

READER'S GUIDE



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Days of Sand

by H el ene Dorion

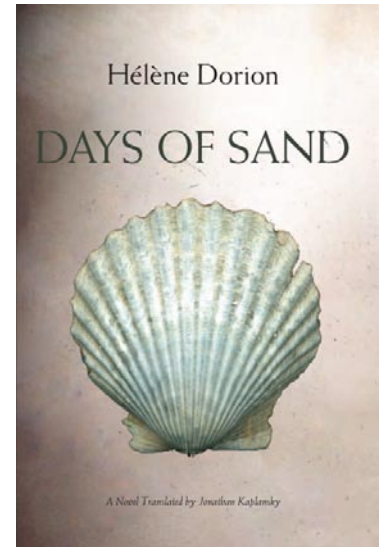
Translated by Jonathan Kaplanksy

INTRODUCING *Days of Sand*

Remarkable images, thoughts, and memories come together, fusing autobiography, sensory fiction, and poetic prose in this beautiful novel by acclaimed Qu eb ecoise poet, H el ene Dorion. Memory and imagination are the settings for *Days of Sand*, where Dorion interweaves place, time, and existence into a present made whole by her deft use of language; this is a novel in which the permanent immediacy of all times and places — of existence itself — is illuminated.

Touching on her time in hospital as a child, vacations spent along the St. Lawrence and the coast of Maine, family stories and histories, Dorion takes the reader into her intimately recorded emotions and carefully observed daily existence, in which the quotidian detail is illuminated by the poet's perception, memory, and language.

An intimate study of the power of words and language, body and self, *Days of Sand* is a meditation that resonates with the stories of a life not merely lived, but experienced in a child's growing awareness of the greater world.



IMPORTANT THEMES

Memories

The entire novel is a blend of memoir and sensory fiction, existing through dreams and memories. The sweeping language moves in and out of the narrator's thoughts, establishing her memory as the actual setting; the place where the novel continues to return to. Through this physical presence, Dorion establishes the theme as the connection to the reader, the one thing in all of our lives that is always present and important.

Words

Throughout, the narrator is obsessed with the formation of words and language, reminiscing about the shape and flow of her father's handwriting, her memories of reading and learning, and how her experiences are shaped by what she has read. Words are what the narrator shapes her thoughts around and how she filters the story to the reader, not writing a narrative, but creating a snapshot of her memory in words.

Childhood

It is often childhood memories that the narrator returns to, relating her stay in the hospital, her days at school, and of her grandmother. But it is also through the story of *The Little Prince* that the ideas of innocence and childhood are embodied, bringing together all of the themes discussed here: a memory of a book about a child without a family.

Q&A WITH HÉLÈNE DORION

1. All of your other work to this point has been poetry. What inspired you to write a novel?

When I was a child, I spent my summers at the seashore. I now live by a lake with a small beach, and, one summer day, I had my feet in the sand when memories of my childhood began to resurface. Of course, the image is slightly bucolic, but, above all, it is strongly linked to the very symbol of time. I experienced the desire to explore this process of memory and reconstruct the figure created by the many, usually banal, events of life — especially those of childhood — to see how various fragments are linked to one another.

I am still just as fascinated by the resonance the past has inside our present. I did not intend to write about “my life” or “my childhood,” even if I needed that material to reconstruct this necessary and perfectly coherent figure. Rather, it was about remembering these traces of individual history and letting universal history intersect it, seeing the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the imprisonment of Giordano Bruno meet up with Beethoven’s piano, Spinoza’s *Tractatus*, and the odyssey of *Apollo 11*, and understanding how fragments of these stories create what we call “a life.”

2. What kind of struggles did you have to deal with in writing this novel? What did you learn about your own writing after finishing the novel?

In terms of writing, this involved making the tone, spirit, and rhythm of the sentence coincide with the movements of memories that, in consciousness, unravel like strands of thread. Writing, therefore, alternates between these scratched out sentences that symbolize this mosaic of fragments and images and longer sentences that, to some degree, reveal the narrator’s thread of consciousness.

I had to find a formal structure that would allow historical facts and personal events to coincide so that we can hear them resonate with one another. In addition, the alternation enters into the narration and the more introspective passages. *Days of Sand* is thus composed of several simultaneous and independent events and juxtaposed patterns.

Of course, at the time I wrote it, the parameters were not so defined, and many elements came to me very intuitively.

3. The narrator speaks at one point about the beloved children’s story, *The Little Prince*, which has become a cultural symbol of growing up. Could you further explain the effect this story has on the narrator and postulate why it has become so important in popular culture?

The first time that I read *The Little Prince*, I had the strong impression that an entire world had opened up to me; a world that linked me to others through the most fragile part of our being: the oh-so vulnerable place that is the heart. In fact, I found exactly the way that I wanted to be connected to others. The character of the Little Prince symbolizes a being who opens himself up and abandons himself to others, a being whose soul is totally transparent. Furthermore, he came to know the world the same way that other people came to know the world, which, once again, resonated deeply for me.



ABOUT HÉLÈNE

Best known as a poet, **Héléne Dorion** is a major literary voice in Québec. Her poetry has won her, among many awards, the Governor General’s Literary Award, the Prix international de poésie Wallonie-Bruxelles, the Prix Alain-Grandbois, and the Prix de l’Académie Mallarmé, which was awarded to her for her body of work. She has edited several anthologies, most notably a collection of the poetry of Saint-Denys Garneau. From 1991 to 2000, she was the managing director of Éditions du Noroît. Born in Québec City, Héléne now lives north of Montréal.

Perhaps *The Little Prince* became a seminal work for many people because it embodies what all of us, deep down, are seeking: love, given and received with a simplicity that does not alter its intensity. This love embodies essential values — that lie outside the realm of any religion, but harbour a spiritual dimension — which may inspire us to learn, to live, and to love. *The Little Prince* illuminates a pathway that goes toward the other, while passing through the deepest part of ourselves.

4. In the novel, the narrator seems to be obsessed with myths and myth-making. Could you discuss how the idea of myths has influenced the way you wrote the story?

The echoes of myths, legends, and historical references that appear in my novel attest to the way that the events in our lives resonate with universal history. I sought to imbue them with a kind of magic, mystery even, so that they take on a whole new dimension; that even simple and banal everyday existence may come to be enraptured once more.

For me, writing is gathering links, attempting to reveal these invisible threads that link us to one another, both in the present and through the past.

5. What do you hope readers will take from this novel?

I hope that my book prompts readers to enter into their own childhoods, to return along the steps of their histories so that they will be able to feel the past resonating in the present; to find that the many fragments — or moments — of a life form, both simple and complex, when linked to one another, allow us to better understand the movement of life.

Perhaps the reader could also create bridges between the intimate and the universal, and see meaning that suddenly appears when we link the smallest to the greatest and perceive the present more clearly.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Symbols abound in the novel. Identify a few and discuss their importance.
2. How must the narrator contend with identity throughout the novel?
3. Discuss the role of men in the book. What do they represent to the female narrator?
4. How does the title relate to the book as a whole?
5. Is there an explanation in the text for the narrator's obsession with words?
6. Can you draw parallels between the story of *The Little Prince* and this novel?
7. Is there an antagonist in the novel? If so, who, or what, is it?
8. How does *The Myth of Sisyphus* affect the narrator as she enters adulthood?