

THE DAY I BECAME AN AUTODIDACT
and the advice, adventures, and acrimonies
that befell me thereafter

by Kendall Hailey

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Reviewed by

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How many of you here know the meaning of the word *autodidact*? (*Small show of hands.*) How many of you knew what it meant before you saw the topic for this book review? (*Presumably smaller show of hands.*) Well, that's interesting, because those of you who went home and looked it up are more suited to *be* autodidacts than those who thought they'd just wait for me to explain. (*Polite but bewildered laughter?*)

Here is how the author explains it in her preface:

Staring at the list today's mail brought, I made a solemn vow (my very first solemn vow, I believe—I'm only fifteen). I am going to become an autodidact. I am never going back to school.

Of course, as bad luck would have it, I have only just finished the tenth grade. But as soon as I can extricate myself from high school, it's over between me and formal education. And all because of that list.

As I opened the envelope from my school, I was already suspicious of what school would have to say to me during the summer. And what I saw made me shudder. A mandatory (my least favorite word) summer reading list.

I read (rarely skimming) everything school tells me to from the middle of September to the middle of June, but the summer is mine. And being told what to read during the summer suddenly made me realize that I don't really like being told what to read during the fall, winter, and spring either.

I cannot wait to tell Mom and Dad what I am becoming. Though I wonder if they'll know what an autodidact is. I discovered the word thanks to the writer Jessica Mitford. Once asked on a forbidding form to list her degrees and not having any, she wrote "autodidact"—a swell word for one who is self-taught. It is nice indeed to have parents who, though they might not know what an autodidact is until I explain, will still welcome one into the family.

Later she adds:

Just to be on the safe side (there's always the possibility they could turn on a word they don't know), I took the most erudite approach I could manage. I said Milton's family had supported him for five years while he educated himself (I did not mention this was after his graduation from Cambridge—though perhaps I should have. Go to Cambridge and you still have to educate yourself). I was asking for only one year.

They said to take ten. But as it only took five to send Milton on the road to blindness, I said I'd stick to one for now. Of course I can't really become a full-time autodidact until I finish high school, but I can start practicing this summer. And make sure I like this word I've taken for my life. Though I know I will.

Thinking of Milton sitting in his family's country home reading everything ever published, I know that's what I want to do. And if I need glasses later on, then that's not too much of a price to pay.

This book, then is a record of Kendall Hailey's progress in self-education. It is in the form of a journal and covers approximately four years, from July 1982 to July 1986. But for those of you who have recently struggled with *The Private Mary Chesnut*, I hasten to say that this could not

be more different from Mary's unedited diaries. This, I imagine, is more comparable to Chesnut's published diaries: although I can't say for sure, I feel confident that Hailey selected, edited, and polished her journal entries to illustrate a few common themes that run through the book.

I was much less aware of this when I first read the book, as I was simply absorbed in learning about her life and reveling in her writing, but when I went back to take notes for this review, I realized that there was much more organization to the book than I had realized. The journal entries are undated, and the titles of the book's twelve sections for the most part have no chronological significance, so it was only when I examined the internal evidence more closely that I realized that each section covers roughly a semester of school or a summer vacation. It is perhaps not surprising that Kendall should be influenced by the academic calendar even after leaving school, since her friends were still taking the conventional path, and she could not help comparing her progress to theirs.

Before we look at that, though, let's back up and find out a little bit about Kendall's family, the parents she was so sure would welcome an autodidact into the family. Far from being uneducated or autodidacts themselves, Kendall's parents both have college degrees. However, both are also writers, and this probably contributed to their cavalier attitude toward education. Her father, Oliver Hailey, is a graduate of Yale University and a playwright. Her mother, Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey, is a graduate of Hollins College, and at the time of this book had published two best-selling novels and was working on a third. And perhaps it is because Kendall too wants to be a writer that they are willing to indulge her. "Certainly," she says, "formal education did all it could to discourage my parents."

