



Sometimes I Sing: The Renovation of Heart and Home

Mary Hershberger

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Via expansive ruminations and inventive metaphors, this memoir explores the slow, somewhat painful evolution toward the self.

Following in the tradition of writers who encounter their truest selves via new settings, *Sometimes I Sing* by Mary Hershberger centers on a dilapidated Victorian home in Syracuse, New York. The book becomes a tour through the author's renovation of the house, naming rooms after people and memories that helped to shape her and her notions of home.

An avid do-it-yourselfer, Hershberger restored twenty houses before turning to one final home for herself. With a failed marriage behind her and her own independence ahead, the author entered into the unholy of unions—the pact between a decaying property and a middle-class owner.

Before tackling the house, the author explains her life leading up to it. She grew up in a tense and angry Mennonite household, made barren by the bitter resentment her mother held against all that was forbidden to her by her faith. According to the author, the bitterness so consumed her mother that little was left for the children. As adults, three out of four children suffered from serious mental illness. The construction of a family, as well as the impact of nature and nurture, fascinates the author, who tries to work her way to an understanding of self by reflecting on her birth family, the family she made as an adult, and the independent woman she became.

Hershberger deftly creates this character of self through her own language and by using carefully selected quotes; sources range from Black Elk to Emily Dickinson to the Bible to a child in a concentration camp. Her articulations of self arise from setting: the Mennonite household, the old Victorian in wretched shape, the aging woman and mother alone in her house, the writer and artist working in her home. By using multiple extended metaphors, Hershberger searches for and embodies what literature has always given her:

Books for me are not sermons but mentors, not analyses but expressions, not numbing chewing gum escape but exploration and experience of heart, soul, and mind, registering clear and unmistakable responses in the spectrometry of the heart.

The voice in this memoir is often philosophical, moving into expansive ruminations on what might constitute abuse, how one might respond to mental illness, and why some voices reverberate in memories. The house at the center of the book adds history and context. Hershberger moves from room to room, using each as a scaffold for engaging larger issues in the text, and showing photographs of their restoration.

In addition to the organizing principle of the house, the book also uses the metaphor of a quilt, with its leftover scraps bound by proximity and happenstance. The resulting effect ends up being uneven. Multiple rooms approach multiple subjects and ideas, and while the tangents can be engaging, they also suggest that everything in the narrative is equally important. As a result, an overarching understanding is somewhat elusive by the end of the book.

Sometimes I Sing will appeal to audiences looking for a book that speaks to the spirit and its slow, and sometimes painful, evolution.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (June 24, 2016)

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