



**SLEEPLESS
NIGHTS**

**ELIZABETH
HARDWICK**

**INTRODUCTION BY
GEOFFREY O'BRIEN**

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SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

ELIZABETH HARDWICK was born in Lexington, Kentucky, and educated at the University of Kentucky and Columbia University. A recipient of a Gold Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she is the author of *Sleepless Nights* and two other novels, a biography of Herman Melville, and four collections of essays, including *Seduction and Betrayal*, a study of women in literature that is also published by New York Review Books. Elizabeth Hardwick lives in New York City.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS DENSE, compressed, singular work was described when published in 1979 as a novel. It bore, however, a peculiar relation to the genre. It was a novel without a plot, with a protagonist who shared the name of its author, and whose successive circumstances followed the known contours of Elizabeth Hardwick's life; a novel that could allow itself to move in any direction in time that it chose, that could shift its attention from one person or situation to another as abruptly as a filmmaker might splice together two incongruous images; a novel that seemed to declare the impossibility of separating itself from life, yet admittedly one "seeming to be true when all of it is not." ("A good deal of the book," Hardwick stated in an interview at the time, "is, as they say, 'made up.'") *Sleepless Nights* might be taken as an exploration of the problem of genre, the problem of distinguishing fiction from what is so coarsely described as "nonfiction," except that the book is more like a demonstration that the problem is illusory.

The book inhabits that divide in so inevitable a fashion as to dissolve what was then—and is often still—perceived as a natural barrier. The norms of fiction, the reader of *Sleepless Nights* might well conclude, are after all a constriction, or at least a superfluity: Since to live is to make fiction, what need to disguise the world as another, alternate one? At the same time strict reportage, with its prohibition against invention, imposes its own aesthetically intolerable demands. *Sleepless Nights*, an alchemical tour de force, reports by inventing

and invents by reporting. It continues to remind us how the novel can become richer by permitting itself the resources of essay, journal, memoir, prose poem, chronicle. It is a commonplace that every book needs to find its own form, but how many do?

Sleepless Nights enlarges on Hardwick's earlier novels (*The Ghostly Lover* and *The Simple Truth*) by allowing itself the structural and stylistic freedoms of her literary essays. For Hardwick the essay has always been a form allowing for sudden transformations. Frames dissolve; writers become characters; characters reenter the world as independent beings; real events assume the stylization and symbolic weight of scenes in novels. There is a constant interpenetration of the fictive and the experienced. A description of the last days of Dylan Thomas has the density found in some ancient chronicler—Plutarch or Tacitus—whose every sentence has a ring of calm fatality: "The people near him visited indignities upon themselves, upon him, upon others. There seems to have been a certain amount of competition at the bedside, assertions of obscure priority. The honors were more and more vague, confused by the ghastly, suffering needs of this broken host and by his final impersonality." Discussing Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* in her famous essay "Seduction and Betrayal," Hardwick does not merely allude to or analyze *Clarissa* and Mr. Lovelace but rather allows them the scope of living beings, discontented forces escaping from their fictional frame: "Words are her protection. Her cries to heaven go out in the next post. Her powers are not perfect, but they reduce the insuperable Lovelace to rape, the most unworthy resource. Are they lovers, or opponents? They have furiously, curiously tested each other and the consummation is death."

Writing—part of life and yet not of it—is the medium that permits movement through, across, beyond. In *Sleepless Nights*, the narrator begins: "It is June. This is what I have decided to do with my life just now." It is life, then, that

we hold in our hands: real time, the actual room in which the words—"this work of transformed and even distorted memory"—are being written. The past will be made part of the book—the past is what the book is all about—but only by being incorporated into the present moment in which one word is added to another. All that has been or might have been real once will be made into an object. "If only one knew what to remember or pretend to remember. Make a decision and what you want from the lost things will present itself. You can take it down like a can from a shelf. Perhaps." In that "perhaps" is the whole art of *Sleepless Nights*. The experiences that are evoked, described, brought to life, are at the same time shown to be words, tokens, emblems. The book stands for everything that is not the book, that could never be in a book. The building up of a world in prose is countered by its equally meticulous dismantling, until we are left with—what, exactly? This object, this structure that haunts as much by what it leaves out as by what it contains.