The only "B" my father ever got was in playwriting. And my mother's history is more encouraging still to the autodidact, even if it did discourage her for twenty years. She took her only creative-writing course in college, received a "C," and was told by the professor, who was new to the college, that he would have flunked her, but he hated to flunk anyone his first year. [75]

Kendall describes her family on the first two pages of her book and in the process not only tells us how important they are to her but also gives a great deal of insight into her own character. She has started reading *Anna Karenina* and encountered the following passage:

Every person in the house felt that there was no sense in their living together, and that the stray people brought together by chance in any inn had more in common with one another than they...

Kendall comments:

It would be hard to find an honest family member who would not admit to that thought crossing his mind several times a day. I love my family, but I do sometimes wonder what I would think of them had I not started out loving them and then gotten to know them.

We are an odd bunch. A father, a mother (not too odd yet), a younger sister (getting odder), a grandmother (approaching the bend), and an uncle (and round it).

It was my uncle who sparked my first battle with formal education. He had infantile paralysis when he was ten years old, and one day when I was in kindergarten I decided to paint a picture of his wheelchair. My teacher looked at it and said it was the most depressing picture she'd ever seen because it was all gray. And wouldn't it be nice to put some yellow in it? At the age of five, I did my best to explain that the painting was a true rendering of my uncle's wheelchair, not a comment on my life.

And that was the only trouble my uncle Thomas's being in a wheelchair ever caused me. When we went to Europe as a break from kindergarten, I rode in his lap across the continent. There is little better in life than a moveable lap. In Paris, I had a nightmare—Thomas had learned to walk. And there had gone my lap.

And so if sometimes I wonder how I ever got to know my family, I am almost always glad I did. The great gift of family life is to be intimately acquainted with people you might never even introduce yourself to, had life not done it for you. [3–4]

One of the recurring themes throughout this book is how much Kendall loves her family and dreads being separated from them, which partly accounts for her desire to study at home rather than go away to college. Although there is inevitably some friction with her sister Brooke, four years younger, most of the entries here proclaim how much Kendall admires her sister's intelligence and writing ability. Her mother is, with Jessica Mitford and Helene Hanff, one of "the triumvirate of writers nearest and dearest to [her] soul" [7]. But perhaps it is her father she is closest to. He is "the wisest man I know" [220], whose opinion she values "as if it came from a sacred god" [167]. This is why Kendall can say, in defending her choice to stay home, "I love my family and I don't ever want to be without them" [141].

So how successful is Kendall's plan to educate herself? It starts slowly, as she must return in the fall to Oakwood, a private school in Los Angeles, where they live. Interestingly enough, we are never told what books were on the infamous reading list, and it is unclear whether she ever reads them. On the last weekend before school starts, when her friend Matthew is searching the house for either *The Last of the Wine* or *I, Claudius*, one of which he has to read for school Monday, Kendall tells him that it is against her principles to read anything for school over the summer, and clearly the books listed on the "reading list" handout are *not* the assigned books. At any rate, soon after beginning school, Kendall has another inspiration: perhaps she can persuade her school to let her graduate early, as one of her friends is doing. She'll need an extra credit, so she'll have to take up French again.

Plus, I will have to somehow manage to take Beginning Painting and Advanced Painting simultaneously. Though I suppose that will be a more lifelike way of doing things since no one ever stops being a beginner, and it is hard to be advanced all the time.

Of more concern to Kendall than the increased class load, though, is the wisdom of her decision:

There is just one thing that worries me about graduating early. I would like, if possible, to make sure I love life as much as I think I do. I would just hate to leave school for life and then find out I am not all that fond of it. [23–24]

As a test of "real life" and an escape from school, Kendall takes off with her family on a book tour.

Mom's second novel has just hit the bookstores and so, of course, Dad, Brooke, and I are accompanying her to do all we can to make sure *Life Sentences* gets prime shelf space. I say "of course" when I should say "very unusually," but my parents are so exemplary in their behavior that they have made the very unusual a matter of course.

