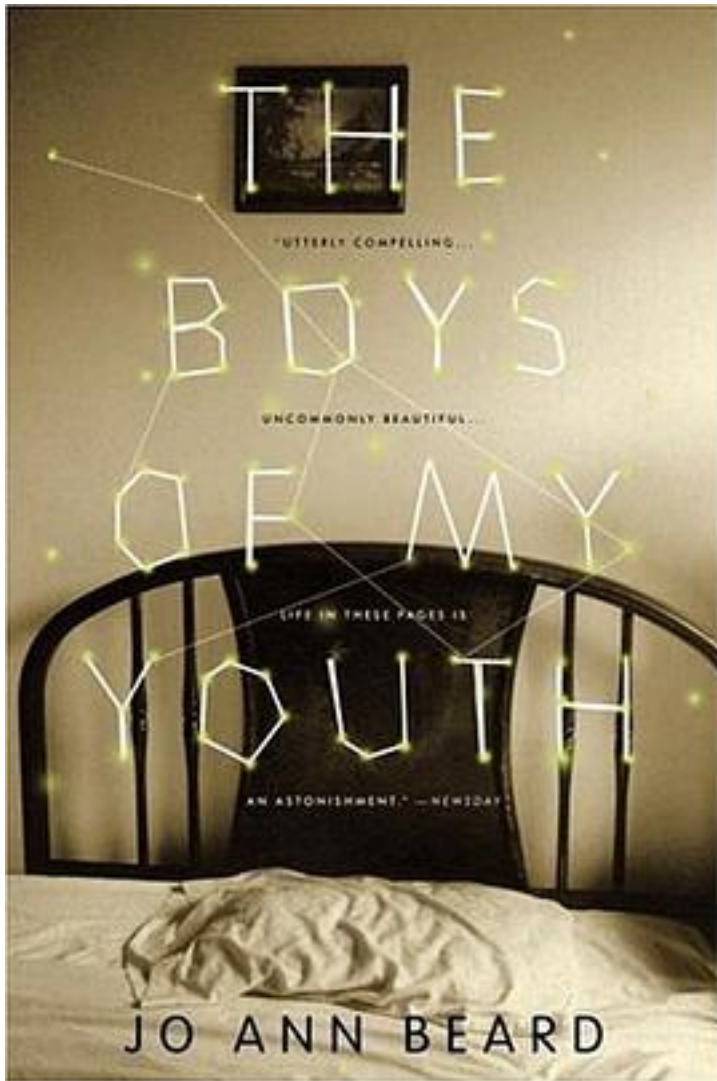


The Boys of My Youth



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Jo Ann Beard beautifully evokes her childhood in the early '60s, a time in which mothers continued to smoke right up to labor, one's own scabs were deeply interesting, and Barbie dolls seemed to get naked of their own volition, knowing that Ken would be the one to get in trouble if they were caught. Beard's memories of the next 30 years are no less sharp and wry, powered by antic melancholy, perfect juxtapositions, and "the push of love." When she was little, "the words of grown-ups rarely made sense," and even now, with the exception of her best friend and a few colleagues, not much seems to have changed. In the title story, Beard and her best friend, now 38, still spend forever on the phone, an activity they perfected in junior high and that is now possible thanks to an office WATS line. Hindsight easily renders their seventh-grade ex nihilo obsession with a "ninth grader extraordinaire" foolish, along with most encounters with the boys of their youth. But their current relations with men are really no less absurd, as they realize while listening to Beard's latest possibility leave an answering-machine message: "I don't know whether to faint or kill myself. Elizabeth laughs unbecomingly. I put both hands around my own neck. We are no longer bored." The Boys of My Youth is filled with family picnics, small celebrations, and fragility. Beard knows that her teenage efforts to "have a better personality" were as futile as her later attempt at "practicing being snotty, in anticipation of being dumped by my husband," but that doesn't make her any less fond of her younger self. And she has the same affection, and irritation, for her family, who slowly emerge in story after story. In "Waiting," she and her older sister try to keep calm as their mother is dying: "I hold two fingers up to remind her of how much longer she needs to keep this up, to pay attention. She holds up one finger, guess which one, to remind me of who's the oldest, who's the boss. I would love more than anything to slap her." There isn't a weak piece in this collection, which includes the world's most perfect description of the agonies of having your hair washed--at age 3--and the ecstasies of one encounter near the Mexican border. "The car is a boiling cauldron. The coyote stands scruffy and skittish, like a wild dingo dog I met once, who bit everything in sight, wagging his tail like a maniac. Eric slides the camera to me and puts a hand on my arm. He whispers in my ear. I nod. I love dogs better than anything else on earth, next to cigarettes and a couple of people." Beard often edges from serious laughter to high seriousness and back again. "The Fourth State of Matter" is perhaps the book's standout, a narrative about space physicists; invading squirrels; a beautiful, dying dog; a "vanished husband"; and, alas, a seminar turned 12-minute massacre. On November 1, 1991, she leaves work early and passes by the disappointed graduate student who will later that day gun down eight members of the University of Iowa physics department. Her piece is complex and heartbreaking, a master conduit of emotion and information. As always, Beard knows the rich value of the minor ritual. Earlier, she had recalled playing "Maserati" with her collie: "I'd grab her nose like a gearshift and put her through all the gears, first second third fourth, until we were going a hundred miles an hour through town. She thought it was funny." After "the newslady" finally confirms her colleagues' deaths, "Maserati" again figures: "We sit by the tub. She lifts her long nose to my face and I take her muzzle and we move through the gears slowly; first second third fourth, all the way through town, until what has happened has happened and we know it has happened."

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