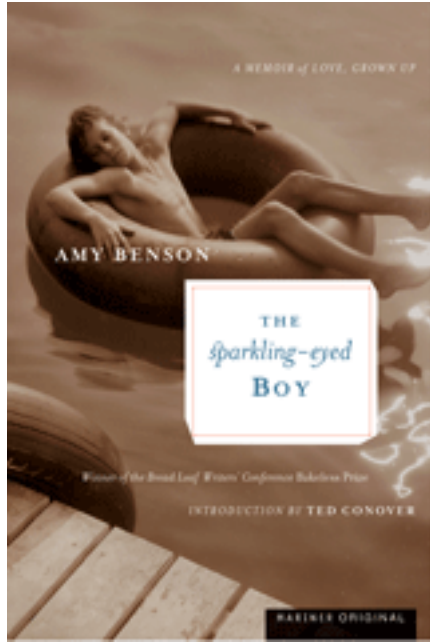


Press Release

The Sparkling-Eyed Boy

by Amy Benson

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"*The Sparkling-Eyed Boy* is so full of color and light and life. This is truth of the most profound sort; truth revealed in the artful and lyrical sensibility of Benson's words and memory. She is dancing with us: not leading, but simply asking us to watch her move and take what we will. Benson shows us here what the memoir can and should do — destroy and resurrect itself over and over. Benson is doing exactly that." — Brad Land, author of *Goat*

"The great pleasure and triumph of this memoir is Amy Benson's ability to make the familiar new again as she explores the country of first love. Over and over I found myself surprised by the unexpected twists and turns, peaks and abysses, of her journey. And also by her lovely, fiercely intelligent prose." — Margot Livesey, author of *Criminals*

About the Book

The Sparkling-Eyed Boy is a deeply personal story of something many of us think we understand all too well — unrequited first love. Amy Benson's memoir is both unsentimental and aching — a thoughtful, probing, and perceptive rumination on that experience and her deeply felt connections to a person and a place. It's a daring and very adult book that examines the undercurrents of desire and the fault lines of adult obsession.

The sparkling-eyed boy is *that* boy — the one who loves you first and loves you best; the one who leaves his impression on your heart and mind. The place is the wilderness and water of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where Amy and her family summured.

Amy's sparkling-eyed boy is never named, but from the moment she first tells of his freckled, gangly adolescence, he is fully formed. His initial overtures, resisted and soon taken for granted, aren't rewarded for several summers. But the sparkling-eyed boy becomes a fixture in Amy's life, and she eventually gives in, and the reverberations of what

evolves into a first love affair for both of them are chronicled here with precision. It is an engrossing, intimate, and provocative story.

Amy Benson beautifully and intelligently articulates an experience that is a rite of passage. But in her capable hands she shifts and shapes the familiar ache of unrequited love, showing something new and important. In rich layers and fine details, she shares with admirable candor her longings and imaginings, laying bare her vulnerabilities as she grapples to find her place in the world, and the sparkling-eyed boy's place in hers. *The Sparkling-Eyed Boy* is brimming with insight and ponderings. It plumbs the complexities of desire and the fictions and truths of obsessional love. It is a remarkable and assured debut.

About the Author

Amy Benson lives with her husband in New York City. *The Sparkling-Eyed Boy: A Memoir of Love, Grown Up*, her first book, was selected by Ted Conover as the 2003 winner of the Bakeless Prize for Creative Nonfiction.

A Conversation with Amy Benson

Q) This book is a fascinating rumination on a first love: in your case, a person you call only "the sparkling-eyed boy." At one point in the book you write, "I am convinced — if he loved me first, he loved me best." Do you still believe that?

A) No. Or, rather, only in the sense that a childhood/adolescent love is less troubled by reality than adult love. But I don't believe that those "pure" loves are the best loves. We don't even know who we are then, and we certainly don't want to know another person fully, with all of the boring and maddening bits thrown in. In the line quoted above and in that chapter, I was trying to capture a knowingly petulant wish that our former loves never recover from us. In immature loves, we want to have been devastatingly important to others, even if they weren't to us. But this wish has little to do with the kind of love that's going to kiss every new line on your face as you grow old together.

Q) When did you first start writing about the sparkling-eyed boy? Did this evolve from other writing?

A) When I was twenty-seven or so I started writing the chapters that would become this book. I was then able to claim a particular fear as my own — the fear that the sparkling-eyed boy would no longer be who he once was. I wanted to think that the changes we'd undergone since I had last known him as a teenager were reversible. One of the early chapters in the book also describes how (and I'm almost embarrassed to admit this) dreams played a central role in my beginning to write about him. A recurring dream about reuniting with him and explaining the past compelled me to think more about him and try to explain the persistence of these dreams.

