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READING GUIDE

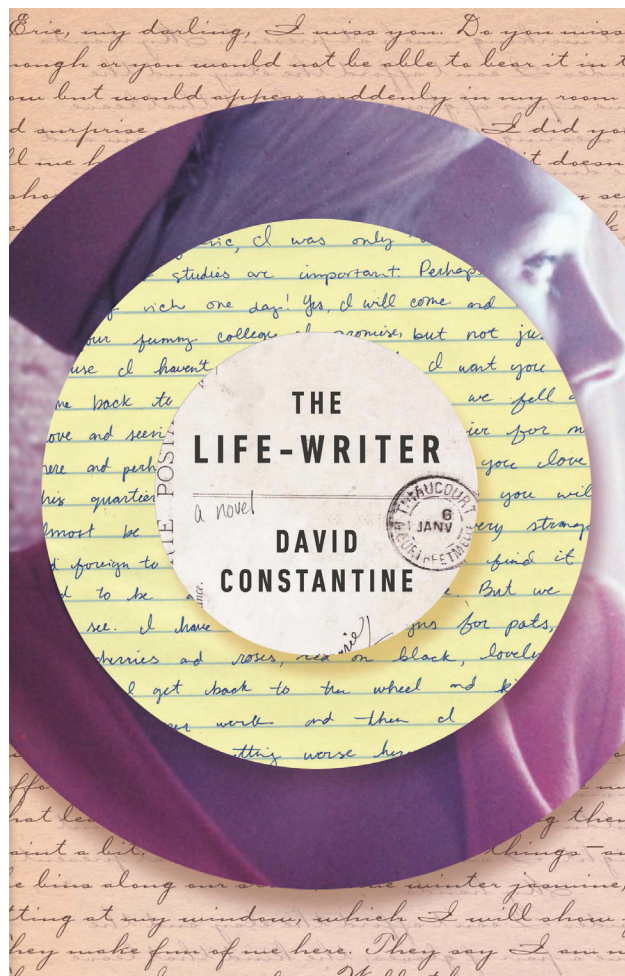
# THE LIFE-WRITER

BY *David Constantine*

## READING GUIDE

AFTER THE DEATH of her beloved husband, Katrin, a literary biographer, copes with the loss by writing his personal history. While researching the letters and journals he left behind, however, she comes to the devastating conclusion that his life before their marriage was far richer than the one they shared. To understand and recreate the period of his greatest happiness—a period of intense friendship and love in the fall and winter of 1968, with a young French woman named Monique—Katrin embarks on a heartbreaking journey to discover the man she never fully knew.

DAVID CONSTANTINE is an award-winning short story writer, poet, and translator. The title story of his North American debut collection of short fiction, *In Another Country: Selected Stories* (Biblioasis, 2015) was adapted into the Academy Award-nominated feature film *45 Years*. He is the author of one previous novel, *Davies*, as well as four collections of short stories in the UK, and five collection of poetry. He lives in Oxford, England, where until 2012 he edited *Modern Poetry in Translation* with his wife Helen.



The Life-Writer | David Constantine

978-1-77196-101-1

\$19.95 CAD | \$14.95 USD

Trade Paper | 240 pp

Published by Biblioasis | [www.biblioasis.com](http://www.biblioasis.com)



Distributed in Canada by Ampersand/UTP  
Distributed in the USA by Consortium/Ingram



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does *The Life-Writer* explore the ideas of marriage and the ‘other country’ of the past?
2. The author, David Constantine, is a poet, translator, and short story writer, in addition to a novelist. Considering the way poetry and translated works are treated in the novel, do you think his experience as such adds to the book? Did his discussions of translation surprise you?
3. Katrin is apprehensive about eventually having to “say wholeheartedly what love is like” and to describe the immensity of grief and loss. Do you think the novel succeeds in doing what Katrin is so worried about?
4. This is a ‘quieter’ novel in that most of the ‘action,’ or drama, happens in the past and emerges through secondary means, such as letters or oral stories. Do you think this adds to the book? What is the effect of this technique?
5. Katrin’s abandoned Nine Lives project seeks to reclaim the lives of people subsumed by time and, in some cases, mediocrity. Beyond the end of the novel, do you think Katrin reclaims her own life?
10. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?

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## AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID CONSTANTINE

*The Life-Writer is your first novel to be published in North America. As an introduction to editors and reviewers on this side of the Atlantic who may not know your work, could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself and your writing?*

I was born on 4.3.44 in Salford, Lancashire, a part of the country to which I am still very attached. Read French and German at university and wrote a D. Phil. [PhD thesis] on Friedrich Hölderlin. Married in 1966. I was a university teacher of German language and literature, first at Durham, then at Queen’s College, Oxford, for 31 years. I began writing when I was 16, and translating, from French and German, when we moved to Durham. My wife Helen and I both gave up teaching in 2000, to translate and, in my case, to write. From 2003 until 2012 we edited *Modern Poetry in Translation* together and are still closely associated with it.



