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You Can't Catch Death: A Daughter's Memoir



Synopsis

In all of the obituaries and writing about Richard Brautigan that appeared after his suicide, none revealed to Ianthe Brautigan the father she knew. Through it took all of her courage, she delved into her memories, good and bad, to retrieve him, and began to write. *You Can't Catch Death* is a frank, courageous, heartbreaking reflection on both a remarkable man and the child he left behind.

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Customer Reviews

His daughter was 24 when quintessential '60s author Richard Brautigan (*Trout Fishing in America*) killed himself in 1984, and the obituaries were almost as painful for her as his tragic act. "I did not recognize the dignified, brilliant, hysterically funny, and sometimes difficult man who was my father in anything they wrote," says Ianthe Brautigan, who makes it her business to capture those qualities in this poignant memoir. Her recollections of an unsettled childhood bouncing between two free-spirited parents' bohemian homes (in San Francisco, Montana, Hawaii, and Japan) are remarkably free from bitterness, even when she chronicles drunken phone calls from her suicidal father. Alcohol was Richard Brautigan's fatal weakness, prompted by severe depressions rooted in an impoverished, unhappy childhood. But Ianthe also depicts his tenderness and warmth, the magical sessions of impromptu storytelling with writer buddies like Tom McGuane and Jim Harrison, the glamour of meeting movie stars Peter Fonda and Margot Kidder. She comes to terms with the past that always haunted her father when she makes a trip to Oregon to see her grandmother, estranged from Richard for 25 years. Without presuming to solve the mystery of his death, the author reclaims the values of Brautigan's life and work in her touching, sensitively written book.

--Wendy Smith

Richard Brautigan (1937-1984) made a big splash with *Trout Fishing in America* (1967), whose unbuttoned prose found a ready-made audience in the burgeoning counterculture. Brautigan completed 11 more books of fiction and nine of poetry before he took his own life; he is now remembered as a campus favorite, and a notorious drinker. His daughter lanthe aims to supplant that portrait with a more complex and tender view; her raw, affecting and largely admiring memoir recalls "R.B." as a father and as a writer. Rather than follow his life, or her own, from the late '60s to the early '80s, lanthe breaks her book up into short sections—some narrative, some meditative, some impressionistic—in a manner mildly reminiscent of *Trout Fishing* itself. In one three-page segment, the adult lanthe tells her own daughter about Richard's suicide. In the next two pages, lanthe recalls the bike she got for her ninth birthday. The piece after that (one paragraph) is purely lyrical: "Sometimes the love I have for my father overtakes my whole being..." (A series of single paragraphs, scattered throughout, describe lanthe's dreams.) The elder Brautigan comes off as energetic, affectionate, playful, outrageous and needy—increasingly so as the '70s wore on. His death and lanthe's progressive reactions to it dominate much of the book. lanthe's memoir creates a vivid sense of her continuing loss and shows how she has come to terms with it. Her work should please "R.B."s still-ardent fans, who will seek (and find) facts about a father, and leave with a new, moving knowledge of his daughter. Author tour. (June) FYI: lanthe's memoir appears at the same time as her father's newly published novella, *An Unfortunate Woman*, a forgotten manuscript she discovered (see review in this issue's Fiction Forecasts). Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I have read a great deal of Richard Brautigan's work and thought I would hear what his daughter had to say about him. I loved her voice as much or maybe more than Richard's. I fell in love with her vulnerability and I realized a great deal about Richard, that came through in his writing, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I recommend this book to anyone who has suffered a traumatic death or simply anyone who wants to experience the heart and soul of another human being who writes beautifully.

My first Richard Brautigan work was "*Trout Fishing In America*" which I read in the late 60s. I was -- and still am -- enchanted by his poetic visions of life. There is something very pure and absolutely wonderful in the way he wrote. For the next several years, I made it a point to seek out his books whenever I visited bookstores. Then, in the mid-70s, life became busy with family and work, and I

lost touch with this sensitive poet and his little books of sparkling wit and beauty. In May 2000, I unpacked a box and found again Brautigan's beauty books that had been packed away for the preceding 25 year or so. I stopped unpacking, went outside, sat down beneath a tree, and read the books I had of his again -- "Trout Fishing In America", "In Watermelon Sugar" (my favorite), "The Pill Versus The Sprinhill Disaster", and "Rommel Drives On Deep Into Egypt". The sweet memories of his writings flooded back to me -- here was a truly sensitive soul so full of music and poetry, a unique way of seeing the world, and a beautiful way of expressing it. My interest rekindled, I wanted to find all the books I had missed of his in the intervening years, and learned of his suicide in 1984... I discovered his daughter's book, and read the story of her father through her eyes. It's also a book about herself, about her coming to grips with the tragedy and terrible pain of her father's death, about her journey to Oregon to see her father's mother and come to grips with the poor and abusive boyhood that Richard had kept hidden from his family. We see Richard Brautigan and come to know him as the sensitive, troubled, eloquent, and deeply beautiful soul he was, and we hear it through his daughter's tenderness and love. Yes, I'm sure Richard would be very proud of his daughter -- and very happy too. I truly hope we hear more from lanthe. She has her father's gift of poetry and expression, and she has her own voice.

Although I began reading *You Can't Catch Death* with the expectation that it would be about her father, lanthe Brautigan quickly set me straight; this book is about her. Reading the book provides a fascinating look at her turbulent childhood with a talented, but troubled father. A father who clearly loved his daughter but, just as clearly, didn't quite know what to do with her. Brautigan the younger is a skilled wordsmith whose first book displays a polish and readability usually associated with more 'seasoned' authors. Whether or not you appreciate Richard Brautigan, after reading this book you will appreciate his daughter.

Heart-felt, brave and well written, as one touched by Richard Brautigan's work and the brother of a father of an only daughter who took his own life I found lanthe Brautigan's memoir especially meaningful. Many thanks to the author for her diligent, insight-filled and loving account. May my own teenage daughter come to know her own involved yet imperfect single-dad soÃ¢ÂÂ even after the inevitable takes me.

She writes like her dad who happens to be one of my very favorite authors. I am not really sure why I didn't give this five stars. Maybe I should. Well, I would highly recommend it.

This is an absolutely riveting portrait of Richard Brautigan and a must-read for anyone who has enjoyed Richard's work in the past. While reading it, I had to keep reminding myself that this is not a piece of fiction. This is the real story of Richard Brautigan, and in some ways not so different from the fictional character we came to love in his novels. On top of that, this is a fascinating tale of a father and daughter living through extraordinary circumstances together, and her triumph over the tragedy of his death.

great book about my favorite writer...

I love this book. It is as painful to read as going to the funeral of a friend or a writer whose work you loved. It is as rewarding as the grieving process. We've been wondering about Brautigan's daughter, the girl with the stange name, Ianthe, and this book of hers lets us know all about her. This memoir she has taken so long to write suggests she has struggled to find her own voice, as a writer, and I am happy to report that her father's style has influenced her enormously. That's a very good thing. I will look forward to the publication of the next Brautigan and I will be as sad it is not by Richard as I am happy it is by his daughter, Ianthe. Write a novel, Ianthe, write short stories and short short stories, too. We'll be waiting patiently for you.

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