



Alive, Alive Oh!: And Other Things That Matter

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What will you remember if you live to be 100?

Diana Athill charmed readers with her prize-winning memoir *Somewhere Towards the End*, which transformed her into an unexpected literary star. Now, on the eve of her ninety-eighth birthday, Athill has written a sequel every bit as unsentimental, candid, and beguiling as her most beloved work.

Writing from her cozy room in Highgate, London, Diana begins to reflect on the things that matter after a lifetime of remarkable experiences, and the memories that have risen to the surface and sustain her in her very old age.

“My two valuable lessons are: avoid romanticism and abhor possessiveness,” she writes. In warm, engaging prose she describes the bucolic pleasures of her grandmother’s garden and the wonders of traveling as a young woman in Europe after the end of the Second World War. As her vivid, textured memories range across the decades, she relates with unflinching candor her harrowing experience as an expectant mother in her forties and crafts unforgettable portraits of friends, writers, and lovers.

A pure joy to read, *Alive, Alive Oh!* sparkles with wise and often very funny reflections on the condition of being old. Athill reminds us of the joy and richness of every stage of life—and what it means to live life fully, without regrets.

Alive, Alive Oh!: And Other Things That Matter Details

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From Reader Review *Alive, Alive Oh!: And Other Things That Matter* for online ebook

David says

I like to wander through the library, just to see what's on the shelves. Yesterday, I had the good luck to find a book by Diana Athill, so I nabbed it. Always worth reading, she's such a good writer. I read this all in one sitting, because it's brief, but more because she's so good you don't want to stop. Don't miss the poem at the very end, and even the acknowledgements page is a pleasure worth your time. In fact, you might turn to that page first, to get a sense of how the book came to be in your hands.

P.S. The Friends of the Library was having a sale, four books for one dollar. So I picked up some fun finds, including a biography of San Francisco's beloved Emperor Norton, and Grace Jones' memoir, entitled, "I will never write my memoirs." Fun with serendipity!

Petra X says

Athill is nearly a 100 years old, she's sharp, funny and as she says of making friends in old age, you make friends not on what you are doing, or on what you might do together, but on stories. And here she shares stories of her life. And life now for her in an old-age home, which she loves. No more housework or grocery shopping and lots of friends!

The saddest story in the book is of the miscarriage when she was 43 of her only child. It is quite harrowing to read as she nearly died, but the ending is unexpected. She didn't grieve for the lost child but gave thanks for being alive.

The funniest story is the stalker on a tiny, isolated beach where she was alone. Footsteps getting closer, crunch, crunch. Ever closer, crunch crunch. In fear and trembling she looks around and there he is (view spoiler)!

But the end-of-life story that utterly charmed me was how she gets to sleep at night, and not just her alone, rather than counting sheep she says, "What I do is run through all the men I ever went to bed with." Sweet dreams, Diana!

Elizabeth says

Three and a half stars.

It wasn't an easy read. Diana Athill covers some very brave, but often unpalatable subjects in this one. One describes in great detail a miscarriage she suffered in her 40s of a much wanted child. She nearly died of a

massive haemorrhage. Another chapter discusses when it was the right time for her to give up independent living and move to a care home, albeit a very smart and lovely one in North London peopled by equally like minded residents. I didn't enjoy the chapter about death particularly although, as always, written in her forthright no nonsense manner.

However, her often brusque no nonsense manner sweeping away her ex lover into the care of his family when he was very ill, and being relieved when he had left, came across as bordering on harsh.

My overall impression of this book is that, whilst she writes so well about her subjects, I found myself longing to get to the end and move on to something less downbeat. The only chapter I really liked was the one at the beginning about her memories of her childhood home in Norfolk. Her grandparents had beautiful house and estate, which is lovingly described in incredibly fine detail. For that chapter alone I bumped up to 3.5 stars.

Jane says

I loved this book. The writer, Diana Athill, is 99 years old, and she writes like a thirty year old---that kind of clarity and beauty and spark. Her subjects aren't always young people's subjects, but oh, I'd love to visit her and discover her secrets. How does she know how to nail racism and classism as she describes a trip as a tourist to Trinidad and Tobago? Who in her class and generation understood this? Over and over I was dazzled by her brilliance as a writer and a human being. She writes: These people furnish your dream.

And while they do--this is something you don't always notice, although you certainly should--you are furnishing theirs. Your money, your mobility, your education, your house, your clothes, your food, your books, they are dreaming of all of this and they want to live in that dream more passionately, and with far better reason, than you want to live in yours. (Share this whole chapter with Pamela Maisey)

Athill says that life teaches you things, if you have loving parents, are spared extreme poverty and equipped with a reasonable amount of natural wit, life will probably teach you useful things. Her two valuable lessons: avoid romanticism and abhor possessiveness.

Bettie? says

BOTW

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06r4byz>

Description: *Stephanie Cole reads from the new collection of essays by acclaimed writer Diana Athill, which is being published to mark the author's 98th birthday later on this month.*

Written from the vantage point of her late nineties, Athill's essays are wise, cheering and thought-provoking. They range from gentle (her love of beautiful clothes), heartbreaking (the miscarriage of a much-wanted child) to salutary (her difficult decision to relinquish her independence and move into a care home).

