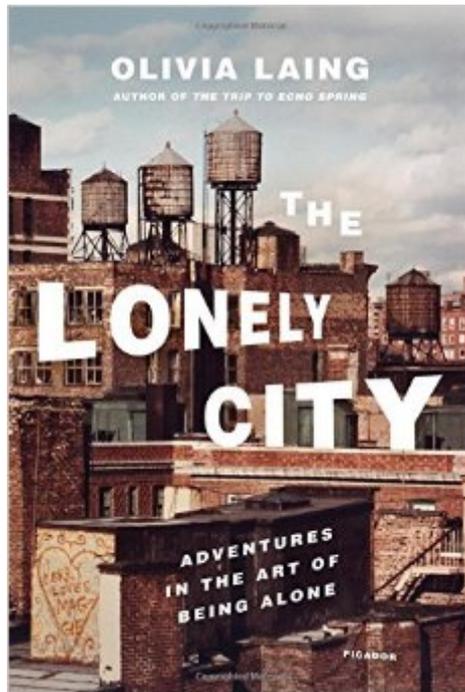


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The Lonely City: Adventures In The Art Of Being Alone



Synopsis

A dazzling work of memoir, biography and cultural criticism on the subject of loneliness, told through the lives of six iconic artists, by the acclaimed author of *The Trip to Echo Spring*. What does it mean to be lonely? How do we live, if we're not intimately engaged with another human being? How do we connect with other people? Does technology draw us closer together or trap us behind screens? When Olivia Laing moved to New York City in her mid-thirties, she found herself inhabiting loneliness on a daily basis. Increasingly fascinated by this most shameful of experiences, she began to explore the lonely city by way of art. Moving fluidly between works and lives - from Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* to Andy Warhol's *Time Capsules*, from Henry Darger's hoarding to David Wojnarowicz's AIDS activism - Laing conducts an electric, dazzling investigation into what it means to be alone. Humane, provocative and deeply moving, *The Lonely City* is about the spaces between people and the things that draw them together, about sexuality, mortality and the magical possibilities of art. It's a celebration of a strange and lovely state, adrift from the larger continent of human experience, but intrinsic to the very act of being alive.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I've been a keen reader of Olivia Laing, since discovering her first book, *To the River*, an account of a walk along the length of the River Ouse. Laing inhabits a new kind of academic writing, which to me seems to warrant the epithet "holistic." It also seems somehow to be a particularly feminine approach, though not all female academics employ it, and there are also male writers in the canon. To explain, this "holism" is different from the kind of distancing, objective, detached

“scientific” approach which has been part of, for example, literary criticism. The “scientific” view of literature divorces the writer from the writing – “the biographical fallacy” and dissects text, or history, or landscape or whatever is being analysed and assessed, as if there is an 100% objective reality to what is being observed. The fact that the viewer themselves has a subjective response, a subjective viewpoint which influences what they see, that they have a relationship with the observed, is ignored. Subjective response is always in there. What writers like Laing are doing as they engage with their own particular field of interest and enquiry, is to enter into their relationship with the material. This is poles away from Armstrong’s length. Other writers in this kind of territory include Helen MacDonald, author of *H is for Hawk*, Kathleen Jamie in her nature writings. Laing’s writing is deeply, sometimes laceratingly, personal and revealing. However it is much more than mere autobiography or confession. Subjective experience and objective analysis flow in and out of each other.

In her previous book, *THE TRIP TO ECHO SPRING*, Olivia Laing traced the lives and works of six American authors of the 20th century, all of whom were heavy drinkers --- all while interrogating her own history with alcohol. In her new work, *THE LONELY CITY*, Laing again constructs a fascinating blend of personal history, biography and cultural criticism, this time exploring the concept of loneliness in the urban environment by examining the life and work of visual artists, both familiar and less so. Laing opens her investigation with a consideration of the paradox of feeling lonely in the city, an environment in which one is constantly surrounded by other people. But, as she points out, loneliness is more about connection (or lack thereof) than it is about physical proximity. And, in some ways, being a constant witness to the lives of others who seem more connected than you yourself are can actually exacerbate the sensation of feeling alone. She also ponders the relatively recent finding of loneliness as a topic worthy of consideration by philosophers and psychologists. She lands on a working definition of loneliness as developed by psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan: “the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy.” Laing then turns to consider the role of loneliness in the life and work of four American visual artists: painter Edward Hopper, pop artist Andy Warhol, photographer David Wojnarowicz and outsider artist Henry Darger. In each case, she considers how loneliness informed and manifested itself in each artist’s work, exploring if and how the phenomenon of loneliness actually enabled the process of creation.

This book is about loneliness, from the author’s personal perspective, and through her interpretation

of the isolationism depicted in the work of various artists she selected. Her starting point is after her separation from her boyfriend when she moved from England to be with him in New York. Navigating the interpersonal streets and avenues of NYC is a frequent topic for authors, and Ms. Lang only marginally rises above the fray when she writes about how loneliness directly impacted her, and she falters significantly when using the odd quirks and personalities of fringe artists to illuminate the biological and nurturing source of loneliness, and how these people expressed and coped with their forlornness. Enter Edward Hopper who painted lonely pictures (Nighthawks); Andy Warhol displaced normal conversation with distractive machines (TV and tape recorders); Henry Darger who clearly was mentally challenged after enduring a compelling sad and detached childhood used repetitive and childish language to draw attention to child abuse; David Wojnarowicz, a person consumed with his self-assessed inferior physical presence who prostituted himself with no discretion or safeguards would later use his notoriety to draw attention to the AIDS epidemic. She includes other unconventional activists and their lonely lives. Occasionally, Laing references professionals who have conducted experiments dealing with the importance of nurturing, and how social connectedness impacts future behavior.

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