

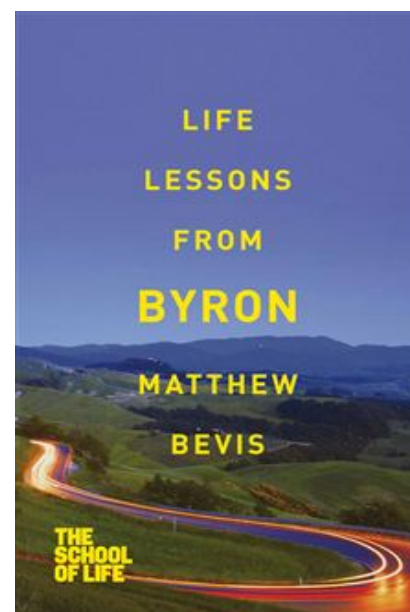
Book Review: Life Lessons From Byron by Matthew Bevis

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*Born in 1788, Lord Byron was an English poet and a leading figure of the Romantic movement. A prodigious poetic gift and a scandalous private life made him famous throughout Europe. Miranda Nell finds that the lessons covered in this book are unlikely to be major life-changers, and anyone truly committed to the task will be inclined to seek out the poetry itself, but as a short introductory read, **Life Lessons From Byron** manages to reveal a thoughtful perspective and provide an enjoyable reflection.*

Life Lessons From Byron. Matthew Bevis. Pan Macmillan. September 2013

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Life Lessons from Byron is a rather minimal introduction to the work of Lord Byron, but it is written with a deep background and presents a nicely organized set of insights. The author, Matthew Bevis, provides readers with seven “life lessons” and ends with a more personal “coda” that describes his own discovery of this leading figure in the Romantic movement.

What biography we get is in the introduction, and it’s brief. For the majority of the book, Bevis focuses on interpreting the poetry itself, or referencing letters Byron wrote, or philosophers and other writers who influenced or were influenced by his ideas. Nowhere in the text does he mention, for instance, Byron’s full name, and he states directly at the start that concentration on scandal and intrigue is a mistake, noting “...he was famous for being infamous... here was a poet who was intent on being more than a poet...” (pp 5-6). This leads the author to the conclusion that “myth and mania have often obscured what’s really interesting about Byron as a writer and thinker,” [pp7] and we aren’t treated to many more of the [salacious details](#). Instead, he moves on to short chapters each entitled “How to...” that proclaim an attitude or understanding that the poetry of Byron illuminates. These life lessons each interpret his words from a particular angle. Many of them are applicable to other writers and poets, but they are very much explored through the lens of Byron. It begins with the lesson “How to become yourself”, which works from the suggestion that selfhood is best seen as “a series of performances” (p.13) rather than a finalized identity. The focus here on the flux and flirtation of who we are is central to Romantic poetry, but may seem surprising as advice for living. But all the counsel given is in this vein—a poetic excursion, perhaps not focused on real world application.

Sometimes we learn more about Byron—in “How to think with your body”, Bevis explores how Byron’s club foot highlighted his own awareness of the physical, and how he reached the conclusion that thought is inescapably embodied through this personal struggle. Other times, the exploration seems more academic—Bevis makes the case for water being central to Byron’s oeuvre when he advises the reader on “How to get wet”, and through this convinces us that being aquatic is beneficial to the soul, that a fluid nature and slippery path in life lead to more interesting outcomes.

In some chapters, the lessons are more specific, as in “How to laugh”, where Bevis shows that Byron “encourages us to wonder what would happen if we were to stop using laughter as a kind of displaced violence” (p.37) and instead “learn to laugh about [our] own limitations...” (p.41). The issue is not merely that we should laugh, but that we should do it properly. Other lessons are more general and focus instead on what should be accomplished overall, as in “How to go astray”, where Bevis simply makes the case that attempts to plot and plan successes are overrated. Missing the mark is just as likely to lead

to happiness.

Each of the lessons provided gives the reader a brief insight into the work of Byron, but overall it may seem unclear why one wouldn't simply turn to the poetry itself. As Bevis himself admits in the introduction, Byron is not only unlikely to endorse the idea of learning from a book, he is rather likely to be skeptical that it's worth learning "about" life at all: rather, the point is to experience it.

But



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then, perhaps this is the quintessential struggle of philosophers and poets, the desire to capture what by definition cannot be captured. In a sense those who most fully encapsulate the lessons of a writer like Byron would probably never bother to write them down in the first place, yet it is the work of the writer to explain those inexplicable moments, and even to try to lead the rest of us to such insight. There may be the occasional wise fool who happily dances through life, landing on meaningful experiences and understanding the beauty of nature without the need for reflection, but many of us yearn for the articulation of that wonder, and as Emerson says, we turn to the poet to say what we cannot quite put into words.

Thus, the poet is always stuck in this hopeless task of trying to capture the fleeting, and the production of poetry is never truly successful but always approximate. Byron's poetry itself is an adornment to life rather than something structural, but that is its power. An investigation of the meaning of the poetry is a further embellishment, and Bevis is able to provide enough thoughtful commentary to make an enjoyable meditation on the poet's work. The lessons are unlikely to be major life-changers, and anyone truly committed to the task will be inclined to seek out the poetry itself, but as a short introductory read *Life Lessons From Byron* manages to reveal a thoughtful perspective and provide an enjoyable reflection.

Miranda Nell received her PhD from the New School for Social Research in 2012 and is currently teaching in Michigan. Her interests include aesthetic experience, the exploration of variety and flexibility in knowledge, and the importance of non-cognitive modes of expression. [Read more reviews by Miranda](#).