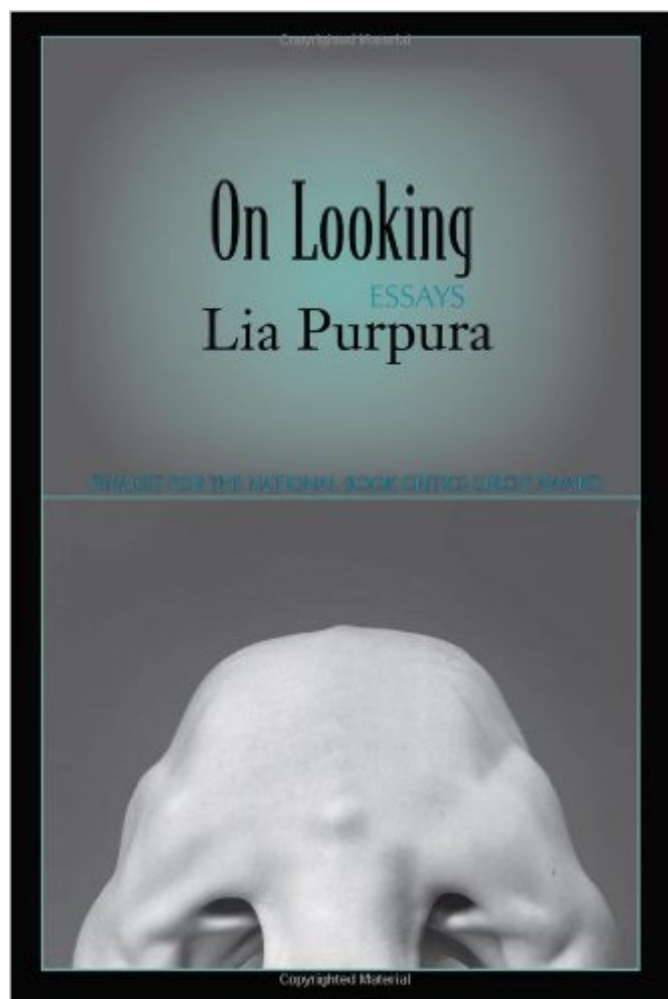


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On Looking: Essays



Synopsis

• Purpura is the real deal, and so is every successive sentence in this collection. A cornucopiac vocabulary is married to a strict economy of expression; an offbeat curiosity is married to the courage of difficult witnessing. . . . • "Albert Goldbarth • Purpura's prose is a system of delicate shocks • leaps and connections and syncopated revelations, all in the service of the spirit negotiating the truth of its experience. • "Sven Birkerts Lia Purpura's daring new book of lyric essays, *On Looking*, is concerned with the aesthetics and ethics of seeing. In these elegantly wrought meditations, patterns and meanings emerge from confusion, the commonplace grows strange and complex, beauty reveals its flaws, and even the most repulsive object turns gorgeous. Purpura's hand is clearly guided by poetry and behaves unpredictably, weaving together, in one lit instance, sugar eggs, binoculars, and Emerson's words: "I like the silent church before the sermon begins." In "Autopsy Report," Purpura takes an intimate look at the ruin of our bodies after death, examining the "dripping fruits" of organs and the spine in its "wet, red earth." A similar reverence is held for the alien jellyfish in "On Form," where she notes that "in order to see their particular beauty...we have to suspend our fear, we have to love contradiction." Her essays question art and its responses as well as its responsibilities, challenge familiar and familial relationships, and alter the borders between the violent and the luminous, the harrowing and the sensual. • Above all, Purpura's essays are a call to notice. She is writer-as-telescope, kaleidoscope, microscope, and mirror. • As she says: "By seeing I called to things, and in turn, things called me, applied me to their sight and we became each as treasure, startling to one another, and rare." This is, indeed, a rare and startling treasure of a book. Lia Purpura is the author of *Increase* (essays), *Stone Sky Lifting* (poems), *The Brighter the Veil* (poems), and *Poems of Grzegorz Musial: Berliner Tagebuch and Taste of Ash* (translations). Her awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Prose, a Pushcart Prize, a Fulbright Fellowship, the Associated Writing Programs Award in Creative Nonfiction, and the Ohio State University Press/The Journal Award in Poetry. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Agni*, *DoubleTake*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. She is Writer-in-Residence at Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland, and teaches at the Rainier Writing Workshop MFA Program in Tacoma, Washington.