She writes of her mother: "I never knew a person so indifferent to the past. It was as if she did not know who she was." Omission here is description, more faithful than the fruits of careful research could be: it is life with the blanks left in, and all the questions that flourish in those blanks. Unanswered, unanswerable questions are a recurring feature of the book. The prose often finds its resolution not in a full stop but a question mark. Both novel and memoir are conventionally expected to provide definite answers—who really did what and what finally became of them and what it meant. *Sleepless Nights* is more comfortable—indeed, can only be comfortable—among uncertainties, insufficiencies, unsatisfyingly partial or obstructed views. Billie Holiday appears (the real Billie Holiday, and it was at this point that one began to gauge how unlike other novels this was), intimately penetrates the lives of others, but is not, finally, to be apprehended: "The mind strains to recover the blank spaces in history and

our pale, gray-green eyes looked into her swimming, dark, inconstant pools—and got back nothing.”

The collage-like texture is crucial. To fill the gaps—to explain the connections—would be a betrayal, a papering over of those breakups, those ruptures of contact which in some sense are the point. The paratactic laying-out of details—in Kentucky the “wrinkled, broken jockeys with faces like the shell of a nut,” in Manhattan the affluent young couples “taking off the stoop so that drunks cannot loiter, making a whole floor for the children to be quiet on”—stripped of connective material becomes a kind of music, punctuated by aphorism and tiny anecdote, a music suitable for emphasizing patterns of recurrence and points of no return, the way the rhymes of lives and neighborhoods and eras can turn, on a dime, into stark asymmetry. Whole towns, years, marriages are fitted into a paragraph or two. Juxtaposed, the paragraphs form a map, a grid of spatial and temporal relations within which the narrator exists. We thought we were exploring a single life, and are brought to see that no life can be single, that anyone’s solitude is dense with the imagined solitude of others.

The book is as much a questioning of the first person as of genre. The most intimate self-portrait might turn out to be a sketch of someone else, built up out of glimpses, rumors, imagined secrets, fragmentary admissions: bachelors, maids, radicals, adulterers. Just at the point in its arc when a reader might expect the book to move inward, it moves outward into the contemplation of other lives. Thus it is a novel after all and not a memoir, but a novel that searches for ways to describe the shapes of lives without having to recount each of them step by step. The search is overt; *Sleepless Nights* is among other things an essay on the difficulties, emotional and technical, of undertaking such a work. The reader is enlisted to participate in that search and those difficulties—and thus to share the exhilaration of finding a form adequate to

express “the tendency of lives to obey the laws of gravity and to sink downward, falling as gently and slowly as a kite, or violently breaking, smashing.”

We come upon paragraphs that might be notes toward a taxonomy of situations and responses. “True, with the weak something is always happening: improvisation, surprise, suspense, injustice, manipulation, hypochondria, secret drinking, jealousy, lying, crying, hiding in the garden, driving off in the middle of the night.” Who needs the three-hundred-page novel if a paragraph or two can carry its essence, in the same way that a fragment of memory—an exchange of glances at a party, a mistimed joke—can stand in for years of experience? Embedded in *Sleepless Nights* are a hundred potential novels, swarming milieus compacted into gists: “Weaknesses discovered, hidden forces unmasked, predictions, what will last and what is doomed, what will start and what will end.” An immense Balzacian chronicle held in the palm of the hand: such a possibility makes novel-writing a fresh enterprise, capable of foregoing thickets of plot development, all the better to get at the live moments that plots are built from.

In the end we are left with an extraordinary apprehension of all that is elusive, haunting, unrecoverable in the human past and, simultaneously, of something proportioned, fixed and flexible in shape, an object to be contemplated: the book, or more precisely this book. What the book cannot hold is lost, and even what it can hold is lost, but the book is not lost. In some sense *Sleepless Nights* asks the impossible of writing, that it share in the life of which it is made, that it remain unfinished, that the door stay open. The result is an object at once open and closed, mysterious and fully articulated: a book written in the form of a life.

—GEOFFREY O’BRIEN