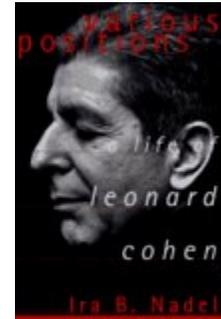


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ira B. Nadel. *Various Positions: A Life of Leonard Cohen*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1996. 325 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-44235-6.

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## Leonard Cohen, Poet in Song

For those who know Leonard Cohen and for those who will inevitably come to know him, Ira Nadel does yeoman service. The first task of biography is to record the life, and Nadel charts Cohen's migrations, compositions, and associations from his birth in 1934 through interviews conducted in 1994 and 1995. Nadel had Cohen's full cooperation (this is not an "authorized" account but, in Cohen's words, a "benignly tolerated" biography), as well as access to archives at three universities (Columbia, McMaster, and Toronto).

Large portions of the book are based upon interviews and unpublished memoirs and notebooks. Missing are perspectives by anyone who might contradict Cohen. For example, Cohen's break-up with Marianne Ihlen (of "So Long, Marianne") is explained as resulting from Cohen's desire for a relationship "that allowed for his need for the freedom which sustained his creativity. Marianne was both the inspiration for, and casualty of, this need." No interview with Ihlen is included in the text. A very different portrait might emerge by the inclusion of perceptions by Ihlen, or by Suzanne ("Suzanne") Elrod, the mother of Cohen's children. And the children are conspicuously silent here.

But there will be other biographies, more complete accounts, a postmortem. Leonard Cohen is our cultural cantor; his recordings wrench and exhilarate. Nadel charts his failed efforts at making a living as a writer. In my opinion, Cohen's written poetry and prose are mediocre, reminiscent of the poetic efforts of Faulkner—they show a man out of his medium. When Cohen com-

bined his poetry with music, something of great power resulted. It would be a stretch to call Cohen a pop star—he has never had mass appeal in North America (as he has in Europe). Pop critics are likely to label him, as did *Time* magazine, "glum, melancholy" and idiosyncratic. On the other hand, literary critics in Canada disparaged his move to music, claiming that he was diluting his artistry.

Cohen is a poet to listen to, to sing, not to read. The sweet absurdity of living comes through in every recorded poem, some that (according to Jennifer Warnes) "pry open your heart with a crowbar" and some that humble contemporary ideologies: "Jazz Police are paid by J. Paul Getty / Jazz is paid by J. Paul Getty too." There is power in Cohen's willingness to speak the unspeakable, to bare the soul of the era, from the free love of the late 1960s (hear, "Hey, That's No Way to Say Goodbye") to the AIDS era of the present ("Everybody knows that the naked man and woman—just a shining artifact of the past").

Nadel writes of Cohen's humility, the appeal of this delicate soul to audiences and listeners. That's half the appeal. The other is Cohen's tremendous, all-encompassing sense of self, the force of beauty and humor that has emerged from that phenomenal voice. Like Whitman, Cohen contains multitudes; he is the enormous I that sings, "we are ugly but we have the music."

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