



Why Not Say What Happened: A Sentimental Education

Morris Dickstein

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A renowned cultural critic tells his own deeply engaging story of growing up in the turbulent American culture of the postwar decades.

At once a coming-of-age story, an intellectual autobiography, and vivid cultural history, *Why Not Say What Happened* is an eloquent, gripping account of an intellectual and emotional education from one of our leading critics. In this "acutely observed, slyly funny memoir" (Molly Haskell), Morris Dickstein evokes his boisterous and close-knit Jewish family, his years as a yeshiva student that eventually led to fierce rebellion, his teenage adventures in the Catskills and in a Zionist summer camp, and the later education that thrust him into a life-changing world of ideas and far-reaching literary traditions. Dickstein brilliantly depicts the tension between the parochial religious world of his youth and the siren call of a larger cosmopolitan culture, a rebellion that manifested itself in a yarmulka replaced by Yankees cap, a Shakespeare play concealed behind a heavy tractate of the Talmud, and classes cut on Wednesday afternoons to take in the Broadway theater.

Tracing a path from the Lower East Side to Columbia University, Yale, and Cambridge, Dickstein leaves home, travels widely, and falls in love, breaking through to new experiences of intimacy and sexual awakening, only to be brought low by emotional conflicts that beset him as a graduate student?homesickness, a sense of cultural dislocation?issues that come to a head during a troubled year abroad. In *Why Not Say What Happened* we see Dickstein come into his own as a teacher and writer deeply engaged with poetry: the "daringly modern" Blake, the bittersweet "negotiations of time and loss" in Wordsworth, and the "shifting turns of consciousness itself" in Keats. While eloquently evoking the tumult of the sixties and a culture in flux, *Why Not Say What Happened* is enlivened by Dickstein's "Zelig-like presence at nearly every significant aesthetic and political turning of the second half of the American twentieth century" (Cynthia Ozick). Dickstein crafts memorable portraits of his own mentors and legendary teachers like Lionel Trilling, Peter Gay, F. R. Leavis, and Harold Bloom, who become inimitable role models. They provide him with a world-class understanding of how to read and nourish his burgeoning feeling for literature and history. In the tradition of classic memoirs by Alfred Kazin and Irving Howe, this frank and revealing story, at once keenly personal and broadly cultural, sheds light on the many different forms education can take.

8 pages of illustrations

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