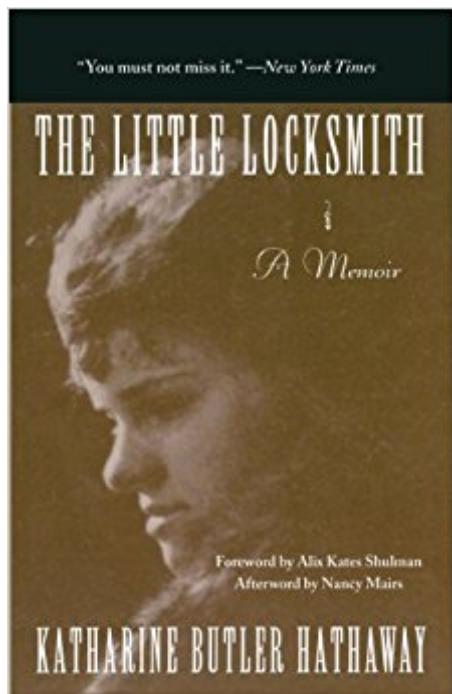


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The Little Locksmith: A Memoir



Synopsis

The Little Locksmith begins in 1895 when a specialist straps five-year-old Katharine, then suffering from spinal tuberculosis, to a board with halters and pulleys in a failed attempt to prevent her being a "hunchback." Her mother says that she should be thankful that her parents are able to have her cared for by a famous surgeon; otherwise, she would grow up to be like the "little locksmith," who does jobs at their home; he has a "strange, awful peak in his back." Forced to endure "a horizontal life of night and day," Katharine remains immobile until age fifteen, only to find that she, too, has a hunched back and is "no larger than a ten-year-old child." The Little Locksmith charts Katharine's struggle to transcend physical limitations and embrace her life, her body, and herself in the midst of debilitating bouts of frustration and shame. Her spirit and courage prevail, and she succeeds in expanding her world far beyond the boundaries prescribed by her family and society: she attends Radcliffe College, forms deep friendships, begins to write, and in 1921, purchases a house of her own in Castine, Maine. There she creates her home, room by room, fashioning it as a space for guests, lovers, and artists. The Little Locksmith stands as a testimony to Katharine's aspirations and desires for independence, for love, and for the pursuit of her art.

Customer Reviews

Upon its original publication in 1943, Hathaway's testament to a full life despite debilitating disease earned glowing reviews and became a bestseller and then dropped utterly out of sight.

Rediscovered by the Feminist Press, this remarkably un-self-pitying book remains poignant and truthful. As a child in Salem, Mass., Hathaway was diagnosed with spinal tuberculosis and, in the most advanced treatment of the time, was strapped to a board from head to toe and kept immobile for 10 years. During this period of enforced introversion, she developed astonishing inner resources and imagination, and a meticulous appreciation for life's details that would inform her work. When she regained mobility at age 15, she found her disability a forbidden topic and realized that a "deformed" girl was automatically expected to become a spinster aunt, forever dependent on her family for love and companionship. Hathaway heartily rebelled, moving and buying herself a large clapboard house in Maine, where she proceeded with the business of living. Hathaway treats the actual events in her life as practically irrelevant: the story she emphasizes is her spiritual and creative struggle to claim "selfish" time to write, her intense loneliness, her startlingly frank observations about her sexuality and her rebellion against the belief that an imperfect person does not experience desire. Hathaway's simple descriptions of the writing process are beautiful and on the mark. We're left wishing for the planned second and third volumes, which Hathaway did not

"Rediscovered by The Feminist Press, this remarkably un-self-pitying book remains poignant and truthful. Hathaway's descriptions of the writing process are beautiful and on the mark. Hathaway treats the actual events in her life as practically irrelevant: the story she emphasizes is her spiritual and creative struggle to claim "selfish" time to write, her intense loneliness, her startlingly frank observations about her sexuality and her rebellion against the belief that an imperfect person does not experience desire." —Publishers Weekly"Katharine Butler Hathaway . . . was the kind of heroine whose deeds are rarely chronicled. . . . [She took] a life which fate had cast in the mold of a frightful tragedy and redesign[ed] it into a quiet, modest work of art. The life was her own. When [she] was five, she fell victim to spinal tuberculosis. For ten years she was strapped to a board . . . and for the rest of her life, though she could move about, she was hopelessly deformed. Her body never grew any larger than that of a ten-year-old child. Her imagination, her understanding of herself, and her vision of the modes by which her life could be transformed—these, however, grew greater and greater." —The New Yorker"No words can convey the fascination and charm of this story. It is a powerful revelation of spiritual truth, won by experience of the two worlds: the world seen and the world unseen." —The Boston Globe

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