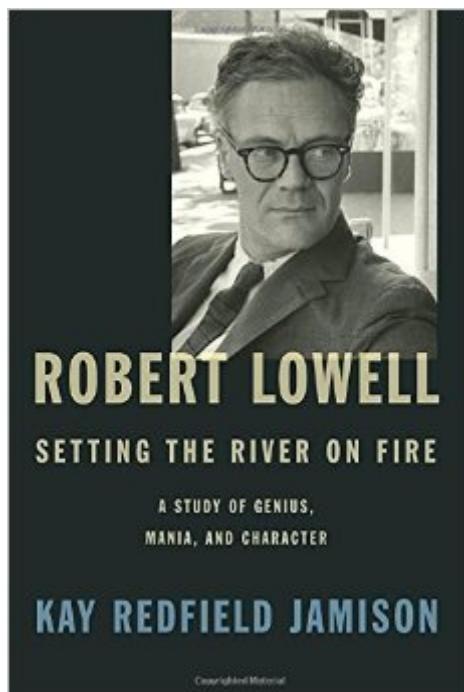


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# Robert Lowell, Setting The River On Fire: A Study Of Genius, Mania, And Character



## Synopsis

In this magisterial study of the relationship between illness and art, the best-selling author of *An Unquiet Mind*, Kay Redfield Jamison, brings an entirely fresh understanding to the work and life of Robert Lowell (1917-1977), whose intense, complex, and personal verse left a lasting mark on the English language and changed the public discourse about private matters. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry, Robert Lowell put his manic-depressive illness (now known as bipolar disorder) into the public domain, creating a language for madness that was new and arresting. As Dr. Jamison brings her expertise in mood disorders to bear on Lowell's story, she illuminates not only the relationships among mania, depression, and creativity but also the details of Lowell's treatment and how illness and treatment influenced the great work that he produced (and often became its subject). Lowell's New England roots, early breakdowns, marriages to three eminent writers, friendships with other poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, his many hospitalizations, his vivid presence as both a teacher and a maker of poems—Jamison gives us the poet's life through a lens that focuses our understanding of his intense discipline, courage, and commitment to his art. Jamison had unprecedented access to Lowell's medical records, as well as to previously unpublished drafts and fragments of poems, and she is the first biographer to have spoken with his daughter, Harriet Lowell. With this new material and a psychologist's deep insight, Jamison delivers a bold, sympathetic account of a poet who was both despite and because of mental illness—a passionate, original observer of the human condition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Groundbreaking . . . A real contribution to the literary history of New England . . . A case study of what a person with an extraordinary will, an unwavering sense of vocation, and a huge talent . . . could and could not do about the fact that the defining feature of his gift was also the source of his suffering.” •Dan Chiasson, *The New Yorker*

“Remarkable . . . Absorbing . . . Jamison approaches Lowell’s vexed life not only with scholarly authority but also with literary talent and confidence . . . One reads this biography so full of incident as one would read a novel, led by each page to the next, fearing and hoping as one follows the excruciating volatility of Lowell’s life and the unpredictable evolution of his art.” •Helen Vendler, *The New York Review of Books*

“Impassioned . . . A remarkably poignant, in-depth . . . look at the making of art.” •Daphne Merkin, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Professor Jamison sets out to recuperate the reputation of the poet, and of the man, an aim in which she succeeds triumphantly. . . . [She is] a writer of rare elegance, distinction and, above all, passion. Her introduction and the closing chapters are dazzling and deeply moving, and would have been highly appreciated by her subject, himself a fine prose stylist.” •John Banville, *The Irish Times*

“[A] journey into and alongside the mind and poetry of the American poet Robert Lowell . . . An illuminating and, at times, heartbreaking account . . . Jamison does not dilute art to adorn science or try to bend science to art. Instead, she unites scientific and artistic sensibilities in an ambitious and honest effort to understand human experience.” •Caleb Gardner, *The Lancet*

“One of the richest portraits ever written of bipolar illness . . . People with mood disorders and those who care about them are likely to experience a healing reconsideration of their own experiences as they read this wonderful book.” •Burns Woodward, MD, *Psychiatric Times*

“[Jamison] focuses usefully on the part that mania played in Lowell’s life and career, and writes about his poetry with thrilling acumen.” •Meghan O’Rourke, *The Atlantic*

“A magnificent biography . . . Sympathetic, compassionate and often lyrically stunning . . . My wariness of such psychobiographies is that the subject will be reduced to a case study, all too tidily explained. Jamison, however, preserves the mysteries.” •Sam Coale, *The Providence Journal*

