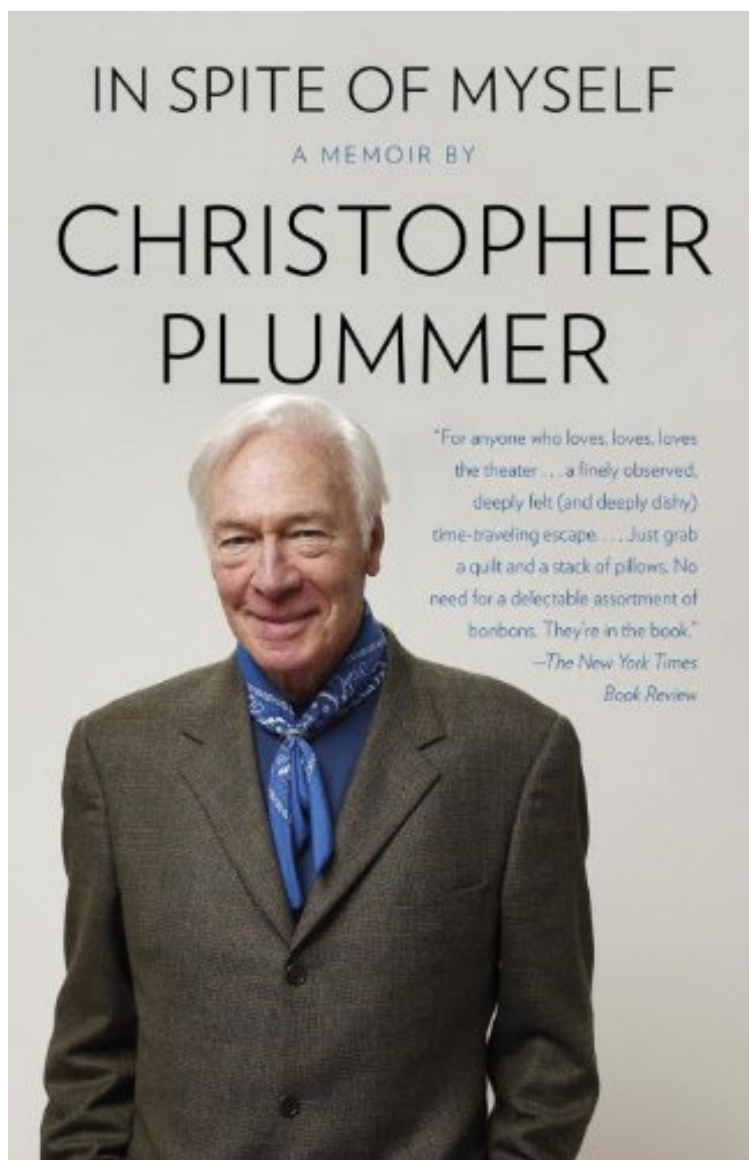


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In Spite of Myself



Par Christopher Plummer
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA rollicking, rich portrait of a life. And what a life! By one of todays greatest living actors, In Spite of Myself is seamlessly written, with stories that make us laugh out loud and that make real the fascinating, complex, exuberant adventure that is the actors (at least this actors) life.ExtraitCHAPTER ONEI was brought up by an Airedale. I wont deny it, tis the truth and nothing but, Your Honoura bumbling, oversized shaggy great Airedale. The earliest memory I have of anything resembling a pater familia, bouncer, male-nurse or God is that dear slobbering old Airedale. My sword, my lance, my shield, he never failed to stand at the ready to rescue me from all my early Moriarties! Wherever I happened to beon the floor, in my bath or on the potty, there looming above me, panting heavily, one large, drooling Airedale

