

So Long, Marianne – A Story of Love and Separation

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In recent years the publishing of books concerning Leonard Cohen seems to have turned into a cottage industry; if in the past there was a gap of several years between the appearance of one book about him and the next, nowadays they are coming out thick and fast, and more and more and more, including biographies, studies of various kinds, personal tributes and what have you. Some of these books turn out to be good, some mediocre, some infuriatingly shallow. Among the better ones of the recent vintage are Sylvie Simmons' biography *I'm Your Man* (2012), and the volume of interviews edited by Jeff Berger, *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen* (2014), both of which should be considered a must for those wishing to gain meaningful knowledge of LC's life and work. Several books were published in languages not all LC admirers are able to read (including Spanish and German), and no doubt many of us were eagerly awaiting the translation of a certain book first published in Norwegian in 2008. Now, six years later, it has finally become available in English, under the title: *So Long, Marianne: A Love Story*, written by Kari Hesthamar and translated by Helle V. Goldman (Toronto: ECW Press).

Still, why did we wait for it so eagerly? Human beings' thirst for gossip is unquenchable, but there must be something more to it than that (one hopes). Through LC's work we feel we've become very intimate with him, as well as with several other people in his life, but through their representation in his art they transcend private circumstances and become universal, potentially reflecting our own private feelings. Even when the name of a specific person appears in a poem or song, such as in "So Long, Marianne", we may identify with the manifested feelings and project them onto whoever corresponds to them in our personal experience. "Marianne", "Suzanne" or "Nancy" have become symbolic, detached, to a certain extent, from the actual women who inspired the poet. So why do we wish to learn more about the real Marianne and her relationship with LC? Giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt, we may claim the wish to decipher the significant lying under the signifier. More plainly we might say that since we've heard so much about her from various other sources, we truly wish to hear her story in her own words; after all, it was her own private life before it became so public, and she must be given the opportunity to set things right from her own perspective. Be it as it may, now, finally, we can delve into Marianne's story and hopefully gain first-hand understanding.

It should be stated at the outset that this book, unlike the ones mentioned earlier, is not about Leonard Cohen per se; it is rather a partial biography of Marianne Ihlen, written by Norwegian radio journalist Kari Hesthamar, with Marianne's collaboration and presumably authorization. It lies somewhere between an impressionistic biography and an assisted autobiography, with many documents – mostly letters, and some private journal records – inserted along the way. The voice telling the life story shifts occasionally, and therefore the image of its protagonist is not always focused, although her main traits are often repeated: a young and insecure woman "with a rich fantasy life", seeking to break out from the predictability

of a routine existence and willing to take the necessary risks and follow her heart for that purpose. Her early life is sketched succinctly; born in 1935, she spent some of the World War II years at her grandmother's house in the countryside before returning to Oslo where she graduated from high school. Then came a period of indecision and searching, until she fell in love with a young and talented author, and dared to break with conventions and confront family opposition by leaving home and following him across Europe, finally landing on a little Greek island, which she made into her semi-permanent home for the next decade and a half. In spite of being seemingly daring, throughout the book she often comes across as passive and lacking in confidence, but also as caring and dedicated, and eventually as a person who grows and becomes able to take control of her own life. And even before that, in spite of her self-depreciation, she must have possessed some uniquely charming quality that made her so irresistible in the eyes of all who knew her; in LC's words: "There wasn't a man who wasn't interested in Marianne, who wasn't interested in approaching that beauty and that generosity" (p. 99).

Intertwined with the story of Marianne are the stories of two of the men she loved (as well as those of several other more minor figures). One was Axel Jansen, with whom she settled on Hydra, eventually married and had her only son, Axel Joachim. Jansen was a distinguished Norwegian writer, whose innovative prose caused a substantial stir in his homeland's literary milieu in the 1950's and 1960's. It is no wonder that much space in the book is dedicated to him, considering the fact that the book was originally written for the Norwegian public. Hestamar was able to obtain both Jansen's letters (mostly to Marianne but also to others) and his widow's permission to quote from them, and she does so extensively. Marianne and Axel kept in touch even after their separation, and although he more or less abandoned her and their son, his presence is felt throughout her story, and it seems both Hestamar and Marianne take care not to criticize him too strongly.

Leonard Cohen first appears towards the middle of the book (p. 92), although he is already mentioned in the short "Prologue", in which Marianne is eager to refute allegations that LC "stole" her from Jansen; "He's not a thief" she emphasizes. In fact, LC is already present in the book's title through his song, although the subtitle, "A Love Story" is somewhat ambiguous: after all, there is more than one love story being told here. Still, it is clear that her relationship with LC is what made Marianne famous (at least among those who cherish his work), and had she only been Axel Jansen's first wife, her story would not have attracted such wide attention outside her homeland.