Mom and Dad never leave home without Brooke and me. It began with Dad. Whenever he had an important production of one of his plays, we all went. He feels our presence—to say nothing of our production notes—much too valuable to be left at home. [24]

Kendall goes on to recount some of her adventures in missing school in her elementary years. When she hit seventh grade and began to attend Oakwood,

Mom and Dad—in an unusual lapse of character—weren't sure if we could get away with the long absences I had taken so casually in grammar school, and they were days from leaving on a trip without me when it suddenly hit me, sitting in a class, listening to material I already understood explained once again for those who didn't, that I had to go.

So, preparing myself for failure of all classes and complete ruination of my life, I took my books and hit the road. I came back weeks ahead of my class (thanks to optimistic teachers who assigned me much more than my classmates let them cover) and haven't given up traveling yet. [25]

While she is on her mother's book tour, she sees Harvard and calls it "very beautiful," but adds, "let us not forget that Harvard was the place Henry David Thoreau said bored him. And since he and I were born on the same day, I'm pretty sure I would have a similar reaction" [27] (Ironically, she is later awarded the Harvard Book Prize at her school.)

Kendall finds unexpected support for her plan from her school principal, who, it turns out, also graduated early. Others are less supportive:

One of the English teachers was very disappointed I was leaving early and would not get a chance to take her Great Novels course.

I asked what the great novels were going to be.

"*Anna Karenina*."

"Oh, well, I've read that."

"*Great Expectations*."

"Oh, well, I've read that."

"*Vanity Fair*."

"Oh, well, I've read that."

"Well, maybe you won't be missing much by missing my Great Novels course."

So Kendall graduates in June 1983. After graduation, her family immediately takes off on a trip to London, where she reads Proust and sees a lot of plays. After her return home, she spends the rest of the summer reading Dickens, Henry James, and Hemingway. As the 1983–84 school year begins and she sees her former classmates returning to Oakwood, she starts reading

Dostoevsky but finds *The Brothers Karamazov* indigestible. At this point I think she realizes she has begun to drift and needs some sort of rationale for her reading, so she attacks the second volume of Will and Ariel Durant's massive opus, *The Story of Civilization*, reads all about the Greeks, and begins to read Greek authors. By the time she gets to the Romans, she has changed her strategy somewhat:

I am now well acquainted enough in Rome to know just whom I want to really get to know.

I'm going to read the history and the literature at the same time, which I think will be slightly more effective, as I did have a tendency with the Greeks to forget who people were by the time I read what they wrote. [108]

With a few side excursions, she continues to plug away at Roman authors through 1984 and into 1985. She sees her original classmates graduate from high school and experiences "Freshman Year from a Distance" through correspondence with some of them, especially Julie Reich, another aspiring writer, many of whose letters from Tufts are transcribed in this volume. It is not until Summer 1985 that her reading program begins to seriously break down.

Many things have happened to distract her from her reading. Among these are numerous trips. Between Christmas and New Year's 1983, she and her parents and sister travel by train to Chicago for a production of one of her father's plays. In the winter of 1984, they go to New York for the opening of the stage version of her mother's novel *A Woman of Independent Means* and on to Philadelphia for the opening of her father's adaptation of Strindberg's *The Father*. In the summer of 1984, they go to Hawaii for a vacation but are called back almost immediately by the news that Uncle Thomas has had a cerebral hemorrhage and is in intensive care. She spends all of school year 1984–85 (what would have been her freshman year of college) at home, but in the summer the entire family decamps to England again.

Travel alone would not stop her from reading, however, as books are eminently portable and readily available everywhere. In fact, on one of her trips to England she writes:

This is England. I have been looking for the complete Herodotus ever since I got to know the Greeks. Today I found it in the bookshop at Victoria Station. Nothing against my countrymen, but can you imagine a bookshop owner in a United States train station having enough faith in our collective intelligence to stock Herodotus' *Histories*? There were two copies, so it is nice to think that at some time in the future an English commuter will also be reading Herodotus. [246]

What interferes more with her reading program is her compulsion to write. She starts right away, saying, "I have been out of school twelve days and I feel it is time to write a novel." During the course of the four years covered by this book she writes a novel, a play, a "screwball comedy," a mystery, another novel, a rough draft for a TV script, and a scene for a play collectively written by fourteen playwrights. This is not unreasonable, as she has always known she was going to be a writer:

My friends and I were discussing the future today. I do find it a little disconcerting that they can all answer when asked where they want to go to college, but so few have a response when asked what they want to do with their lives.

