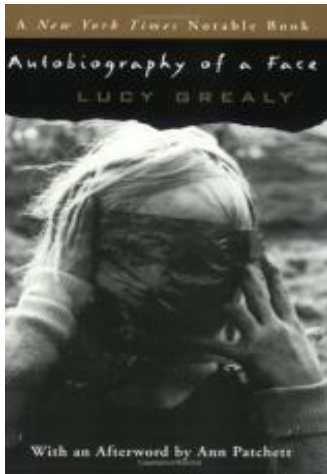


# Autobiography of a Face

by Lucy Greal

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## About the Book

In her moving memoir, **Autobiography of a Face**, award-winning poet Lucy Greal describes her life as a cancer victim who, at nine years old, has part of her jaw removed. From then on, she endures operation after operation in order to reconstruct her disfigured face, and suffers cruel taunts from classmates and uneasy stares from their parents.

As a child, Lucy finds refuge in the hospital where her face is considered an illness just like any other patient. It is here where she gets her first kiss from Derek, her partner in crime on Ward 10. Her life at the hospital is, ironically, where she feels the best about herself.

Although she maintains a few friends who she had before the surgery, and lives among her four siblings, Lucy is alone. She is torn between wanting to be loved for who she is and wishing desperately and secretly to have a perfect face.

Her search for truth and beauty continues throughout her life -- at college where she finds true friendships and the power of poetry, at graduate school where she discovers her long-awaited sexuality, and later in Britain where she takes advantage of their health system to begin another series of operations. Throughout it all, Greal tells her story, the story of her face and her heart, with stunning strength and remarkable wit.

On December 18, 2002, Lucy Greal died at the age of 39. She leaves behind this courageous picture of her life so that the rest of us might learn something about ours:

*I used to think truth was eternal, that once I knew, once I saw, it would be with me forever, a constant by which everything else could be measured. I know now that this isn't so, that most truths are inherently unretainable, that we have to work hard all our lives to remember the most basic things. Society is no help. It tells us again and again that we can most be ourselves by acting and looking like someone else, only to leave our original faces behind to turn into ghosts that will inevitably resent and haunt us... [I]t suddenly occurred to me that it is no mistake when sometimes in films and literature the dead know they are dead only after being offered that most irrefutable proof: they can no longer see themselves in the mirror.*

## Discussion Guide

- 1. Autobiography of a Face** has been widely adopted in high school and college curriculums. Do you think that this book would be appropriate for younger audiences -- such as junior high, or sixth graders -- to help them understand the feelings of sick and handicapped kids and to teach them the importance of a kind word?
2. As a child, Lucy lives in three worlds: the hospital, her home, and the outside world. How do the people in each of these environments treat her? How does Lucy respond to them?
3. "We were taken to another floor with a playroom that boasted a large, ornate dollhouse, a real collector's item probably donated by some well-meaning person. You could only look at it from behind a glass partition, but it was too nice to be played with anyway. Sometimes you'd see a child standing there, staring, but for the most part the giant miniature house, despite its prominent position near the door, was ignored" (page 40). Do you think Lucy tells her readers about the dollhouse to describe her own loneliness? Or do you think Lucy craves a picture perfect place in which to hide and be left alone?
4. The author remembers the first time she grasped the severity of her disease: "Someone dated an event as something that had happened 'before Lucy had cancer.' Shocked, I looked up. 'I had cancer?'" (page 43). Do you remember a time in your life where you were surprised to find out something about yourself that everyone else already knew?
5. After Lucy's second chemotherapy treatment, her mother scolds her: "She went on to explain how disappointed she was that I'd cried even before Dr. Woolf had put the needle into me, that crying was only because of fear, that I shouldn't be afraid... As I made my way downstairs to my room, I resolved to never cry again" (page 78-79). How does this scene make you feel about Lucy's mom? Do you think, overall, that she is a good mother to Lucy?
6. Her father can't bear to confront her sickness, often leaving her alone during her chemotherapy treatments: "I watched his back as he left and felt relief, because his embarrassment and awkwardness caused me as much pain as they did him. There was no blame in those moments, no regrets, no accusations, not even despair" (page 84-85). Do you think that Lucy is harder on her mother than she is on her father in this memoir? If so, why do you think that is?

7. "Being different was my cross to bear, but being aware of it was my compensation. When I was younger, before I'd gotten sick, I'd wanted to be special, to be different. Did this then make me the creator of my own situation?" (page 101). Do you think Lucy, like many children do, blames herself for her sickness and, as a result, her disfigurement? Does she believe that she deserves her fate?

8. Young Lucy is tormented by other kids, mostly male: "'That is the ugliest girl I have ever seen.' I knew in my heart that their comments had nothing to do with me, that it was all about them appearing tough and cool to their friends" (page 124-125). Were you surprised at her level of maturity and reasoning? Or do you see this is an example of a defense mechanism -- distancing herself from the situation in order to hide the hurt?

9. In the hospital bathroom, someone scratched "Be Here Now" into the door. This message has a significant meaning to Lucy later on in the book. Discuss.

10. The struggle between truth and beauty is prevalent throughout Lucy's memoir: "I had put a great deal of effort into accepting that my life would be without love and beauty in order to be comforted by Love and Beauty. Did my eager willingness to grasp the idea of "fixing" my face somehow invalidate all those years of toil?" (page 157-158). How would you answer Lucy's question?

11. Does Lucy's death change your feelings about this book? How?

## Author Bio

Lucy Grealy (1963-2002) was born in Dublin, Ireland. She moved to Spring Valley, New York, with her family when she was four years old. When she was nine, a surgery to remove a tumor also resulted in the removal of part of her jaw, leaving her disfigured and fated to endless reconstruction operations. She found comfort in her love for horses and, later, in her passion for poetry.

She received a BA from Sarah Lawrence College, and a Masters in Fine Arts in Poetry from the Iowa Writers Workshop. Her poetry appeared in a number of magazines, including *The Paris Review* and *The London Times Literary Supplement*.

After living abroad for several years (West Berlin, London and Aberdeen) she returned to the states in 1991 to take on a Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Mass., and then went on to be a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Living in New York since 1994, Lucy taught at the New School for Social Research's MFA in the Creative Writing Program, and also at Bennington College in Vermont, where she taught in both the graduate and undergraduate programs.

**Autobiography of a Face**, published in 1994, grew out of an essay that first appeared in *Harper's* magazine, and which won a National Magazine Award. Her second book, a collection of essays titled *As Seen on TV*, was published in 2000. She has a chapbook of poems, **Everyday Alibis**. Lucy Grealy won several prizes for her poetry, among them the Sonora Review Prize, the London TLS poetry prize, and two Academy of American Poets awards.

## Critical Praise

"Grealý has turned her misfortune into a book that is engaging and engrossing, a story of grace as well as cruelty, and a demonstration of her own wit and style and class."

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