*“In Another Country,” a story that many North American readers are now familiar with due to the success of 45 Years, involves an older, married couple and the reappearance of the husband’s former lover in an ostensibly non-threatening form. A similar situation provides the foundation for The Life-Writer. Could you talk about what draws you to the subjects of marriage and the ‘other country’ of the past?*

I wasn’t really aware of the similarity, in structure, of the two until I’d finished writing the second. (They are twenty years apart!) I don’t believe the present to be impervious to the past. On the contrary, in much of our thinking, feeling, and dreaming, past and present are effectively one state. I don’t believe in closure. In fact I dislike the very idea of it, since life itself, including death, allows none for the living. All the same, I understand why people seek closure—to be rid of bad things, to ‘move on.’ (Katrin isn’t trying to do that.) The eruption of the past into the present in my story “In Another Country” is very unfair. But I don’t think it’s the writer’s job to be fair—rather, to tell the truth (the truth of that particular fiction) as well as he or she can. As to marriage ... It’s one social arrangement (not the only one) in which, very often, a great deal is at stake. For fiction, I’m drawn to points of crisis when vital things may be lost or won.

*You’re known primarily as a poet. Do you find there are differences in the way you approach writing a novel? Does it provide possibilities that you’ve explored with The Life-Writer, distinct from those of poetry and short stories?*

I think I write the sort of fiction—stories and two novels—that somebody would write who primarily wrote poems. It makes me very (compulsively, obsessively) attentive to my language. I don’t like to think of language merely as a means to an end, that is plot. Fictions, short or longer, give me more room to realize the potential of certain quite large and complex subjects. Still my stories and novels work chiefly through concrete images and voices. And they are exploratory—sentence by sentence I try to discover what the story is about, where it might be going. Much as I do when I write poems.

*Multilingualism and the act of translation figure prominently in The Life-Writer, whether it’s Katrin’s translation of Monique’s letters or the emotional impact on Edna of Eric practicing Middle High German. Could you talk about why language and translation play such a large role in the novel?*

See my answer above: voices. Katrin and Monique are ‘foreigners.’ Eric is very English, but a good linguist. None of that is an end in itself. It’s rather all part of a more general desire to demonstrate the ‘strangeness’ of passion, how it liberates you (or flings you) into a sort of elsewhere. K’s translating M’s letters: that is the closest form of close reading. She takes into herself something very potent—indeed, dangerous.



*Tied to the act of translation is the difficulty of specific kinds of articulation. Concerning Eric and Monique, Katrin is apprehensive about eventually having to “say wholeheartedly what love is like.” Did you encounter any difficulties writing about such intense grief and love, which Katrin finds difficult to articulate?*

It's the law of writing: the better you do it, the more affecting it is. As she tries to say 'what it is like,' she is effectively conjuring up something that may annihilate her. Her love for Eric (or his for her, as she sees it) risks annihilation under the force of the romance 'back then.' In writing the novel I continually ran into difficulties which I felt to be Katrin's. When she got stuck, so did I.

*Many of your stories deal with 'quieter' aspects of human experience. Instead of infidelity occurring in the course of her relationship, the evidence of Eric's former life haunts Katrin. Likewise, much of the emotional burden of Katrin's project stems from the act of transcription and translation, two activities that are often considered more passive than writing. Is there a reason you tend to avoid flashier plots and more traditionally active scenarios?*

Yes, see above. I don't really view her activities as passive. She is, in effect, trying to recover her life. She is seeking bravely to go on living after his death. A common experience. The paradox in her case is that the way she chooses to save her life—writing about him—risks pushing her into a failure of the will to live. That sort of struggle interests me much more than what you allude to in your question.

*Katrin's abandoned Nine Lives project seeks to reclaim the lives of people subsumed by time and, in some cases, mediocrity. Beyond the end of the novel, do you think Katrin reclaims her own life?*

Katrin's subjects interest her because of their 'falling short.' They have the allure of Romanticism, without the talent. But Eric doesn't view them like that. Several things are moving in the right direction for K as the novel ends—friendship with Monique, for one; the cheerful Patrick, for another; the gift of the silver coins. But chiefly I like to think of her getting through grief by dint of her own brave and risky efforts. Her understanding—from Hiroshima mon amour—'La vie qui continue, ta mort qui continue ...'—is true, it's an insight that, I think, should be strong enough to help.