Of course, I am too harsh a judge because I have always had a response when asked what I wanted to do. I grew up watching my father do everything in life with a steno pad in his left hand and a pen in his right. It seemed an ideal way to live and so I decided that I too would live that way. However, the fact that he never set down a specific time to write, but instead wrote while waiting in line at the post office, while pulling weeds, while talking, while walking, while even driving a car, led to my greatest childhood misconception.

I did not really understand that writing was his profession. I assumed he was a kind of waiter-in-line-at-post-offices/weed puller/talker/walker/driver. And he, as I assumed everyone did, wrote while he was doing all his jobs. I thought that was the way everyone lived. They had these odd jobs and, of course, always wrote. When I envisioned my future life, it was usually as a farmer (I preferred the profession of farmer to that of waiter-in-line-at-post-offices/weed puller/talker/walker/driver), but of course I would always be writing a new play while feeding the sheep. A great melancholy accompanied the realization that not everyone in the world carried a steno pad. And I still feel that perhaps secretly they all do. [30]

Perhaps because her father is a playwright, she is also drawn to drama. She sees plenty of live theatre on her trips to London and New York, but she is also a voracious consumer of old movies on television and video. This is an activity she shares with her live-in grandmother, Nanny, who was born in 1905 and thus has lived in what Kendall considers the golden age.

One of Kendall's favorite movies is a "screwball comedy" called *My Man Godfrey*, made in 1936 and starring Carole Lombard and William Powell, who are among her idols. This and other films of that period have given her a very romantic outlook on life. Like any other healthy adolescent, she feels a need to be in love and soon pitches on the first available prospect. Matthew Van Scoyk, two years her junior, is a family friend, almost a brother to her. His mother, Leona (called Leo) and Oliver Hailey are competitive hypochondriacs, constantly comparing symptoms. When Oliver's doctors finally concede that he has Parkinson's disease, this rather takes the fun out of their game, but the Van Scoyks are supportive, accompanying the Haileys to England for treatment Oliver can't get in the United States. This experience rather sours Kendall on Matthew, as their prolonged proximity reveals a less attractive side of him (after all, he's a fifteen-year-old), but it doesn't take long for her to work back up to full force.

Like many children who are precocious intellectually, Kendall has been slow to develop socially. This is due partly to her in some ways sheltered life and partly to her inherent nature. So it is amusing to read about her first stirrings of love for Matthew, a fact that the 22-year-old author no doubt realized when putting this book together. If you can remember how intense the teen years are, you will have some idea. In her case, however, it comes out in writing, as she makes herself and Matthew characters in novels, plays, and "screwball comedies." She ultimately experiences tremendous success and satisfaction in a variety of ways.

This is how it happens. In the fall of 1983, her first year out of school, she starts going with her father to a playwright's group he belongs to. At first she just sits and listens, but inevitably she wants to participate. Her first opportunity comes when she is chosen to act—or at least read lines—in a staged reading of one of the playwrights' plays. She enjoys several such experiences. But then she gets a chance to write.

Last fall [that is, fall 1984], Paul Kent, who runs the Melrose Theatre in Los Angeles, came to the playwrights' group and asked if they'd be interested in writing a series of scenes all set in a bar. Being playwrights and smelling an actual production, they of course said yes. And in a great act of taking myself too seriously, I tried to write a scene for the "bar play" too. [178]

Her first attempt is a dismal failure:

Talking to Dad, I realized that the scene I wrote dealt with something I really don't know about. It was about two college kids doing a sociology report on why people go to bars. It wasn't the fact that my characters were in college that made me feel I didn't know my material. I know enough about school to know what it's like to go to college. And I have Julie Reich at my disposal as technical advisor. It was the fact that I was writing about two people who had acknowledged that they loved each other.