Many of the details and little stories in the book should be of interest to most readers; the story of the expatriate colony on Hydra has often been told before, but is retold here with some colorful details. Marianne's life with LC and his interaction with her son Axel Joachim, for whom he must have served as a substitute father, gain somewhat better perspective, although here too there are but a few outstanding revelations (one point that differs from most LC biographies is the seemingly good relations Marianne had with Masha, his mother; pp. 136 & 152). For that reason it is frustrating that the story is abandoned not long after LC and Marianne's separation; only a few lines in the "Author's Epilogue" tell about Marianne's later

years (remarriage, work in her country's oil industry and a little more), and nothing is told about Axel Joachim's life without LC (save for a hint about difficulties in adulthood and the support given him by her second husband, mentioned in Marianne's own short "Epilogue"). After all, when LC separated from Marianne he also disappeared from the life of a child who was abandoned by his own father, and in whose life he was a constant figure throughout the child's most formative years (see the boy's letter to him on p. 189; and clearly, as evident from various quotes, the child was important to him as well). However, the book seems to wish to avoid issues that are too painful to handle, and only hints at them. Incidentally, even the photos in the book cover only the same period until the separation, and we are given neither images of Marianne or her son in later years, nor of the art work she eventually came to produce.

The book also contains some original material by LC. Hesthamar interviewed and quoted him, and some of the quotes are memorable and as well-articulated as always (on the golden time of youth, pp. 99-100; his happiness with Marianne, pp. 114-5; the inevitability of separation and what he learned with the passing of years, p. 169). Several of his letters to Marianne are also quoted, and are quite revealing (pp. 122-125, 181-3, 185-7). There are also three poems that he gave her and have not been published before (pp. 116, 145, 191-3), all expressing her uniqueness in his eyes. Finally, in the photograph section of the book, there are photocopies of some notes in LC's hand, including a check drawn on The Bank of Nova Scotia in which he gives her his heart. Unfortunately, such gifts often do not last, although in some ways perhaps they do.

On the whole, in spite of its compelling story and valuable incorporated material, it is not a very well written (or translated) book. I found the writing style, especially the use of the present tense in describing some scenes from the past (and then switching back to the past tense), mildly irritating. There are also a few factual errors; Irving Layton did not teach LC at McGill University, and Morton Rosengarten was not a member of LC's early trio "The Buckskin Boys" (both p. 137); LC did not introduce "Suzanne" to Judy Collins over the phone, at least not according to the latter's recollection, emphatically put to Sylvie Simmons (p. 176; Simmons p. 149); for the first documentary film about him (*Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Leonard Cohen*) LC was indeed filmed in Montreal, but not on Hydra (p. 168). I also found strange the repeated insistence that Marianne's English wasn't good enough even to fully understand LC's poetry (pp. 142, 174); evidence to the contrary are excerpts from her diary written originally in English (for example, p. 171), and Sylvie Simmons' assertion in her book (p. 198) that many of the poems for LC's *Selected Poems 1956-1968* "were handpicked by Marianne" (having interviewed Marianne for her book she presumably heard it from her).

There is another factual point which seems problematic. According to the book, Axel Jansen left for Hydra a week after his son was born in Oslo (where they had returned for the birth); Marianne followed him with the baby four months later, but "barely a week" after their arrival there Jansen left them again to follow his American lover (p. 96), never to fully return. This does not coincide with LC's assertion in the book that he'd seen Marianne many times together with Axel and the baby, making him think of "a beautiful Holy Trinity" (pp. 92-3). There is even a photo of the four of them together (the baby in his carriage looking at the camera,

the three adults smoking and looking at him), taken by *Life* magazine's photographer who was visiting Hydra in 1960 (did he happen to be there that very same week?). Obviously, human memory is not wholly reliable at a distance of decades.

For me, perhaps the most startling revelation about Marianne's place in LC's work and life came not from this book but from Sylvie Simmons', where it was revealed that the original line of the song "So Long, Marianne" was in fact "Come on, Marianne", which indeed makes more sense when the song is read with this line replacing the familiar one. It is also much more in tune with the happy melody, which gives no indication of separation, but on the contrary, of warm-hearted togetherness. According to Simmons (p. 170), quoting both Marianne and LC, it was indeed not written as a farewell song; the line was finally changed during recording in New York, when the writer of the song realized he was irrevocably separated from his muse. Ideally, sentimentally, perhaps we would have preferred the original line, but like Marianne herself we too must bear the pain of separation. Luckily, for them and for us, their years together also left a legacy of great beauty.

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