

# A Little Life

## Author Background

### Hanya Yanagihara

**Born:** 20th September 1974 in Los Angeles

**Raised:** Hawaii, New York City, Baltimore, California and Texas

**Resides in:** New York City

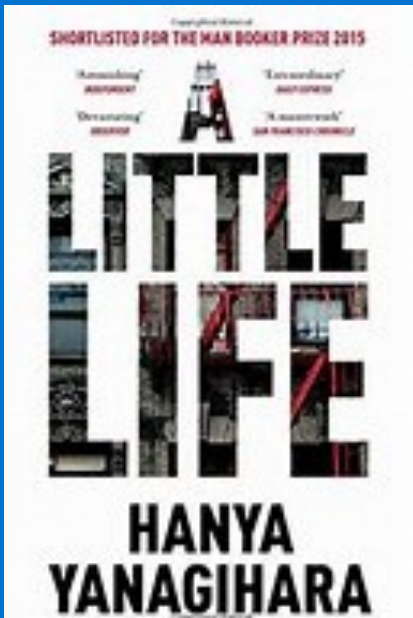
Hanya Yanagihara was born in Los Angeles, California, a fourth-generation Hawaiian, to a haematologist/oncologist father from Hawaii and a mother who was born in Seoul. She frequently moved around the United States as a child, due to her father's occupation. The family lived in multiple locations, including Hawaii, New York, Maryland, California, and Texas. She attended Punahou High School in Hawaii.

Yanagihara graduated from Smith College in 1995 and moved to New York, where she worked for many years as a publicist. In 2007 Yanagihara began working for *Conde Nast Traveller*, later becoming an editor there before moving to the *New York Times Style Magazine* in 2015.

Yanagihara's first book, *The People in the Trees*, was published in 2013. It is based on the real-life case of virologist Daniel Carleton Gadjusek. Her second novel, *A Little Life*, was published in 2015 and was short-listed and became a finalist for many awards before winning the Kirkus Prize for Fiction in 2015.

*A Little Life* was written in only eighteen months after Yanagihara worked on it in a "fevered state" every evening and weekend. The character of Jude came to Yanagihara fully formed, and she had "had the characters in (her) head for a long time". The book was written partly in response to a series of photographs that Yanagihara had been collecting through her adult life. It is also a meditation on friendship, and on the lives of adults who have wide and deep friendship networks rather than traditional families and family connections.

Sources: Wikipedia, SMH interview, Guardian interview



# A Little Life

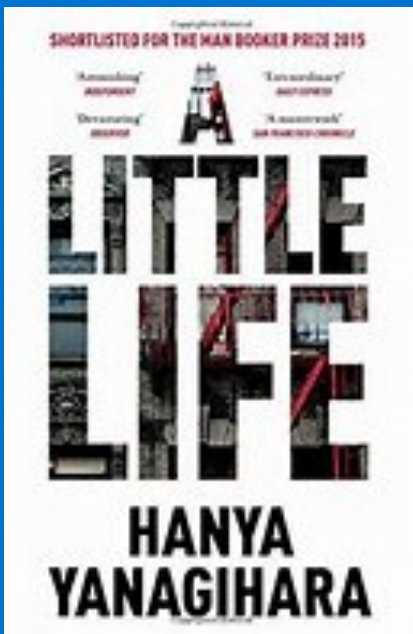
## Book Summary

When four classmates from a small Massachusetts college move to New York to make their way, they're broke, adrift, and buoyed only by their friendship and ambition. There is kind, handsome Willem, an aspiring actor; JB, a quick-witted, sometimes cruel Brooklyn-born painter seeking entry to the art world; Malcolm, a frustrated architect at a prominent firm; and withdrawn, brilliant, enigmatic Jude, who serves as their centre of gravity. Over the decades, their relationships deepen and darken, tinged by addiction, success, and pride.

Yet their greatest challenge, each comes to realize, is Jude himself, by midlife a terrifyingly talented litigator yet an increasingly broken man, his mind and body scarred by an unspeakable childhood, and haunted by what he fears is a degree of trauma that he'll not only be unable to overcome—but that will define his life forever.

In rich and resplendent prose, Yanagihara has fashioned a tragic and transcendent hymn to brotherly love, a masterful depiction of heartbreak, and a dark examination of the tyranny of memory and the limits of human endurance.

Source: Webbiography website



# A Little Life

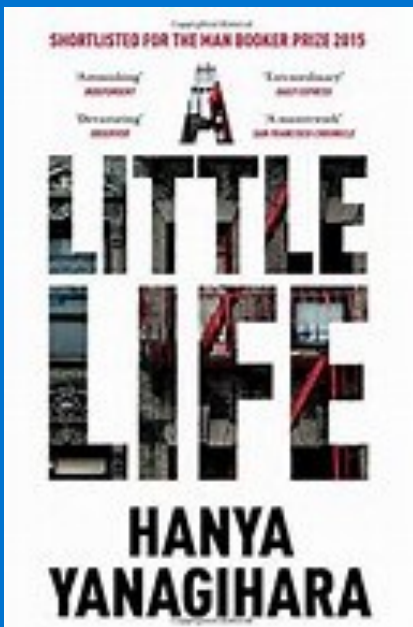
## Discussion Questions

1. Jude's life is hardly insignificant or small, so what do you think is the significance of the title *A Little Life*? When asked by *Newsweek* if the title is ironic, Hanya Yanagihara said: "All life is small... Life will end in death and unhappiness, but we do it anyway." Do you agree that all life is small?