I don't know how that feels. I don't even know, if acknowledgments started being made, if Matthew and I would have anything to acknowledge. And there is pain in that. It may not be up to the standards of full-length-play pain, but I think it's pain enough for a scene. [178]

She keeps trying, though, and when she goes to England in the summer of 1985, she states as her objective: "Write a bar play if it takes getting drunk to do it." Her summary of what she accomplished during this period is, rather tantalizingly, "What I had hoped to do," leading one to wonder if she *did* have to get drunk to do it.

On her return, she shows her scene to the director, Bill Cort, and he accepts it. Better still, it is established that she and Matthew will play themselves in the scene, which is called "Confessions of an Autodidact." Kendall has cleverly written a kiss into the scene, and she makes sure they rehearse exhaustively. As it turns out, they perform together at the first reading, but then Matthew, because of the pressures of school, has to bow out and is replaced by the "handsome and charming" Dean Howell, who is "as close to James Dean as our generation is going to get" [251]. Acting on the advice of her sister and grandmother, Kendall allows Matthew to become jealous of Howell and plays "hard to get," with the result that Matthew confesses that he loves her dearly (though she has a desperate moment of fearing he may have said "nearly" or "wearily" or "merely"). When she wonders how to respond, Nanny advises: "If he tells you he loves you again, you can tell him you like him a lot" [269].

As you can see from the reading list, during this period Kendall is doing a lot of drama-related reading. One of the major exceptions is *Moby-Dick*, which she is slogging through on Matthew's recommendation, though she ultimately decides she should spend as long reading it as Melville spent writing it. At this point she is totally consumed with the joy of acting. *The Bar off Melrose*, originally intended to run for four weeks, runs for four *months*, and she says, "in four months, not once have I been bored" [275] It has changed her life, she says [265], and "I have dreamed all my life of being a writer, but now I am so loving getting to be an actress" [269]. She gets some good reviews and some bad reviews, but what she appreciates most is praise from some of the actresses she has emulated, such as Nancy Walker.

Is Kendall's education program as successful as her acting *début*? Being an autodidact is an uphill battle in many ways. Her first discovery, after school starts without her in the fall, is that autodidacts don't get the same respect as students: Nanny makes Brooke's bed but not Kendall's.

She also finds that she has a barrier to break down with Brooke every day because Brooke is in school and she isn't. Explaining her status to strangers is another problem.

This trip to Chicago [she writes] is the first time I have been introduced to a lot of new people since I left school. I hadn't realized how much more difficult it would be to answer the question, "What grade are you in?" Eleventh certainly was an easier reply.

Now I let Brooke respond first and hope they'll just forget to ask me. But after she says eighth, I have no choice but to take a deep breath and say as quickly as I can, "Well, actually, I've decided to take a year off between high school and college."

What has amazed me is that the response to this quickly sputtered statement is so positive. Nine out of ten think it's a wonderful choice. The only trouble is, I haven't learned how to argue with the disagreeing tenth. [82]

And there are numerous attempts to dissuade her. A playwright friend of her father's, George Furth, writes her a letter telling her she is "shy" and challenging her to get out into the world. In response, Kendall quotes Eudora Welty: "As you have seen, I am a writer who came of a sheltered life. A sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within" [141]. Janet, her maternal grandmother, takes a different tack: "If you don't stop reading all these books," she says, "you're going to be overeducated. I think you should go to college" [151]. This from someone who dropped out of Vassar after two years to go to art school in Italy! Her grandparents worry that she might turn out

lopsided concentrating on history and literature, and pretty much ignoring math and science. But I pointed out that college wouldn't necessarily correct that. A friend of mine about to graduate from Yale has yet to take a science or math course, and many such progressive colleges no longer force a student who's happy with the humanities to take math or science. [151-52]

