

## Review: 'A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past,' by Lewis Hyde

NONFICTION: Lewis Hyde's latest book is filled with arguments and ideas that are almost thrummingly alive.

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By WESTON CUTTER

Each Lewis Hyde book ends up being so startling as to be almost unsettling. In “The Gift,” “Trickster Makes This World” and “Common as Air,” Hyde makes book-length arguments and narratives that reframe how certain ideas are conceived. In my experience with each of his first three books, his arguments have been so compelling as to obliterate all former notions I had on certain subjects.

In “The Gift,” Hyde argues that artistic commodities fundamentally cannot be valued according to market forces. In “Trickster Makes This World,” he argues for the significance of wild, bolder figures, and how critical they are to helping cultures and societies establish and maintain themselves. In “Common as Air,” he’s back to art, showing how critical it is that the sort of copyright protection the 20th century has given rise to harms culture and future creators.

And now there’s “A Primer for Forgetting,” subtitled “Getting Past the Past.” Easy stuff first: You should buy it and read it as soon as you’ve got a chance. Hyde’s one of the few authors I know of whose work, even if you disagree with it, leaves your mind almost thrummingly alive. Split into four sections — Myth, Self, Nation, Creation — “A Primer for Forgetting” is a welcome tonic and corrective to the current age of overwhelming data, constant news and infinite tips to keep your brain sharp.

Early in the book, on page 39, Hyde writes, “Because Mnemosyne is the mother of the Muses, all arts require her double power, her ability to record or erase as the need may be. There are then two ways for memory to destroy imagination: by retaining too many abstractions (thus failing to perceive fresh detail) and by retaining too many details (thus failing to perceive abstractions).”

Hyde provides further examples, in the Myth section at the book’s start, of artists who are quoted addressing how necessary forgetting is to creation, but this bit on Mnemosyne is what sticks, and ends up offering two poles as ends of a fulcrum by which to consider memory and its potential dangers.

And of course it’s not likely immediately obvious why memory might be dangerous — we’re all much more aware of those instances in which our failure to remember has caused problems. And then we might consider the story of Thomas Moore, a black man a few years older than Hyde whose brother was beaten and murdered by members of the KKK in the early 1960s.

Or we might consider the political reality in South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In each of these instances, the only future possible required a sort of forgetting — as Hyde’s subtitle promises, of getting past the past.

Hyde will shake how you think of things, but of course there's a price. He is one of the best writers we've got going, if only for how seriously he takes his readers' intelligence, how little he's trying to pander. There's no clear answer to how to get past the past, what details or abstractions to remember or let go of, and Hyde is not claiming there is. But if we ever — as individuals or a society — are going to find a way forward, I'm betting that Hyde'll have something to do with it.

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