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Customer Reviews

This is an important book. It presents looking as an ethical act in a world that is filled with cruelty as well as beauty. Without preaching, it speaks out against multiple forms of violence in our culture; the essay about the Maryland snipers is particularly searing at this moment when America refuses to reconsider its love affair with the gun despite events at VA Tech. And while it emphatically rejects sexism, it is complex in its analysis of the relations between men and women, willing to consider the possible pleasures of being an object of the "male gaze." Though it never moralizes, *On Looking* is a deeply moral book, and truly poetic. The going can be difficult, but struggling with its language rewards the reader. Every so often, a moment of preciousness intrudes, but on the whole, Purpura's touch is fine, and her vision is admirable.

This is very different from what I'm used to reading (I don't typically buy essay collections). I would say it's not really for the faint of heart, the first essay is an examination of autopsies, a pretty stark intro. Occasionally, I feel like I don't fully understand the connections between various subjects but then again, the essays probably deserve a second reading so maybe it'll be clearer the second time around. The best one is "Sugar Eggs: A Reverie". In the first few paragraphs I wasn't especially interested, but stuck with it. After a few minutes it almost felt entrancing, to the point that I felt very disappointed when the piece had to end (just read it and you'll see why). That essay alone is worth the cost of the whole book.

The style here is all important. From the first skim of the slim volume, one knows the style will be all important and set a high standards. Even the author's name seems to say this, though whether it is

a nom de plume or her actual name I do not know (nor is it relevant), with "Lia" invoking light and "Purpura" repeating 'pure' twice, making her extra-pure, to essays what extra-virgin olive oil is to salads. The inside title page, identifying this as a not for profit publishing venture and with a sponsor's logo, informs us that this book is a hothouse flower, a rare orchid that cannot be asked to turn a profit in a crass marketplace. Finally, in an early essay (p. 11, repeated p. 30), the author puts in an explicit claim that she is a dead ringer for John Singer Sargent's portrait of Mrs. Agnew, who is pure sex in an Edwardian evening gown. When it comes to setting up a volume to be judged before reading, on a per-page basis, Lia Purpura beats Sarah Palin. The first essay, "Autopsy Report" has to meet these high expectations. It is not lyrical - lyrics sing - and its dark subject matter sets the tone. Dead bodies can be treated as something almost beautiful and evocative, like the classic Roman statue The Dying Gaul. They can be treated as evocative of higher things, like Pericles' funeral oration. They can also be a public health problem. It is, as the author points out, a matter of looking, looking and what is there (the body) and what is absent (the life). This is a theme returned to in subsequent essays, for example, "On Not Hurting a Fly: A Memorial". There is a lot about how people or objects look when their life is taken away. Some of it may be elegiac, as some of the essays, such as "Coming to See" and "Spires", are explicitly to memorialize the author's personal dead, or, perhaps to be more precise, look at the spaces that the dead have left by their absence, in the heart, in the window box (p. 102) or in the empty Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for the Vietnam War (p.118). The author is there in the essays. There is a lot of "I", but no dialogue. The title is, after all is On Looking, not On Talking. The subject matter is what the author sees. She does follow the show-don't-tell prescription, and her descriptions of objects and people are brief - a few lines - but often effective (see the St. Sebastian painting on p.20, Magda on p. 23, and Skierniewice on p.101 for examples). The descriptions - bodies, people, places - are spare but effective for the author's purpose. Here is not a lush orchid or the luscious Mrs. Agnew, but a Chinese calligrapher's few deft brushstrokes or the tiny pieces of sushi exquisitely arranged on china. Others are less distinct. The author tells us she has a spouse and child, but these are foils for the author's vision rather than the subject of it, reflecting back onto her thorough their actions or reactions. The essays are self-consciously literary. Again, we are aware this is On Looking not On Reporting. In "Autopsy Report" the dead appear without ceremony and with their humanity stripped away by the mortality that makes them her subject. The comparisons would be to the treatment of the dead in literature not, say, a profile of a forensic technician. The modernists - and their post-modern successors - may believe themselves different and finer creatures from all that lived before, but we still die just as terribly. The author, like her prose, is a hothouse flower. Much of the crass materialistic world repels,

