

THE CONVERSATION

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Goodbye Leonard, you brought us so much light

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Leonard Cohen in 2012 accepting an award for his song lyrics. Jessica Rinaldi/Reuters

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Leonard Cohen has died, and the lights have gone out all around the world. His death shouldn't have come as any surprise: as he wrote to his muse Marianne, just weeks ago,

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we are really so old and our bodies are falling apart and I think I will follow you very soon.

But I didn't think he meant quite that soon. I thought "well, 80 is the new 60", and that for years yet he would be helping me see the world through his unique gaze.

Readers and listeners and fans often speak about the celebrities who captivate them as though they have a relationship with them; as in some ways they do. Of course it is synthetic, but it can feel remarkably real, as does my not-actually-there relationship with Leonard Cohen.

I never met him, never spent time drinking and talking with him. And yet listening to him or reading his work feels like sharing a conversation with someone I know.

Leonard Cohen Live: Suzanne (Rare Footage)



And I have known him most of my life. Like many people my age, I first ran across his work in early adolescence. That is perfect timing because adolescence, at least for arty nerdy kids, is a weird and lonely place, where one feels alien in an alien land.

His music — the dark lyrics, the dark voice — perfectly suited my longing for a warm bath and a sharp knife; but also kept me from acting on that longing. I had to hear the end of one song, the beginning of the next one, so he Scheherazade'd me through the ennui till I came out the other end of sadness.

Back then, it was his perspective on attachments and loss that captured me: So Long Marianne, with its forlorn vision of a love not quite attained (“You left when I told you I was curious,/ I never said that I was brave”); Famous Blue Raincoat, with the calm awareness of just how impossible love can be (“you treated my woman to a flake of your life/ And when she came back she was nobody’s wife”); or Teachers, where the persona of the song can simply never get things right (“Have I carved enough my Lord? /Child, you are a bone.”)

They moved me then; they move me still.



Justin Trudeau

@JustinTrudeau

There's a blaze of light
In every word
It doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken Hallelujah#RIPLeonard

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A few years later, I struggled through his Beautiful Losers; and then came across his printed (as opposed to sung) poetry: books like Death of a Lady’s Man; Stranger Music; The Book of Longing.

And the older I grew, the more I realised that his work wasn’t bleak after all; Cohen’s “tragic vision” is in fact warm and funny and closely observant, his writing without schmaltz or sentimentality.

First We Take Manhattan cracks me up even today, with its wry/dry humour (“Ah, you loved me as a loser /But now you’re worried that I just might win”).

Leonard Cohen - First We Take Manhattan



Dance Me To The End of Love is both wry and tender (“let me see your beauty when the witnesses are gone/ Let me feel you moving like they do in Babylon”); and The Stranger Song: I can’t put my finger on why it makes me smile, but I think it’s the way he plays the rhythm and the rhyme (“I know that kind of man /It’s hard to hold the hand of anyone / who is reaching for the sky just to surrender”).

He extracts the numinous from the ridiculous; the ridiculous from the pompous. His language suits my ear; his words and his ways of seeing and saying and doing are in my bones.

But more than his poetry, his fiction and his songs, I fell in love with his observations on creativity and the creative life.

If you can be mentored by someone you’ve never met, I have been mentored by Cohen. He knows what it is to wrestle with intractable poems; he knows that ideas can be obdurate or, worse, banal.

He knows that the creative life is a long haul, and hard work, and mystery; that there are “no prizes ... no rewards other than the work itself”.

All we can do, as writers and artists, is keep going, keep working, hope to find moments of grace, hope to retain our integrity. He knows too that it is about human society, when he writes,

Songs don’t dignify human activity. Human activity dignifies the song.

Leonard Cohen - You Want It Darker (Audio)



Just weeks ago, Cohen produced *You Want It Darker*, an album whose title teases those of us who have read despair in his creative outputs; whose lyrics circle around the numinous, reflecting on what it is to be elderly, and to know that death is not far away, but not any more an enemy.

He has, after all, been watching death approach for a long time now, as his writings suggest, but apparently not with dread.

His death seems such a loss in a year of so many losses. Still, there is a small consolation in the fact that, as his own writings remind us, death simply is.

There's a crack in everything;/ that's how the light gets in.

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