reporting for duty, sir! If I went for a ride in my little cart, I would look away and pretend there was no one there at all and then when I did look back, of course he was there. He was always there padding along beside me how could I miss him? He was my only horizon he filled the sky. Like Romulus or Remus, I was his cub and he was my Wolf of Rome. His name was Byng. He was christened after another shaggy old Airedale, Field Marshal Lord Byng of Vimy, whom my grandparents had known when he was governor general; and also for the very good reason that if any of our household showed guts enough to sit down to tea or play a hand at bridge, the days calm would invariably become a stormy sance as tables, taking on a life of their own, began to shake violently and with one quick loud explosion, Bing! they would catapult themselves ceiling-ward as teapots, cups, toast, crumpets, cards and markers flew madly across the room! My canine patron had, quite simply, decided to rise. But I like Byng, my dog, because He doesnt know how to behave So Byngs the same as the First Friend was And I am the Man in the Cave (Apologies to Kipling) Nothing ever came between us Your Honour nothing he was my world; I knew no other. Until one day, one sobering day, the spell was broken when a meddling family friend pointed out to me that the nice tall lady pushing my pram was my mother. Mummies and dogs! You can beat em, kick em, treat em as shabbily as you like they will eternally forgive you and still come back for more. Such degree of devotion is as hard to grasp as it is unshakable. Being a child, I had no comprehension of it. It embarrassed me. I regularly ran away from it; in fact, I still do. I didnt throw myself into the struggle for life I threw my mother into it. g. b. shaw I came into the world that monster of infant monsters, who can clear a room more swiftly than a Sherman tank; that very monster which causes fear, dread, revulsion to seal the lips of those that dare to speak its name The Only Child! And being an only child I was more than frequently left on my own. Can you blame em?! A little boys mind can play some pretty macabre tricks on itself. I was so damned terrified of the dark that Mother had to sing me to sleep, snatches of old French songs she particularly loved. Chante, rossignol, chante, Toi qui as le coeur gaill y a long temps que je taime, Jamais, je ne toublierai. But the terror never left. It stayed through all the early years. Because of books, which Mother insisted I read, my imagination began to take over, and the long winters gave one so much time to dream up horrors. My grandparents tall, forbidding house in the city could be pretty ominous, full of dark corners to jump out of and scare yourself to death. Every time I tried to rob my grandfathers overcoat pocket of change so I could sneak downtown to Bens delicatessen for a smoked-meat sandwich and a Coke, some sudden sound would force me to drop everything and run like hell. My room was on the very top floor and in the middle of the night I would steal from my bed and sit shivering on the uppermost step, clinging tight to old Byng, staring down into the center of the long circular staircase, down into that black hole, that bottomless pit, and wait wait for them, whoever they were, to climb up and get us. Every spring we moved to the country. Lingering in the city after school, I generally took one of the late-night trains. As they never knew when I'd arrive, there was no family car to meet me and I was obliged to walk the long way home. When finally I reached our gate, I was tired and hungry but there was still some distance to go. Our driveway from the gate to the house was at least a half-mile long it was always dark no streetlamps lit the way. The first portion of the drive was long and straight but suddenly it dipped precipitously and turned a sharp corner. It was next to impossible to see. I could only feel my way and would invariably slip and fall on the loose gravel. The drive resumed, snaking along by a deep swamp to my left near the edge of the lake. The dense woods which made the darkness even more impenetrable gave out a dank fenlike smell. I kept glancing behind as I hurried along but there was never anyone following me. To gain confidence I tried singing, but the sound of my voice was more sinister than the darkness itself, so I quickly gave up. A faint light glowed from the fields to my right and more than once I was sure that I saw, lit by a young moon, a still, solitary figure standing there. I bolted the rest of the way up the hill and it wasnt till I reached the top and could see, through the eight tall poplars the lights from the house beyond, that my heart stopped pounding. Very softly down the glade runs a waiting, watching shade, And the whisper spreads and widens far and near; And the sweat is on thy brow, for he passes even now He is Fear, O Little Hunter, he is Fear. RUDYARD KIPLING More than once in the mountains north of the city, snowshoeing in the woods, I would lose my way. Night fell and I'd stop and stand dead still listening to the wind. The ice-bound trees cracked and rattled like the bones of skeletons. I was sure I would freeze to death. I started to cry and the tears froze against my face little icicles hanging from my eyelids. The wind was stronger now and began to moan and howl through the tops of the pines, a sad and terrifying sound. I was certain at any moment I would be snatched up by that Spirit that hovers high above the trees the half-breeds talk of that carries you away into the sky at such frightening speed that you burn alive. And so the energy that imagination generates warmed me, and at last, I could concentrate and find my bearings. In the snow-covered

city, I would ski from the top of Mount Royal down its winding trails past the great stone wall surrounding an estate called Ravenscrag and onto our street, Pine Avenue. Often Mother would join me on her skis, but she also loved taking walks up those same trails. Frequently alone, as her selfish wayward son had less and less time for Mummy, she very seldom wore an overcoat even on the most frigid day, just a heavy tweed suit, thick brogues and flowing scarf. Very thirties, very smart, very brave! One late afternoon as I whirled down the hill full speed along by Ravenscrag's wall, I saw her coming up toward me on foot. I waved at her as I whisked past and out of the corner of my eye I saw her wave back. When I reached the bottom I looked around, but to my astonishment there was no one there, just an empty hill. I climbed up the trail again on my skis; how could she have disappeared so quickly? Was she behind the wall? But there was no door, hole or space into which she could have vanished. Had my eyes deceived me? Had I seen her at all? I kept still and listened for footsteps on the hard crust there was nothing but silence. The sun dipped behind the mountain and a chill set my teeth chattering. I turned and skied the rest of the way home faster than I had ever made it before.

AS A FAMILY we were knee-deep in dogs Canines Unlimited. That was all right by me. I adored them all. But to one in particular, a long-suffering cocker spaniel called Scampy, I am ashamed to say I was rather cruel. We played power games together, instigated by me, of course, and I caused him to suffer a bit. I'm afraid just the sort of tricks a lonely, spoiled-brat child with too much time on his hands might play. Until one day I saw something that made me swear that I would never ever hurt an animal of any kind again. It was dead winter in Montreal, an uncomfortable cold, the roads treacherous, icy almost impassable no traffic to speak of. I was staring out of our living room bay window onto the streets below. The familiar little horse-drawn cart carrying coal came clattering with difficulty up the steep hill. The same horse, the same old man that had made this trip together winter after winter since time began. The ancient horse, now almost all bones, was faithfully struggling to reach the summit the old man urging him on with his whip. But the hooves could not get a grip on the ice. The horse bravely kept up the struggle, slipping backwards as he went. The old man, beside himself, gave the poor nag a severe lashing but in vain the horse stopped. He could move no longer. One last lash of the whip proved too much. His heart cracked as he sagged to the ground between the halters. It began to snow. Something heaved inside me I ran from the window to hide and when I returned I looked down and the old man, his livelihood gone forever, was sitting in the middle of the road cradling the horse's head in his arms rocking back and forth in silent grief as the big gentle flakes began to cover everything beneath them in a warm soft blessing.

