

The Life of John Cotterell

John Cotterell

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The resonant memories shared in the memoir The Life of John Cotterell are followed up by family tributes.

The Life of John Cotterell is a moving memoir about life, love, and loss, told against the backdrop of twentieth-century England.

John Cotterell's life was off to a rough start when, at the age of three, he was diagnosed with poliomyelitis—polio, as we know it today. This illness left him permanently disabled, but while it undoubtedly made his life more difficult, it didn't stop him from living it to the fullest.

Cotterell's early years stand out in the text. He recalls his mother pushing him several miles back and forth between their home and the hospital three times a week in poignant terms; he remembers crying because of his painful medical treatments, prompting his mother's tears as well. The heaviness of such stories is balanced by more humorous events, as when Cotterell entered school and answered in the affirmative when his new teacher asked if he could add—but then did so incorrectly.

Cotterell also devotes special attention to his memories of courting and marrying his wife. Their early relationship is preserved as a comedy of errors, its events made to seem lighthearted. When difficult times come, they hit the couple hard: Cotterell's wife's illness and death at a young age are recalled, and both loom over the portions of the book that follow her passing. Twentieth-century England is seen in the background of Cotterell's story, both in its periods of chaos and calm.

The book is incomplete: Cotterell passed away while writing his memoir, so his daughter-in-law Sharon added a final chapter to give closure to his story. Afterwards, three brief chapters focus on his areas of interest, including music and sports, suggesting that the book was meant to include a section of trivia and nuggets of wisdom.

But although the book itself wasn't finished by him, the portion that tells his life story is. The events of his lifetime are relayed in a clear, concise manner, their matter-of-fact style softened by occasional bursts of wry humor. Still, there is not much emotion on the surface of the book; its general mood is almost detached. This begins to change in the last three chapters: Cotterell's personality is more apparent, and the tone more colloquial. The mood of the book changes again with his daughter-in-law's contribution: sentiment permeates every word of her chapter, and the book closes with a heartfelt personal tribute.

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CAROLINA CIUCCI (January 21, 2021)

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