

Loving Robert Lowell

Sandra Hochman

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In 1961, twentysomething Sandra Hochman interviewed forty-three-year-old poet Robert Lowell for *Encounter* magazine. Lowell agreed to meet her—just a half hour after their telephone call—at a New York City tea room and was immediately friendly and flirtatious. He confided that he was leaving his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, and believed Hochman would be the perfect person to start over with. Amid the spring snow on Brooklyn Bridge, he vowed to marry her. Hochman was drawn to Lowell's impulsiveness and charisma. At the time, she was also separated from her husband, violinist Ivry Gitlis. Was this a coup de foudre or a disaster waiting to happen?

In *Loving Robert Lowell*, Hochman, a novelist and journalist, recalls the euphoria and cruel letdown of her months-long affair with the man she, like many, called “Cal,” a childhood nickname likening him to the tyrant Caligula. Lowell's past—a Catholic upbringing in a prominent Boston family, being a wartime conscientious objector, and a first marriage to novelist Jean Stafford—emerges through their recreated conversations, while Hochman fills in her own history through flashbacks.

It's in capturing the fevered pace and heightened emotion of their liaison that the book shines. A budding poet, Hochman was thrilled to have the undivided attention of her literary hero. They read and commented on each other's poems (examples of which are quoted here at length), attended mass and held a seder to understand their respective faith traditions, and shared their hobbies. “We were two dream pickers trying to fit the jigsaw of our own lives together in a new puzzle,” Hochman remembers.

Woven through this glistening picture of fresh love, however, are seeds of doubt. Despite the warnings, it comes as a shock to the reader as much as to Hochman herself when Lowell has a manic episode at their engagement party, tries to choke her, and gets taken away in a straitjacket. The true extent of Lowell's mental illness, unknown to her before, was suddenly clear. “I ended our love affair in a mental ward,” she laments, yet the bittersweet conclusion can't outweigh the innocent beauty of what went before.

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