There's an island deep down in my sleep A lost land I long to find But I wake ere I reach the island So it must only live in my mind. It could be the dream we yearn for That on earth we may never attain But I know there was love on that island For it chased away all of my pain. If you looked through the oaks and the balm of Gilead across the bay from our country house on the shore, you could just see the island. You couldn't always quite make it out, not all at once, and sometimes it simply decided in its mischievous way to hide behind a fog but from my earliest infancy, I knew it was there. It seemed to float on its own, just a little above the water, not too permanent a thing as if, free of its moorings, it would drift away at any moment. I just hoped it wouldn't forget me but beg me to follow. It had a habit of disappearing and reappearing through the mist and beckoning . . . always beckoning. When I grew older I was allowed to go there with my mother. It was like playing truant; it was the most wonderful escape. It didn't take me long to realize it was an escape for Mother too. It belonged to her greatest friend a lady of similar age with the warmest, most sympathetic of hearts and the deepest, darkest, most beautiful eyes I had ever seen. Her name was Pauline but everyone called her Polly and the island was Polly's Island. She was Canadian Franais, spoke a little of all sorts of languages and her English was unique. Her voice was coated with a husky timbre which was not unmusical and in an extraordinary way enhanced her attractiveness; its Creole-like drawl made you want to smile. It gave her conversation an unusual extravagance an almost theatrical cadence she elongated her ma chres, affectionately stretching them out to infinity. When she spoke, the world was an easy place to be in. She made me feel as grown-up and as wise as she, and she listened as if I were her only friend. The island on weekends overflowed with guests from all over the globe, it seemed, considering the variety of tongues, and Polly, with breathtaking ease, practiced her phenomenal talent for making everyone feel that this was perhaps the only home they'd ever had. No one wanted to leave. Whenever there was a crowd, Mother and I knew just where to hide. On the way up to the house there was a bridge where we could stare down at the giant lily pads that carpeted the black waters below. There were lots of mysterious paths through the woods with surprise openings where we could both get splashed from the waves crashing against the shore; the swimming hole, with a raft you could swim out to, the stables which housed the ponies, and the inlets through which we would paddle our canoe and watch the bitterns stand on

one leg or listen to the long sad chorale of the frogs. Polly had the most exquisite eye, and there was always the heady fragrance of fresh-cut flowers that penetrated every room. The great screened-in porch with its burnt-sienna tiles where cool drinks were served was the place to while away many an hour looking out across the lawn to the far point at the islands tip and watch the sun go down. This enchanted isle would remain for me throughout my life, a hidden world . . . a place lodged firmly in the heart. It also became for me all the islands I never knew, perhaps too far at times to reach, and almost always, a little too wondrous to be true. Lord Ronald said nothing; he flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions. Stephen Leacock *Revue de presse* For anyone who loves, loves, loves the theater a finely observed, deeply felt (and deeply dishy) time-traveling escape. . . . Just grab a quilt and a stack of pillows. No need for a delectable assortment of bonbons. They're in the book. *The New York Times Book Splendid, lively. . . . An immensely satisfying memoir, of rare grace, good humor, and unapologetic self-honesty. . . . In tact and generosity of spirit, it is the very model of what a memoir should be. The Daily Beast* A staggering parade of theater-world luminaries struts, swaggers, and yes, occasionally staggers through this compulsively readable memoir. . . . [Plummer] has a tasty anecdote about onstage, backstage, or drinking-hole doings about every single one of them. *The New York Times* Rich and riotous. . . . He seems to have been everywhere including inside almost every room of the Hotel du Cap on the French Riviera and known everyone. Jennifer Schuessler, *The New York Times* The veteran actors delightfully sprawling account of his life and career. *USA Today* [A] fascinating memoir. . . . The book records so many trysts, pratfalls, drunken evenings and afternoons that it's amazing he has survived. . . . Amply shows how Mr. Plummer has managed a long, successful career in spite of himself. *The Wall Street Journal* In spite of himself his relentlessly high artistic principles; his penchant for playing the underdog, even when he was the star; his keen ear equally attuned to the precision of Elizabethan verse and to what passes as truth across a whiskey at 5 a.m. . . . this man has experienced a life rich in textures, and he is able to give most of them glorious voice. His is a life in the theater lived hard and true, in the grand tradition of those distinguished players who went before, whom he surely made proud. Good sir! I raise my glass to you. Alex Witchel, *The New York Times Book*