Q) How has writing this memoir changed your relationship with and to the sparkling-eyed boy? Do you imagine what kind of reaction he might have?

A) To the first question, I would respond that writing about anything profoundly changes our relationship to it. I'm sure that he became more important in my life than he would normally have been during the years I was writing it. But I'm also sure that the book will prevent any further understanding between us. That is, I can no longer be the casual old friend dropping in for a visit each summer.

The second question is difficult, since I would be horrified if any harm came to him or his family as a result of the publication of the book. I'm assuming that he would feel flattered by some of the descriptions, angered by others that perhaps seem off the mark to him, and probably betrayed by my ability to make some of our history public. Though the portrait of him is terribly fond, I can only imagine that any portrait by someone other than yourself would be enormously fraught. Seeing a wholly unexpected version of yourself must necessarily shock your self-perceptions.

Q) Do you see *The Sparkling-Eyed Boy* as a coming-of-age story?

A) Most certainly — on two levels. It is a personal coming-of-age story, about accepting the complexities, diminishment, disappointments, and fractured ideals that adulthood offers. The sparkling-eyed boy and memories of childhood summers in a beautiful place that seemed not to change became juxtaposed for me with a highly mobile, cynical, intellectual, and urban world that I embraced as I entered college. Slowly, though, I became warier of this world as I began to consider the things from childhood I have given up. The arc of the book is really about accepting that there is no lost, perfect — and perfectly static — world. For me, part of the struggle to finally "grow up" was to stop imagining that Life Is Elsewhere, when in truth it is all around us in its many, mixed forms.

I also see it as a cultural coming-of-age book. Our culture changes — just as our landscapes and environment do — at lightning speed. While our intellect can, more or less, keep up with changing philosophies and postures, our emotions often cannot. Intellectually, for example, it is fashionable to decry nostalgia and narrative and sentimentality as trite at best and harmful at worst; and yet in our own lives we often make choices based on these impulses and ideals for which we should be "too smart." This book is in many ways about that struggle to reconcile our emotional desires with our intellectual ones, to grow fully into our cultural age.

Q) On the surface, this book is about first love, but it also is just as much about your love affair with the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. How are those two loves related in your mind?

A) They are inextricably intertwined. In one chapter I mention something I would tell him if I got the chance: "When you leave what has been your one and only place, you forever leave places. You must concede an interchangeable sameness. When there is no longer only one place, there are millions of dishearteningly similar places . . . The floodgates of disillusionment open." A large part of the book is about our connection to places, our notion of home. Though it was only our summer place, nothing has ever felt as much like home as the Upper Peninsula — its expanses of water and forest, its relative isolation, and its sparse

population. I wanted to capture what I love about this unique place. But I also wanted to suggest that our changing notions of home and our increasingly mobile populations have a profound effect on how people think and feel in general. It is incredibly freeing to think that we can choose our place, that we are not tied to where we were born — we can go anywhere and become anything we want. But it is also troubling to imagine what we lose when we lose a deep connection to place, when we are so mobile that we cannot concentrate and fail to ever actually be where we are. We threaten to become opportunists.

When I was young and longed to live up there I needed the locals to acknowledge me as someone who belonged there. If you're not accepted by the community, your own claim on a place is compromised. My interest, then, in the sparkling-eyed boy has everything to do with the fact that this has been his only home and he loves it with constancy and loyalty — traits I can't muster, since I can't live there. Part of me is terrified by the very idea of being born, living, and dying in the same town, as the sparkling-eyed boy has so far; but part of me deeply wants to know what that would be like, how it must be to sidestep the caginess and restlessness that seem to occupy most of the rest of the country. In this way, he is a symbol of that place.

Q) You pointedly write, "The sparkling-eyed boy did not love my sister." Your relationship with your sister seems nearly as complex in this book as the one you have with the sparkling-eyed boy.

A) There's an odd similarity between those relationships: as with the sparkling-eyed boy, my sister and I have made very different choices with our lives, but, rather than growing apart (as he and I have), she and I find more and more common ground as we get older. We see that the good girl/bad girl dichotomy we enacted in our youth means less and less in the adult world.

Q) One of the unique things about *The Sparkling-Eyed Boy* is the way the story is told. Can you describe the structure of the book?

A) I never felt as if I had a *story* to tell; I felt as if I had a mystery to solve, the mystery of why I was having these relentless dreams about him, why I had become preoccupied with that time and that place. So it never made sense to write a linear book that begins in childhood and ends in the present. The shape of the book is better described as a cluster than a line: At the center is a knot of questions I think we all ask ourselves as we get older and start to see our lives not as a random set of incidents but as something that reflects our sometimes unconscious, sometimes misguided choices. Radiating out from this center are chapters that try to engage those questions in many ways — by remembering the past, by examining the present, by thinking about sex, ownership, our relationship to the natural world, our distance from other people, and by inventing illicit scenes for the present. The project of the book is to come to terms with loss, but it takes many shifting modes (as it does in life) to do that.