disgusts or enrages her, like the New York City subway (p.9) or 1970s Playboy issues (p. 66). But this is not the voice of Sylvia Sensitive writing a letter to the editor in protest. Indeed, she explicitly turns away from such an approach (compare the treatment of the woman with a bear problem on p. 104 with the subsequent paragraph). She turns her gaze, in several essays, on freaks, the unusual or the malformed, or equally strange-seeming events like a peep show (p.40). Yet these are assessed with the same spare prose to describe the missing arms or the world's smallest woman. Her style displays an awareness that looking creates patterns to make sense of an otherwise senseless world. We root what we cannot know or share in what we do through analogies, similes and identification (see p. 116 for an example of this last). She is not Mrs. Agnew but looks just like her. In Sargeant's portrait, Mrs. Agnew is pure sex, empowered and unashamed. She is aware of what she describes as "the nightmare of artists: nothing standing still long enough to be seen". (p. 39). I wish this nightmare was limited to artists. The author has put across a spare but not sanitized vision of what she has been looking at in these essays. The issue is whether this vision will, pass in the crass marketplace, not of commerce, but of perceptions, whether it will be accepted as standing for something real, the way that little green piece of paper in my purse stands for a dollar and will get me an actual McBurger. That is more problematic. Seeing is a deeply personal act and we all bring personal experiences to it. I've also seen (and smelled) the bodies (pp. 1-8), looked through the sights of weapons (p.11) , and watched women in burqas carrying children cruelly sick with stupid and preventable diseases (p. 126) . At those moments, my reaction was the same as it usually is when I read a decidedly non-literary press report of an event where I was present: that's not what I saw. A Chinese master brush-painter may depict Coney Island on the Fourth of July with a dozen exquisitely considered and applied strokes, but only another such master or an adept would have the insights to recognize it as such. This is a book written for the adepts.

Purpura's collected essays, "On Looking," is absolute beauty. The way she creates images through words, highlighting unseen details--this is a must read. As other reviews have pointed out, "Autopsy Report" starts the collection out with a series of abrupt and painfully revealing glimpses of the human body. The stark, honest images don't end there, either, and in a powerful way Purpura guides the reader through a lesson on humans, on existence--on looking. My favorites include "On Aesthetics," "On Form," "Brown," "The Pin," "Red: An invocation," and man...the entire book really. With "On Looking," Purpura offers a strong and unique example of what the nonfiction essay can be.

More a collection of loosely stitched musings than a coherent narrative about the pleasure and pain of paying attention to the particulars of life. Close attention. Poetic attention. Sign up for the lyrical ride and you won't be disappointed.

Purpura's writing is not for everyone, as her images affront the reader with simultaneous disgust and beauty. Her sentences are crafted to be inevitable--so perfectly crafted that there is no useless word or sound or extraneous sentences. On Looking is in line with other collections of essays on seeing/sight (I am thinking of Sontag's On Photography or Barthes' Camera Lucida), but taking a less direct, but equally beautiful and formally exquisite, approach to the subject. Individually, though, the essays may not appear to be "on looking," and thus can be taken as essays exploring just the occasions that spawn them. Ultimately, a beautiful, ravishing, daring collection written by one of the most important essayists writing today.

If you like Lydia Davis you'll love Lia Purpura.

Like magic.

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