

The Case for Staying Single

By Kathryn Hughes

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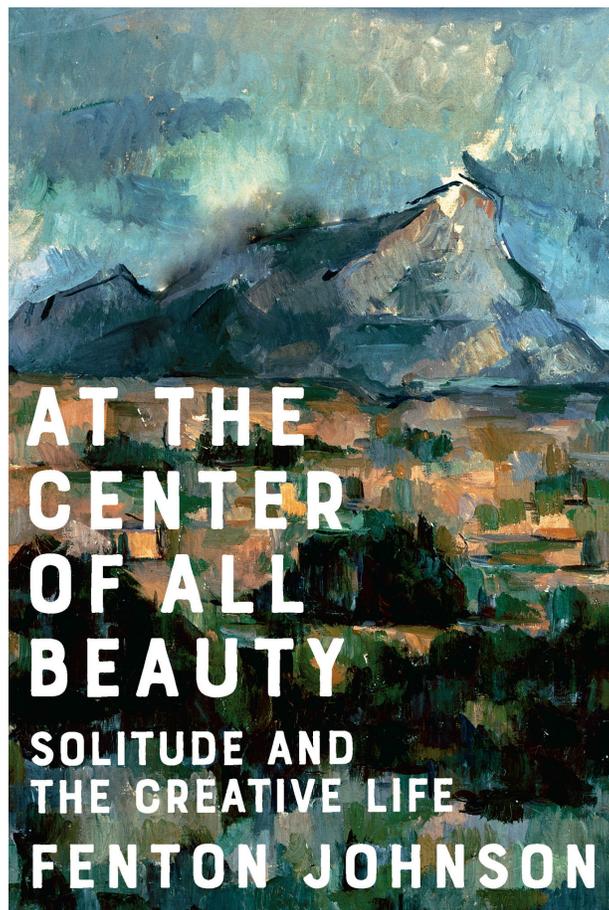
AT THE CENTER OF ALL BEAUTY

Solitude and the Creative Life

By Fenton Johnson

When the writer Fenton Johnson was in the seventh grade in 1960s Kentucky, the class was asked to draw posters illustrating some aspect of Roman Catholic catechism. Johnson chose “Three Roads to Heaven,” representing the three church-designated paths from which a good pilgrim must make an adult choice. The first road led to the religious life — a calling to be either priest or nun. The second ended in the self-explanatory “Marriage,” with procreation tacitly assumed to be part of the deal. The third possible vocation, perhaps surprisingly, was to stay “Single.” As far as the Roman Catholic God of postwar rural America was concerned, choosing to live on your own while remaining at large in the community was an entirely estimable thing to do. Yet when the room of 12-year-olds was asked in a follow-up session which path they would choose, only young Johnson responded “Single.”

This is hardly surprising, either then or now. Johnson, who in “At the Center of All Beauty” reveals that he has remained largely uncoupled in his adult life, is exquisitely alive to the bad chatter that “solitaries” — his term for those who are solo by choice — attract. In many parts of the globe, being a single adult is seen as temporary at best, a transitory phase through which you progress on your way to the social goal of heterosexual coupledness. To tarry as a “bachelor” or “spinster” past the age of 35 is to enter a doubtful, dreary no man’s land. The fear is that you will be stuck there forever, eventually attracting that pitiable label “not the marrying kind,” which contains within itself the ghost of another, crueler designation: “unmarriageable.”



In this lyrical yet finely argued book, Johnson sets out to show that being alone — so different from loneliness, its direct opposite, in fact — is absolutely essential to the creative life. Taking a dozen or so historical examples, from Emily Dickinson in Amherst to Bill Cunningham in New York via Paul Cézanne in Provence, Johnson reveals how artists have always removed themselves from the noise and clutter of enforced sociability in order to live closer to the sources of their inspiration. Dickinson turned down an offer of marriage late in life, while Cunningham, the society photographer, insisted on living on as little money as possible so that his employers, which included The New York Times, “can’t tell you what to do.” Cézanne, though technically married, saw his wife and child only on Sundays, which left the rest of the week free for obsessively painting Mont Sainte-Victoire in all weathers and lights.

The revelation that artists are tricky to live with hardly seems sufficient roughage for a whole book. But Johnson is clear that when he talks about the “creative life” he means far more than the pursuit of individual excellence and glittering prizes. He is thinking instead about something closer to communal service, a caring for the world that depends on the setting aside of self. As he puts it, “relationship to a partner or spouse can be a thing of beauty ... but I am more deeply touched by those who forge a relationship with all.” To show us what this looks like in practice, he takes us back to his own childhood in the Kentucky Knobs. His devoutly Catholic parents had nine children, of whom he was the last. There was not much space

and still less money for “me time,” yet Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were committed solitaires who carved out far more space for themselves than their hardscrabble surroundings would seem to have allowed.

In meticulous, loving prose, Johnson describes how his father built a cabin among the ancient beechwoods in which to pursue his sculpture. The senior Johnson also ran a workshop for all the carpentry and machine work needs of their small, agricultural settlement, including the community of Trappist monks next door. Johnson’s mother, meanwhile, had a greenhouse in which she cultivated those most beautifully useless plants, orchids and cactuses. She also ran a lending library out of an abandoned gas station in addition to acting as den mother to the Trappists, who slipped into her kitchen for an extra meal, their vow of silence temporarily set aside. Johnson suggests that his parents were able to be of such service to the community, let alone to their children and to each other, because they were fierce about spending several hours of the day quite apart.

What is this special quality, then, that is available only once we have learned to be truly alone? To draft an answer, Johnson goes back to his famous solitaires in an attempt to identify a common denominator. But the deeper he looks, the more distinct each of his emblematic figures becomes, so that, by the end of the book, it seems foolish to expect some secret formula by which Rabindranath Tagore, Eudora Welty and Nina Simone can be bound together. Ultimately Johnson’s answer seems to be that the more fully we can learn to exist

without the “social fiction” of coupled togetherness, the more likely we are to be able to live most fully, and usefully, in the world, whether as librettist or librarian, wife or friend.

Kathryn Hughes’s most recent book is “Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum.”

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