Q) Your book was awarded the 2003 Bakeless Prize for Creative Nonfiction. What does that genre mean to you? How does fiction play a role in your memoir?

A) I find it a tremendously exciting genre peopled with writers who are thinking deeply about the intersections between art and life, the uses (and abuses) of memory in our lives,

and the gray area between fact and fiction, given the squirrelness of human perception. I also find it exciting because the forms literary nonfiction can take are wide open. In fiction, writers begin with the supposition of characters, narrative, setting, etc., and then break them or not as their theoretical bent leads them. But the only supposition in literary nonfiction is that a piece be firmly rooted in actuality and be artful. The forms it may take, then, are limitless. I've tried to suggest this openness in the different chapters of the book. Some chapters are narrative, some meditative, and some lyrical, seeming more like prose poems than essays. It's important, I think, to use multiple forms of address to elucidate a problem or idea.

The fictional chapters are yet another "form of address" used to approach some of the central concerns in the book. They are an attempt to imagine continuity between our past and present relationships — which is a rather antiseptic way to describe fictional stories of an affair between us. These fictional versions of an affair begin rather glibly, but deepen over the course of the book as the consequences of even imagining this betrayal become more real.

Q) You make an interesting point about how much a writer should share and how the story should be told: "What you know of someone else's life has one value when kept to yourself and a different value when told." Yours is a deeply personal story. What made you decide to share it with the rest of the world? Do you feel that there is still a part of the story that is sacred and private?

A) I suggest in the chapter "The Ethics of Nonfiction" that writing about your life and the lives of others is not only unseemly; it can be unethical as well. And I believe that. I don't think writers are terribly good people, but they make art of their lives and the contents of their brains. Hopefully, if they are *conscientious* in this often unethical task, they have something to reveal to others about human behavior or culturally relevant ideas or the soft spots in our own self-analysis. This is very personal, but I'm always trying to find the relevance to potential readers. A piece is worth almost nothing to me if it has little hope of resonating with a reader. I find that once I've written about something, though, it seems less personal, since I think of the "I" in the various chapters as personas — some part of me, some attitude I have — rather than me as a whole person.

Writing about your own life is dangerous, since to some extent you lose your memories and your interior relationship to the elements of your life. Narcissistically, you fall in love with your own rendering of those elements. I'm glad that there are things that seem inexpressible to me still about the poignancy of that place and him. They're safe from my attempts to freeze them in a certain shape with my own words.

Q) What project are you working on now?

A) I'm at work on a second book that I hope will also be a mix of nonfiction personal essays and fictional chapters. It takes as its ground the story of my uncle who joined the army at seventeen and was shipped to Germany just after the end of World War II to be part of the occupation forces. He died there in 1948 when, in the process of building airstrips for the Berlin Air Lift, he touched live wires with his crane and was electrocuted. He left behind a German woman he had asked permission to marry and their daughter, whom she would give birth to eight months later. Destitute, she wrote to my grandmother, asking for help to

come to the United States with the child. However, since the Red Cross and the army both warned her against helping "these women," my grandmother didn't give her the help she needed. On a personal level, this story has always haunted my mother because of the loss of her loving older brother and because of her sense of difficult choices having been made poorly. On a larger level, I would like to use their personal stories to get at the ethical issues involved in occupation, the idea of the collective guilt of German civilians, and the often overlooked events in the "dead zone" *after* a major event. It's interesting to examine what happens after the dramatic crisis and resolution of our historical narratives. Life still continues; what is it like?

Bread Loaf and the Bakeless Prizes

The Katharine Bakeless Nason Literary Publication Prizes were established in 1995 to expand Bread Loaf Writers' Conference's commitment to the support of emerging writers. Endowed by the LZ Francis Foundation, the prizes commemorate the Middlebury College patron Katharine Bakeless Nason and launch the publication career of a poet, fiction writer, and creative nonfiction writer annually. Winning manuscripts are chosen in an open national competition by a distinguished judge in each genre. Winners are published by Houghton Mifflin Company in Mariner paperback original. The judges in 2003 were Louise Glück for poetry, Jay Parini for fiction, and Ted Conover for creative nonfiction.

Also available:

[The Clerk's Tale: Poems](#) by [Spencer Reece](#), Foreword by [Louise Glück](#)

[Rear View](#) by [Pete Duval](#), Foreword by [Jay Parini](#)