hard, the portrait of the poet this oral biography creates is, finally, absorbing and at times beautiful and graced with artfulness. --
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Review

"*Remembering Elizabeth Bishop* amply succeeds in what it proposes to do: It offers an intimate view of Bishop's desperate and lonely life, as that life was observed by those who were there at the time?and those observers are a particularly perceptive and articulate lot."? *New York Times Book Review*

"A multivocal treatment well suited to the complex and dappled life of one of America's premier modern poets."? *Kirkus Reviews*

"This is not a random collection of reminiscences, but?thanks to Gary Fountain's brilliant intercutting of interviews done by himself and Peter Brazeau?a genuine biography, a collage that somehow constitutes a vision of Bishop's life. It illuminates much that hitherto was obscure, and is the indispensable companion to her letters. Bishop's life, idiosyncratic, seemingly marginal, was exemplary. Her masked but intense refusal to be anything but herself reveals like an x-ray the contradictions and pleasures of twentieth-century culture. The tragedies at the root of her life were at the root of the mastery achieved by her art."? Frank Bidart

About the Author

Gary Fountain is chair of the English department at Miss Porter's School. The late Peter Brazeau was author of *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*.

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