Although Kendall doesn't study science or math (in fact, when she has to help Brooke with geometry, she finds that it "confounds" her the second time around [137]), she does have activities other than reading, writing, and going to plays. The double dose of painting her last year in high school seems to have "taken," and she spends a good bit of time painting portraits of her family members, though they are predictably dissatisfied with them. For a time she helps out in the kindergarten of her old elementary school, but quits when she decides she's not really helping. One of her most valuable "extracurricular activities" is providing clerical assistance to her parents. This begins after her uncle's hospitalization:

Today Dad offered to give me a practical education by teaching me to do all the things Thomas usually does. Turns out all the time Uncle Thomas thought he was just typing scripts and handling finances, he was really getting a practical education. [127]

Her father gives her a script to type:

I love reading it and I type at about the same speed I read (very, very slowly). I have not actually calculated just how many pages I can do per hour because I know that would depress me, but tonight I typed for two hours and went from page one to page six. Any further calculations are up to anyone but me.

But truthfully, I am glad I am getting a practical education. I've had a whole year of pretending I was Milton, doing only what I wanted. Frankly, any more totally carefree years and I'd probably turn into the tyrant he did. A little recording of stockmarket profits and losses would have helped his character a great deal. I know it will help mine. [127]

Eventually she graduates to typing her mother's manuscript of her novel-in-progress, which became *Joanna's Husband and David's Wife*. This is especially interesting for her because the book is based on her parents' marriage and contains a character who is "more or less" Kendall. Gradually, she becomes her mother's first editor, though she says she's not sure her father realizes that he's been supplanted.

Reading "the classics," however, remains the main focus of her educational activities.

People are always arguing in favor of college [she writes], that you are made to read things you would never read on your own, but it's hard to take joy in the things we are made to read. And I think following the path of what really interests us will eventually branch out into all knowledge. [152]

With just a year to "branch out into all knowledge," it is not surprising that Kendall rushes her fences at first. When January comes and she has not opened a college catalog, she realizes that she will be taking at least two years off from school—"and quite possibly the rest of my life"—and that is when she slows down and begins to read more systematically. She experiences her first real crisis of confidence while looking through her mother's college scrapbooks:

My God, what a scholar. And what a wonderful shock it was to find this paper on Plato. I read the assignment and thought, my heavens, I could never do this. I should give up being an autodidact and head for college because I don't really know anything about Plato. How nice to know that my mother, despite having studied him in college, didn't either. On the final page of her paper was written "totally unacceptable." [101]

It is not surprising that she compares her work to her mother's. She has found that "in changing my life course from the one taken by my peers and ruling them out as a measuring stick of my own progress, I have so narrowed the circle of those who approve me. I don't have teachers anymore, who, as Mom used to say, write Kendall love letters instead of report cards" [95]. And in some ways she doesn't want her progress measured. She is reluctant, for example, to show her writing to anyone. She has embraced Gertrude Stein's pronouncement "I am writing for myself and strangers" [14]. "Only strangers should hear the secrets of your soul," she writes. "Close relatives can't take them." [177].

The ultimate test of her education, however, is how well it fits her for "real life." Her first concept of "real life" is anything outside of school. For example, she is "shocked" when an acquaintance "mentioned casually...that she was still recovering from getting stoned two days ago."

Why are there so few of us who find life exciting enough not to need to hallucinate? Perhaps if what my classmates were facing now was life and not just another year of high school, they would share my excitement. [62]

Make no mistake about it, she has no desire to go back to school. When school starts without her, she says that her decision has caused her "not one moment of regret." Yet she remembers

school very fondly, “which must be proof I left at the right time” [65]. When she can get up in the morning thinking about the play she is writing “as opposed to the tortures of P.E., I know that the life I want is here” [90]. Having tasted freedom, she says, she knows she could never set foot in school again [90]. There are, of course, uncertainties:

I have been given the chance to live my own best life, but no instructions were included with the chance. So I haven’t been exactly sure how to do it or if my efforts have been any good. I certainly don’t know who I am the way I did in school. I don’t suppose one is ever as secure as one is in school because there are such easy standards. An “A” is the best and if you get an “A,” then you’re the best. And if you get all “A’s,” then you couldn’t possibly be doing more with your life. In the life I’ve been living, it hasn’t been as clear as that.