“Kay Jamison brings together meticulous research into the factual narrative of Lowell’s life, an immensely sophisticated ability to interpret his poetry, and a profound understanding of his mental illness and its effect on everything else about him. Written in prose that

is often poetic and always acute, it is a poignant, terrifying, and thrilling examination of the complex relationship between genius and madness. It captures Lowell's electrifying charm, his persistent elegance of thought, and the consuming chaos of his despair. It is one of the finest biographies I have read. Andrew Solomon • Andrew Solomon "Robert Lowell was a constantly searching, restlessly inventive artist who courageously wrestled with bipolar illness all his life. Kay Jamison's deeply considered, deeply empathetic reading of Lowell's life and work gives us a revolutionary, richly nuanced way of understanding both a major writer's career and the sources and processes of creativity itself. We needed this book." Jonathan Galassi "Intellectually thrilling . . . Achieves a magnificence and intensity that sets it apart . . . Above all, the book demands that readers seriously engage with its arguments, while also prodding them to reexamine their own beliefs about art, madness, and moral responsibility." Michael Dirda, *The Washington Post* "The best book so far about one of our most polarizing contemporary literary figures." Craig Teicher, *Los Angeles Times* "Seldom if ever has there been such a neat match between author and subject as in this penetrating study . . . Exceptionally nuanced." Martin Rubin, *The Washington Times* "[A] superb examination of manic depression and its connection with creativity." Kay Jamison's understanding of literature is also "fast, compound, legendary"; she draws from a vast knowledge while disclosing this larger than life poet who was loved, hated, and because of brain chemistry, often misunderstood. In addition to the luminaries quoted, her account is enhanced by memories offered by his daughter Harriet Lowell, and the inclusion of previously unreleased medical records that chart his, and his many relatives', experience with mental illness. Valerie Duff, *The Boston Globe* "A remarkable look into the life and mind of a genius." Matt McCarthy, *USA Today* "Incandescent writing . . . [Jamison] affirms her scholarship of the highest order, analyzes the conjoined world of manic-depressive illness and creativity with imagination, [and] demonstrates a brilliant use of language and image . . . Her humanity and innate generosity of spirit remind us of Menninger's injunction, 'When in doubt, be human.' Gordon Parker, *American Journal of Psychiatry* "A landmark analysis of the disease that molded a brilliant man, and an immensely moving book . . . [Robert Lowell] is the perfect subject for Jamison's superb examination of manic depression and its influence, for good and ill, on creativity." Mary Ann Gwinn, *Booklist* "Jamison has constructed a novel and rewarding way to view Lowell's life and output." Publishers Weekly "An intimate, sensitive, and perceptive

account of the illness from which poet Robert Lowell suffered most of his life. •  
Kirkus Reviews • “Finally, a book commensurate to the immensity that was Robert Lowell. This is the soul that fires the poetry and prose, the soul that his friends fell in love with. I’m happy that I’ve lived long enough to read it.” • Frank Bidart • “A dazzling combination: the brilliant Robert Lowell read by the brilliant Kay Jamison, who writes a book for the ages: poignant, ambitious, and big-hearted, about friendship, history, and the mad dance of mind that Lowell faced with supreme courage, all the while producing some of the most haunting lyrics of the twentieth century. Jamison on Lowell: read it to learn, with humility, how to live.” • Brenda Wineapple • “Reading *Setting the River on Fire*, I felt I was keeping company with the man I knew, yet seeing him bathed in so many new lights that I realized how little I had actually known him. In this astonishingly multidimensional portrait of Robert Lowell, Jamison makes him live and breathe, and restores to him the grandeur he deserves. We can see her in him and him in her and, in the best sense, *Setting the River on Fire* turns out to be an exhilarating vicarious biography • something so rare as to be perhaps unique, a biographer fully inhabiting the life of her subject in a way that seems to the reader a life at once seen from a wise distance and felt intimately at first-hand.” • Jonathan Raban

KAY REDFIELD JAMISON is the Dalio Family Professor in *Mood Disorders and a professor* of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, as well as an honorary professor of English at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. She is the author of the national best sellers *An Unquiet Mind*, *Night Falls Fast*, and *Touched with Fire*, and is coauthor of the standard medical text on manic-depressive illness, *Manic-Depressive Illness: Bipolar Disorders and Recurrent Depression*. Dr. Jamison is a recipient of the Lewis Thomas Prize, the Rhoda and Barnard Sarnat International Prize in Mental Health from the National Academy of Medicine, and a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship.

Coming to the end of a book that is more than a biography. It is a reliving of the poet’s creative process in and through a horribly turbulent life, with the worst kind of pain giving birth to his art • more painful than going through a war • because the battlefield is in his heart and mind and worse in a sensitive conscience. It read swiftly a first and then, though the writing stayed lucid and fluid, it was a struggle going through the poet’s ordeal and the ordeal he inflicted on his loved ones however compelling the prose. Exhausting yet exhilarating. Will never forget this.

Excellent account of Robert Lowell, his poetry and the mystifying bi-polar condition. Kay Redfield Jamison has done it again!

Great story... enjoying it immensely

An excellent, well-documented clinical biography.

I loved this book. I am a Lowell fan and was not disappointed. Not for everyone, though.

Wonderful and detailed look at Robert Lowell Can be a bit repetitive at times, but still worth it. A great read!.

This book was in perfect condition from the seller & still at a discount price! Kay Redfield Jamison does some of her best writing in a long time. This is a page turner & has a lot to offer with insights on Lowell's life, poetry, career, and struggles. A fascinating read. I highly recommend this book & this bookseller! Sheds excellent & pertinent light on what it's like to be a manic-depressive & a writer. This book offer much new learned material on Robert Lowell's life- an excellent biography.

Beautifully written.

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