In this first essay, "Post-War", Athill delights in debunking the myth that Britain in the 1940s and 1950s was

a mire of dreariness. A young woman when the war broke out, peace and its aftermath was a time of joy, freedom and optimism.

2: she describes with total candour her miscarriage in 1960, aged 43, when she nearly lost her life

3: In "The Decision", she explains the process by which she relinquished her independence and moved into a residential care home in north London.

4: Dead Right

5: A Life of Luxuries

Amanda Brookfield says

Diana Athill was born in 1917. This means, she is at least (I don't know her actual birthday) 98 years old. And she is still writing books!!! Not just okay-ish books, but excellent ones, filled with warmth and wisdom and a directness of tone that makes me sit up and listen, no matter what she is talking about.

'Alive, Alive Oh!' is the latest product from this remarkable woman, an addition to the archive of wonderful memoirs that began with 'Stet', written after an acclaimed career as an editor with Andre Deutsch. 'Alive, Alive Oh!' is a bit gentler than its predecessors, in that there is less focus on her always interesting personal exploits and more reflection on things like the huge and beautiful gardens of her grandparents' home, Ditchingham Hall. But all her writing sparkles, whether it is descriptive or dramatic, and I think this is not just because of the acuteness of her perceptions, but the humility and gratitude with which she expresses them. Not even the miscarriage (in her early forties) of the unplanned baby she had decided to keep, gets her down. She was sad, of course, she explains, but also greatly - selfishly - relieved. Such honesty is rare and deeply engaging. One is left with the abiding impression of a woman with no edges, no hidden agendas. Diana Athill simply adores the business of being alive and this lights up every aspect of her prose.

Yet Death holds no fear for her either. In fact, anyone worrying about the life hereafter - or lack of it - should be advised to read this book. Athill writes that the world spun well enough, and without her being aware of it, before she came into being, and so assumes that the same state of affairs will prevail after she has gone. Such commonsense! How can one not be persuaded as well as delighted?

In fact, the only problem I have with Diana Athill is that she has scuppered my own - albeit distant - writing 'retirement' plans. I had always imagined I would give up one day, you see, to drift instead in a fug of allowable indolence, free from the novelist's challenge of trying to make sense of the world and graft it into stories. But now the achievements of Diana Athill make such thoughts seem shaming. For, as well as writing books, she continues to have a rich social and cultural life, surrounded by people of similar energies and a like-mind. In one chapter she describes how they all spent an afternoon planting rose-bushes. Life may tire her more - after the gardening she confessed to being exhausted - but she is still going at it full pelt.

So thanks, Diana Athill, for showing me that a possible forty-five years more work and hectic living beckons! You make me very happy.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:

Stephanie Cole reads from the new collection of essays by acclaimed writer Diana Athill, which is being published to mark the author's 98th birthday later on this month.

Written from the vantage point of her late nineties, Athill's essays are wise, cheering and thought-provoking. They range from gentle (her love of beautiful clothes), heartbreaking (the miscarriage of a much-wanted child) to salutary (her difficult decision to relinquish her independence and move into a care home).

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Photo credit: Mark Crick

Written by Diana Athill

Read by Stephanie Cole

Abridged and Produced by Kirsteen Cameron.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06r4byz>

Rebecca says

Update: Last night I was lucky enough to see 98-year-old literary legend Diana Athill live in London. Here's my blog write-up of the event. (*Pssssst!* I have the dirt on a forthcoming publication – and here I thought this would be her last book for sure.)

Apart from "Dead Right," this collection is not primarily concerned with imminent death. Athill is still grateful to be alive, marvelling at a lifetime of good luck and health and taking joy in gardening, clothing, books, memories and friendships. Six of the 10 essays originally appeared elsewhere. The collection highlight is the title piece, about a miscarriage Athill suffered in her forties. Another stand-out is "The Decision," about moving into a Highgate retirement home in her nineties. **(3.5)**

See my full review at Nudge.

[I've read all of Athill's work, even her obscure novel and story collection. This doesn't live up to her best memoirs, but it's an essential read for a devoted fan. For readers new to her work, I'd recommend starting with *Somewhere Towards the End*, followed by *Stet*, about her work as a literary editor.]

Diane S ? says

Please, please let me be like this wonderful woman when I am 98. Let me remember things with the

descriptive qualities and clarity as she does. Her grandmother's garden described beautifully, post war conditions and trips she took. Expecting her first child, feelings about being pregnant and so much more all described in incredible details. Amazing, so please, please.

Danielle Palmer says

What did I think of the book? It was ok, this the two star rating. The first chapter started out quite slow, with a detailed remembrance of her familial home, where every building was located and exactly which kind of tree grew by which building... At this point I was really glad this was a slim book and yet dreaded what remained. Luckily the interest factor ticked up in the following chapters. I can't say I agree with the authors choice of using abortion as a birth control, or with her willingness and enjoyment of continued affairs with married men, but it was interesting to hear the other side of the story I suppose. I liked the closing line "why want anything more marvelous than what is?" I think the most marvelous thing about this book, unfortunately, is that it was written by a nonagenarian.

