



L. J. Davis is an author and prize-winning journalist who has contributed to *The New York Times*, *Mother Jones*, and *Harper's*, among other publications. A former Guggenheim Fellow and the winner of a National Magazine Award, he lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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A MEANINGFUL LIFE

by L. J. Davis
Introduction by Jonathan Lethem

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“Stultified by his job (editing a plumbing magazine) and his mind-numbing marriage (‘a cross between *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and *Father Knows Best*’), frustrated novelist Lowell Lake welcomes a new obsession: renovating a monstrously dilapidated mansion in a Brooklyn slum. What follows, in L. J. Davis’s deadpan 1971 novel *A Meaningful Life*, reissued by NYRB Classics, is pure chaos, as Lowell confronts a cast of urban squatters, in some of the most brilliant comic turns this side of *Alice in Wonderland*. A cathartic read for urban pioneers.” —*O, The Oprah Magazine*

“Here’s a real rediscovery...This strange comic masterwork is compared to the work of Kingsley Amis in Jonathan Lethem’s new introduction. That’s almost right, but the feel is darker, and there’s a touch of Patricia Highsmith too; it’s all about gentrification, and, ultimately, madness.” —*Los Angeles Times*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

L. J. Davis’s *A Meaningful Life* is a darkly comic novel about existential disquiet and the pitfalls (and pratfalls) of gentrification in 1960’s New York. Lowell Lake, a perfect mediocrity who has “found his level” as managing editor of a “second-rate plumbing-trade weekly” in Manhattan, wakes up one morning shortly after his thirtieth birthday with the recognition that he has been living without purpose, without meaning.

Propelled by a “fierce but aimless need,” Lowell, a native of Boise, Idaho, decides he will purchase and renovate a deteriorating old mansion in that filthy, forbidding, crime-infested slum of a borough, Brooklyn. “Lots of people are doing it. There are all sorts of good reasons,” he tells his Flatbush-born Jewish wife, Betty, who is horrified by the idea but agrees, at least for the moment, to go along with it.

Things do not go as planned, however, and Lowell soon finds himself overwhelmed by drunken neighbors, agitated former tenants, and his dilapidated property—and still no closer to achieving his goal of living a meaningful life. In telling Lowell’s unfortunate story Davis savagely (and hilariously) exposes the risks of asking for more than conventional bourgeois society has to offer.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How seriously does the book treat Lowell’s quest for a meaningful life? Is Davis simply interested in Lowell’s aspirations as a source of comedy and satire? In what ways is his situation representative? To what extent is the reader supposed to sympathize with him?
2. How do the newly married Lakes come to the decision to move to New York [pp. 43–49]? Who really makes the decision? What does the decision (and the process by which it is arrived at) reveal about Lowell, about Betty, and about their marriage? Compare the decision to move to New York with the decision to move to Brooklyn nine years later [pp. 86–87].

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

John Updike, *Rabbit Redux*

Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*

Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall*

Jonathan Lethem,
The Fortress of Solitude

Paula Fox, *Desperate Characters*

Flannery O'Connor,
Collected Stories

Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*

3. “Us pioneers think nothing of moving around,” says Lowell to his wife when they are discussing where to live [p. 44]. “We fought the Indians and crossed the plains.” Discuss the book’s frequent allusion to American history, particularly the period of westward expansion in the 19th century. How do these allusions affect our sense of Lowell and the task he undertakes? How does Lowell’s individual story comment on the course of American history at large? What is the significance of the two epigraphs?
4. “He looked his best from across a wide room; the closer you got to him, the more he seemed to fall apart into a mass of twitches and gnawed fingernails and the clearer it became that his big, smart-looking moustache was a kind of bush he was trying to hide behind.” (Description of Harry Balmer, Lowell’s “best friend,” p. 35.) Davis excels at grotesque Dickensian portraiture, evoking vivid minor characters in a few brisk, well-turned sentences. Find some other examples from the book and examine how Davis goes about bringing his characters to life. What does he choose to describe about them? What function does the gallery of minor characters serve in the novel? Look, for example, at the tour of the house in Chapter 4.
5. What do we learn about Lowell from his failed novel [p. 60]?
6. “He’d also met, albeit briefly, a substantial number of Negroes and Puerto Ricans and one goofy grocer from the Canary Islands, but they were not the people he was looking for, and they didn’t count” [pp. 177–178]. Discuss the book’s treatment of race. What are the novelistic advantages of addressing racial issues through such a naïve and feckless character as Lowell?
7. Why is Lowell fascinated by Darius Collingwood, the powerful Brooklyn attorney who occupied his house for six months in 1884–85? What does this fascination reveal about the kind of life he would like to lead himself? Compare the account of Collingwood’s picaresque biography [pp. 124–128] with the paragraph about Lowell, beginning “Nine years: an endless chain of days...” [p. 78].
8. Almost everything in the book—from family life to American society as a whole—is treated by Davis with scorn and ridicule. Is there anything that he does seem to value? Does the book give any positive recommendations about what a meaningful life would look like?
9. How does the mood and tone of the book change in the last chapter? How does the murder affect our impression of Lowell’s character and how does its aftermath—the lack of response—affect our impression of the society in which he lives?
10. “His dreams were bathos, his hopes were ashes, his marriage was a wreck, and his mother-in-law was right” [p. 194]. Was Lowell’s quest doomed from the start? Why does he fail?

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