It’s funny, when people go to college, they often have a hard time adjusting at first, but everyone advises them to stick to it. With autodidacts, the period that’s hard is after the newness of freedom has worn off, and you begin to wonder what you should be doing with this freedom. But even if the struggle to get the most out of my freedom is sometimes hard for me, I don’t want to stop struggling.

I know that for certain now. I’ve seen too much of life, and even if I haven’t loved all I’ve seen, I’ve loved being able to see so much. I don’t ever want the days to slip together in some terrible way and I’ll look back and life will be gone. I want to feel something every day, even if occasionally it happens to be a little misery. Even if at times I feel a little lost, I want to find my own way.

When I was in school, my life was what was due next week, and that’s not enough for a life. [142]

A year later, she writes:

I just had my first midlife crisis. I was lying on the floor and suddenly it came to me that I’m going to be twenty in a few months (nine, actually). Of course, I never thought I’d really be nineteen. When I was little, I thought you should be out of the house by twelve. I’m way behind schedule.

I feel I am kind of poised—waiting for *life* to begin. But what if this has been life all along? What if it never gets any realer? I keep attributing this feeling to youth, but what if I go through my whole life without ever feeling it really began?

I suppose the ugly truth is that life begins the moment you’re born. And it is asking too much of it to request that it always live up to its reputation of being real. [238]

Toward the end of the book, as she sees her grandmother growing older and her father progressively weakened by Parkinson’s, she says that “we are fools to think a life is a long time. It goes faster than any of us has been led to believe” [268]. About his Parkinson’s, Oliver Hailey says, “I know why I got this disease. It was the only way God could think up to get me to let go of my daughters.” Kendall also sees this:

Dad is so happy in England [she writes] I think that it might finally be the place I can leave him to grow up (the “grow up” refers to us both).

I am so glad for his sake I lived the beginning of my life a little fast. Thank God I graduated early. And thank heavens I did not go to college. What a terrible waste of life it would have been. Of so many lives.

Kendall sees that, with time as with any other commodity, rarity makes it precious: “The definition of happiness,” she says, “is having too little time for all you want to do” [247]. She ends the book with these words: “Happiness is like everything else. The more experience you have, the better you get at it.”

All the passages I have quoted illustrate one of the reasons that reviewing this book was so frustrating. It is a very dense book, which Hailey has really boiled down, leaving in only the very best bits, and it is about 90 percent quotable. But this is all the more reason why you should read it. You know how sometimes when you go to a movie you find that you have already seen all the best scenes because they were in the television commercial or theater trailer that brought you there in the first place? Well, unless I read straight through this entire book, there is no way I could steal all Kendall’s thunder. This is a highly entertaining book from start to finish, with something funny or memorable several times on every page. It is a love story, a coming-of-age story, a feel-good book spiced with thought-provoking philosophy.

It is also a book that begs for a sequel. As I came to the end of the book, I was left with many questions. The book ends with the Haileys returning to the house they have bought in England. That was summer 1986, shortly before Kendall’s twentieth birthday. She is now 29, and a great deal must have happened in the interim. Did she ever go to college, I wonder. Did she do any more acting? Publish any of her writing? What happened between her and Matthew? What about her father’s Parkinson’s? I can’t answer any of these questions. I wrote to Kendall in care of her publisher but received no reply. The only clues I have are on the dust jacket of her mother’s 1991 book *Home Free*, which says that Elizabeth Forsythe Hailey “lives in Los Angeles with her husband, playwright Oliver Hailey, and her daughters Kendall and Brooke.”

Even without knowing “what happens next,” there is a great deal to enjoy in this book, and although I have been forced to leave most of it out of this review, I hope that the little I have been able to include will be enough to make you go out and get the book and read it.