

Report on *I Live A Life Like Yours* by Jan Grue by Becky L. Crook

Publishing Details

Gyldendal Agency

Published in 2018

176 Pages

Non-fiction, autobiography, memoir

♣ Nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize 2019

♣ Winner of the Literary Critics' Prize 2018

Author Bio

Jan Grue is the author of a wide-ranging body of work in fiction, non-fiction, and children's literature. He made his debut with the short story collection *Everything Under Control* (2010). He has since published a further four short story collections, the latest of which is *Vexations* (2019). His first novel, *The Best of All Possible Worlds*, came out in 2016. Among Grue's works for children is *Oliver* (2012), a fantastical story about living wheelchairs. He has also written several academic books. His most recent book of autobiographical non-fiction, *I Live a Life Like Yours*, was the first Norwegian non-fiction book to be nominated to the Norwegian Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 50 years. Jan Grue was born in 1981 in Oslo. He holds a PhD in Linguistics and is Professor of Qualitative Research at the University of Oslo. (*bio taken from NORLA*)

Description

I think perhaps it is helpful, in describing what this book is, to start out by describing what it is *not*: this is not a post-traumatic processing of the author's life as a handicapped person; a nostalgic or sentimental backward glance at his upbringing and experiences; a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps type of story; a purely academic or journalistic investigation into the societal and political ills associated with accessibility; one of those popular autobiographical novels brimming with beautifully described, self-absorbed minutiae; nor, as Grue himself writes, is it "a case-study, an example. My life is not an illustration, it is not a demonstration of some moral or philosophical point, the solution to an ethical dilemma." (p.147)

"This is not a story about survival," writes the author. "It is not about how I became a human, but rather how I came to understand that I already *was* human. I am writing about everything I wanted and how I came to be in possession of it. I am writing about what this cost me, and how I was able to afford it. This is an attempt to write off the language of others. It is an attempt to write off the gaze of others. (...)"

"I began writing because I needed a language different from the one available to me."

Jan Grue's brilliantly rendered, essayistic autobiography, *I Live A Life Like Yours*, (or, more exactly translated: "I live a life that resembles yours") is not a straightforward, chronological look at the life of

a wheelchair user (he is careful never to use the words “handicapped” or “disabled” because, as he claims, “wheelchair user” is much more concrete and specific, corporeal, less infused with stigma). Much in the style of Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, Grue dances between specific chronological periods of his life—growing up with his parents and sister in Norway, with an early diagnosis of spinal muscular atrophy from the age of three, to when he studied and lived in Berkeley, St. Petersburg, and Amsterdam, to his current life as a professor in Oslo together with his wife Ida and infant son Alexander—and intersperses these histories with elegant and astonishingly wise reflections on the world, social structures, minorities, sorrow, loss, relationships, the body, in short: what it means to be human.

The title of the book has a double meaning. In one sense, in spite of enormous obstacles, Grue’s life has come to resemble a very “normal” one. He has a wife, a child, a job, opportunities, and all of the accompanying joys and frustrations. The words “resemble” or “like” in the title, however, reveal that Grue’s life is only parallel to the reader’s in appearance, that it only *looks* like a normal life from the outside when in fact it is very different in its daily details. “The body limits us,” Grue writes, and provides multiple descriptions of the very tangible ways his body limits him from, for example, getting up to get a cup of water. On the other hand, Grue’s revelations about his struggle to accept himself as he is, to even accept his sorrow at the challenges he must face and the incredible loneliness he has experienced on many occasions, reads as a balm with which anyone might identify, and so this life also resembles ours inasmuch as we are also human and vulnerable in a hard world.

Grue manages to convey both meanings throughout the entirety of his book by flitting effortlessly and intriguingly between his and other peoples’ stories, philosophical reflections, references to films, art, and literary writing ranging from Joan Didion to Michael Foucault. He also brings in the cold, clinical language of his childhood from a stack of medical records his mother one day brought him when he was in his early twenties. Suddenly, his twenty-year-old self was forced to confront a completely other self-identity, one in which the boy who he thought was himself as “just Jan” was instead defined through countless documents in terms of what was wrong with his body. This gaze—that his body was problematic—followed him out of the medical paperwork and into the world as he was, and is still, forced to confront the penetrating stares of strangers who, it often seems, wish the problem of him in a wheelchair simply did not exist.