2. Yanagihara and her editor disagreed about how much graphic violence was necessary in the book. What do you think, was there too much gruesome detail or was it appropriate for the story? How difficult or painful were those passages for you?

3. Talk about the four main characters: Willem, JB, and Malcolm, as well as Jude. How are they similar, how are they different, and what is behind the strength of their long-lasting friendships? How would you compare their male friendship to those among women?

4. *A Little Life* focuses heavily on the inner lives of its characters, with very little attention paid to exterior surroundings. Did you feel the interiority slows the book down, makes it drag in parts? Or did you find the inward focus enriched the story, making it compelling, even enthralling?



# A Little Life



## Discussion Questions (continued)

5. Were you disappointed with the lack of central, well-developed female characters? Yanagihara, again in *Newsweek*, said that “men are offered a much, much smaller emotional vocabulary to work with,” which makes them more challenging to write about.

Women, on the other hand, have a well-trodden emotional landscape and were less interesting to her as a writer. What are your thoughts?

Source: LitLovers webiste

6. *A Little Life* is a big read. Did you feel that all the deeply descriptive passages, and flights of memory and philosophy, added to the book for you? Were you drawn in and captivated, or left wanting the story to move on?

7. Although there is sadness, despair and violence in *A Little Life*, many readers also experienced a sense of hope in the power of friendships to carry us through the worst that life offers. What was your overwhelming feeling on reading and finishing *A Little Life*?

*Just for fun*

8. The four main characters in *A Little Life* have very successful ‘external’ lives. Did you believe that this would have been possible for them? Do you desire, or have, such a glittering career? What would you do with the fame and fortune if they were yours?

# A Little Life

## Reviews

*A Little Life* is uneven, unusual, unrelenting; it moves swiftly forward before lurching into longueurs of anguish recounted, self-hatred chronicled. “An elegant mind wants elegant endings,” Jude says at one point, eulogising a maths professor who believed in the axiom of equality. Elegant minds probably prefer elegant

patterns throughout, and not only at the end. Like its protagonist, this is a novel discomposed by searching questions. But it also shows the truth of a maxim Edmund Wilson once proposed, that a novel can commit any number of sins so long as it does not commit the cardinal one – it must not fail to live. Somehow, against all the odds, just like its protagonist, this book survives everything its author throws at it – and if it doesn’t quite triumph, it has far outplayed the odds.

Review by Sarah Churchwell, *The Guardian*

Yet it becomes evident soon enough that the author has more on her mind than a conventional big-city bildungsroman. For one thing, there’s the huge hunk of paper in the reader’s right hand: more than seven hundred pages, suggesting grander ambitions than a tale of successful careers. There are also curious absences in the text. Yanagihara scrubs her prose of references to significant historical events. The September 11th attacks are never mentioned, nor are the names of the Mayor, the President, or any recognizable cultural figures who might peg the narrative to a particular year. The effect of this is to place the novel in an eternal present day, in which the characters’ emotional lives are foregrounded and the political and cultural Zeitgeist is rendered into vague scenery.... Yanagihara’s novel can also drive you mad, consume you, and take over your life. Like the axiom of equality, *A Little Life* feels elemental, irreducible—and, dark and disturbing though it is, there is beauty in it.

Review by Jon Michaud, *New Yorker*



# A Little Life

## Reviews (continued)

But it is the sinews of other relationships which mark this novel as more than just one more of the child abuse memoirs and fictions which now populate booksellers' must-reads. This is a novel about male desire in some of its forms, and the grotesquely described accounts of male-male child sexual abuse are part of this spectrum

of emotionality between men. Yet it is in friendship between men that Jude gains a sense of himself as an adult, and as someone who can contribute (however little he may recognise this or, more vitally, value it) to others' lives ... There is love and hope in *A Little Life* as well ... hope of loving one another well enough, although perhaps not the complete love that we might have desired.

There is no narrative redemption for Jude, no fairy-tale ending ... A less deft novel might have given Jude a less obscure winding down of his life, but Yanagihara is confident enough to show that even fleeting and transitory moments of love and happiness can be enough, that the act of friendship can be the most important act in one's life.

Review by Stacy Gillis, *The Conversation*

Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, published in March, turned out to be one of the most talked-about novels of the summer. It's a big, emotional, trauma-packed read with a voluptuous prose style that wavers between the exquisite and the overdone.... *A Little Life* eventually develops a relentless downhill trajectory. It might have had even more impact with fewer wild beasts prowling through fewer pages. But Ms. Yanagihara is still capable of introducing great shock value into her story to override its predictability. One major development here is gasp-inducingly unexpected, the stuff of life but also of melodrama. It may not lift the bleak mood, but it explains a lot about this voyeuristic book's popular success.

Review by Janet Maslin, *New York Times*

