

On Jenny Diski
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Every morning, I read the *New York Times* over breakfast and a lingering cup of coffee. Spurred in old age, I suppose, by an ever-increasing realization of my own mortality, I turn first to the obituaries. In the obits that catch my eye, I take note of what caused the subjects' return to oblivion (my view is we go back to the nothing that preceded our births) and whether I've stayed alive longer than they managed to (as time goes on, more and more often I've outlasted them, which prompts both positive and negative responses in me—I think that's good that I've lived longer, but I also think I'm next). I'm interested in the stories, the narratives, people create with their lives, and obituaries offer up good capsule biographies. Oh, that's what they did with their shot at existence; how does that compare with what I've done with mine?

An April 29th, 2016 *Times* obituary reported the death from cancer at 68--I've beaten her record there--of a British writer I hadn't heard of with the odd name of Jenny Diski (it turns out her birth name was Jennifer Jane Simmonds). The obituary compiler describes Ms. Diski as having "channeled the turmoil of her early years, which included suicide attempts and confinement to mental hospitals, into a stream of richly observed and mordant novels, memoirs and essays [so that's what she did with her go at life]." Intriguing—I should check this Diski out, I thought to myself.

The title of one of Diski's books, published in 2006, especially caught my eye--*On Trying to Keep Still*--which, according to the obituary, depicts her solo travels, as well as reflects her view of her life as "a struggle" and her last years in particular as "a search for solitude." Life as a struggle, trying to keep still, a solo existence, a search for solitude--I could relate. To illustrate, see the thoughts on this site, "On River of No Return" (October, 2015), "On Living Blind" (January, 2016), and "On

Waiting” (February, 2016). The libraries around me didn’t have the book, so I bought a Kindle from Amazon.

On Trying to Keep Still (Little Brown) turned out to be a fine reading experience for me: at the top of the first rank artistically and very much worth my time personally--consider this a recommendation if you pick up that you come at things as I do. On one level, it’s a travel book, Diski’s trips over the course of a year to New Zealand and the far north of Sweden. More fundamentally, however, the book is about Diski, what goes through her mind, her phenomenology, call it that, including her memories of her childhood and how she comes at life. You get a good idea of what it is like to be Jenny Diski at this time within the overall span of her life, and, even if she doesn’t always seem to realize it, what might account for that—including her personal history, extremely high level of intelligence and exemplary writing talent (the Nobel Prize-winning writer Doris Lessing rescued her from a juvenile home to become Lessing’s protege), health status (I pondered the impact on her of, from an early age, having to deal with a painful, debilitating foot problem), work as an author/journalist, and the geographical context and people in New Zealand and Sweden.

Diski is far from an upbeat type, but nevertheless it was a delight for me to be in the company of her remarkable mind and I found her superb prose a joy to read; and she let it fly in this book, she told her truth, she didn’t hold back, play it safe—I so respect that in an artist. I especially took to the book because I could see myself in Diski, and I could learn from her. I’m now looking around for other things she wrote.

A good way to get across a sense of *On Trying to Keep Still*, and of Diski herself, is to offer quotes from the book.

I don’t have the slightest wish to be intrepid. I don’t want to prove myself to myself or to anyone else. I don’t care if no one thinks me brave or hardy. I have no concern at all that I did not have whatever it is that I should have had to take a dive out

of a plane or off a building. None of that matters to me in the least. I don't even mind that I missed hundreds of wonderful things to see in parts of New Zealand I didn't get to as a result of my wish to be quiet and solitary and sit on a veranda on the Coromandel Coast, and my failed fantasy of silence and stillness drifting through Doubtful Sound. So, aside from doing my bit as a professional writer, was there any need for me to go to New Zealand, or anywhere else? None, I think. All the places I imagine myself in are solitary, silent, visually appealing. That is as good a description of my workroom as it is of anywhere in the world. So what about staying home? (p.67)

[A journal entry.] Read Montaigne. Listened to Beethoven late quartets as it grew completely dark. Watched the news and wondered if I should. Slept. Closed the living room curtains for darkness, opened them for daylight. Showered. Read. Looked out of windows. Slept. Saturdaysunday. Whenever I was hungry, I made toast, and ate it with salami, cheese, peanut butter, or marmalade. Made four or five or six cups of tea (Assam, Harmutty Gold) each day. Microwaved my hot wheat tea bag innumerable times and hugged it to me happily. Not that I was cold. The cottage was centrally heated and the sun shone all weekend. But comfort as the thing (no contentment without a direct source of warmth). Looked out of kitchen window—though carefully, to ensure that no one passing by could see me looking. A perfect weekend alone. Every moment was a pleasure, doing what I was born to do. Still not thinking, but reading other people's thoughts. Uninterrupted. Read Robinson Crusoe, finished it, read Diana Souhami's story of Alexander Selkirk, read Montaigne. No interruptions. And most important, none expected. A car drove to and from the farmhouse occasionally. Voices sometimes in the yard. The sheep bleated in the distance, not much, they were too busy gestating. So am I, I told myself—hopefully. I was very watchful, or course, as I went about the place—the arachnophobia never lets me entirely relax and even less so in the country. But this was as peaceful and calm and doing exactly as I want, as I could ever hope for. Not thinking, it's true. Not being a writer. Not being anything at all. Just a

transparent and pointless ghost flitting around an empty house without a purpose or intention. Timeless, without substance, invisible. (pp. 80-81)

Even to know that something is going to happen, that I am required to do something, is an intrusion on the happiness that I am after. What I love to see is an empty diary, pages and pages of nothing planned. A date, an arrangement, is a point in the future when something is required of me. I begin to worry about it days, sometimes weeks, ahead. Just a haircut, a hospital visit, a dinner party. Going out. The wait of the thing-that-is-going-to-happen sits on my heart and crushes the present into non-existence. My ability to live in the here and now depends on not having any plans, on there being no expected interruption. I have no other way to do it. How can you be alone, properly alone, if you know someone is going to knock at the door in five hours, tomorrow morning, or you have to get ready and go out in three days' time? I can't abide the fracturing of the present by the intrusion of a planned future. Perhaps I just don't want to die. (p. 140)

How much time in my life have I wasted waiting? Books not read, books not written, sinks not polished. Waiting is a full-time activity. It is an act that takes up all my energy and being. (p. 143)

I wondered about writing a book about what being alone is really like. About insubstantiality and emptiness. A book about these things—for why? To describe what is. To show. Show and tell. Why? Who do I want to convince, and of what? No one, nothing. In any case, as I imagined the book the blank pages which suit the subject so well filled with words; black marks smearing the white paper with the doing, looking, wondering, narrating that keep the underlying emptiness underlying. There is the sense in which every word I write is antagonistic to the only truth I think I have seen about myself in the world. Which is to hold still and silent until it's done. (p. 216)

I always feel so different, alone, cut off from the world. For the time I spent reading *On Trying to Keep Still*, I didn't feel that way at all; and now that I've finished the book, I feel more comfortable with who I am and clearer and more directed than before. Jenny Diski's impact on me has been significant and it has remained, and I'm sure she has had a comparable impact on others who have known her personally or through her writings. As a consequence of what she made of herself and did with her life, in a very important way, Jenny Diski will always be alive.