Contrary to what one might think, the examples Grue gives of such tough experiences are never self-pitying or moralistic. They are in fact powerful because of the palpable lightness that he applies to them, and by that I mean both the unsentimentality of the language as well as the sense that his coming to terms with an acceptance of himself has allowed for an incredible amount of breathing space. The reader benefits from this spaciousness too. For example, (and perhaps there are other, better examples):

Dance is magical. It is something private in public, it is something secretive that takes place in the open. I am not a good dancer. *Good* is not a relevant word; I can hardly move to the rhythm without falling down. In high school, I sometimes went out dancing, I sometimes fell down on the floor.

It is summertime in Bordeaux and Ida’s cousin is getting married. We are newly in love and have flown there because we are able to do such things, to order plane tickets to France and pick up and go, go attend a wedding. At Charles de Gaulle, the airport personnel try carrying me and drop me on the ground, it takes half an hour for someone to unlock the only wheelchair-accessible toilet at the airport, in the tiny country village, Ida has to push me around in a manual wheelchair while the day gets hotter and we each grow more and more irritable. These are all details. We get lost on the way back to the airport, we are eaten up by the insects that hover around the little river next our hotel. All of this is immaterial, because on the eve of the wedding, we dance on a wooden platform under the open sky. “I never thought we’d ever be able to do something like this,” Ida says, and I never thought we’d be able to do something like this either. And yet, there we are, beneath a starry sky, and three years later, almost to the day, we dance at our own wedding, I don’t fall down, we hold onto each other.

There are so many different parts of the book I wish I could translate for you. While I was reading, I found I highlighted almost every other sentence.

The central, re-occurring themes of the book, as I organize them to myself, are body, language, gaze, and intimacy, and Grue's stories and reflections illustrate vulnerabilities and strengths pertaining to each of these topics. He does this with humor, clarity, and an extraordinary graciousness. One of the things I particularly love about this book is that Grue is able to look up from his own experience and out to the broader world, touching on what it means to be a minority for example, or to his indignation on behalf of other children growing up in wheelchairs in a wheelchair-unfriendly world. "Those of us who stick out are a *we*, and we know we are a *we*," Grue says, and with this view, he widens the experience to a large audience in a way that feels both unifying and relational.

The theme of relational intimacy is very strong throughout this book. Indeed, it was the impending birth of his son, Alexander, that inspired Grue to finally finish writing the book, which he began ten years prior. His experience, after a painful period of loneliness, of falling in love with Ida—and the many shocking (but unfortunately also not-so-shocking) questions from strangers about their sex-life, his likelihood of living long, and countless intimate technicalities—makes up a large portion of the book. Also powerful is the final story he tells about the birth of his son and the way in which they prepared for it, given their limitations. While Ida and their mutual close friend Mari ran down to the taxi and sped off to the hospital in the middle of the night, Jan, according to their plan, jumped on his wheelchair and whizzed through the streets of Oslo to the hospital behind them.

This book is, in effect, a love story in much the same way that Joan Didion's novel "The Year of Magical Thinking" is also a love story. It is a love story of a life, a loss, sorrow, joy, backed up by descriptions of the details of what such love looks like—like a girlfriend pushing you through the airport and forgetting you next to the baggage claim, to school-mates forming a chain behind your wheelchair on the ice one winter's day, to parents writing one letter after another to the healthcare system in desperation for proper treatment, to a two year old son who climbs up his father's wheelchair and runs away too fast for his father to catch to finding the words with which to describe a more authentic, less stigmatized experience. It is also a love story about accepting one's own body and one's own limitations, and learning to love things as they are while also looking for ways to stay hopeful.

This is a fabulous book and a fresh perspective on a topic that the world only needs more of. Critics in Norway have Grue's book a literary masterpiece and a book which will certainly have a place in the canon among Norwegian non-fiction. I hope FSG decides to make it possible for a broader international readership to enjoy this book.