Caroline says

This my third Diana Athill book - all of them written when she was over eighty - in fact she was ninety-six when she wrote this one. And what a joyous, invigorating, sharp and enchanting read it is..... It consists of a series of essays on different aspects and periods of her life. She is such an original and sassy human being, and she shines a brilliant light on all sorts of different things, in a way that must surely resonate with everyone. I wish I was drinking champagne rather than coffee - she so definitely deserves a toast.... Bravo Athill! I think you're fab.

I will end with a few of my favourite quotes.(view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

Diane Barnes says

Excellent! IF I make it to the age of 98, this lady is my role model. She lived life by her own rules, made the decision to go into a retirement home at 93 so as not to be a burden to friends and relatives, and still lives the way she chooses, limited only by her body. Still writing, still sharp, no regrets.

Ali says

Diana Athill is best known now for her memoirs and short stories, though she began her career in publishing. Working as an editor with Andre Deutsch – one of the founders of the company, through a fifty-year career she worked with some of the biggest names in literature. Her book *Stet* – which I received recently, is the memoir about that work, and the people she met and worked with. I am looking forward to reading that.

“My two valuable lessons are: avoid romanticism and abhor possessiveness.”

Alive, Alive Oh! was published in Diana Athill’s ninety eighth year, and in this work while dipping into the past as she does in all her books, she also considers what it is like to grow old. She reflects on what it is that stays with one in memory, having already lived a very long life. Surprisingly it isn’t the things you might imagine. She has found herself recalling places visited, things once experienced are remembered with great fondness. She remembers the grounds of the family home. In beautifully descriptive prose she recalls a grandmother’s garden, a memory of place which increasingly sustains her.

(Incidentally, it is worth pointing out to anyone who has yet to read anything by Dina Athill, that her memoirs are neither written or published chronologically, so it is perfectly possible to start anywhere).

“The terrace felt more like house than garden because one stepped out onto it so easily, and after breakfast Gran used to sit on its stone steps while she brushed Lola, her poodle. It was a place for civilised behaviour, where we interacted with our grown-ups more than in most places. The urns that stood at intervals on its wall has been brought back from Italy by Gramps, and small pink roses, with a lot of heavily scented honeysuckle, clambered over the walls – on summer evenings, through the bedroom windows overlooking the terrace there used to come delicious waves of honeysuckle.”

Recalling her visits to Europe and Tobago, the friends she made – and experiences as a traveller.

In the title chapter, Diana talks honestly and quite harrowingly about the miscarriage she suffered when she was in her forties. Having decided years before that she didn’t want children – she considered a termination, she had done it before – but something changed.

Full review: <https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2017/...>

Sarah says

This was a thoroughly enjoyable book of memoir essays written by literary giant Diana Athill. Athill is now 98 years old and lives in a retirement home in Highgate, London. The essays covered a surprising variety of topics, everything from her childhood memories, post-war Britain, colonialism, miscarriage and abortion, and of course, aging and death.

I wasn't sure what to expect of it when I picked it up. It came recommended to me, but I'd never read any of Athill's books before. I am, however, a big fan of many of the writers she has worked closely with in her

publishing and editing career. (Seriously, it is hard to top a list like Margaret Atwood, Simone de Beauvoir, Philip Roth, Jack Kerouac, and John Updike.)

Athill has had ample opportunity to enjoy the finer things in life, and she is 100% aware of her privilege. One of the most memorable essays in this collection is her trip to Trinidad and Tobago, in which she discusses colonialism, racism, and privilege in a way that I wouldn't expect of a woman born in 1917. No offense, white women, but we don't have the best record with being aware of our privilege. Her language was powerful and struck me as someone who is truly empathetic and interested in the world around her.

I also enjoyed her personal essays where she discusses her decision to not have children, including her discussion of abortion and miscarriage. She has an open perspective on many women's issues and isn't afraid to discuss them in frank terms. I was definitely expecting more mushy material on aging in this collection, but was pleasantly surprised to find her writing to still be fresh and emotional. Her discussion of death and choosing to live in a retirement home of her own volition struck me as extremely rational, and her writing lends an important voice to our discussion of aging, death, and fear of dying.

I definitely recommend this collection. It's a short read, only about 170 pages, and the essays are light, yet thought-provoking and full of substance and emotion. Diana Athill has lived a full and fulfilling life without many regrets, and her openness and frankness to discussing her life decisions and emotions is a perspective we can all benefit from.

Julie says

I have no idea in the world how I came to read this book: it must have jumped into my book bag at the library for I have no recollection of wanting it, let alone getting it. Hmmm. It seems that Athill is sharper at 100 than I am at my age!

It was an enjoyable, quick read. Humorous, sad, charming. A life well lived and someone to spin a good tale out of it.
