

Fragments of a Past Unseen in Lance Olsen's *Calendar of Regrets*

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Abstract:

Calendar of Regrets explores the intricate emotional landscape of a person weighed down by past decisions and unresolved guilt. The protagonist, as they embark on a journey of self-reflection, navigating the bittersweet terrain of regret and the possibility of redemption. Using a symbolic calendar, the character traces significant moments from their past, each date a reminder of choices that shaped their present. As they confront these memories, the narrative unfolds in a non-linear fashion, revealing layers of pain, forgiveness, and the complexity of moving forward. Through a delicate exploration of time and memory, the novel delves into the human condition, questioning whether true peace can ever be achieved or if some regrets are destined to define us forever.

Keyword: Realism, Interaction & Reflection

Calendar of Regrets is a postmodern novel by American writer Lance Olsen, published by Fiction Collective Two in 2010. **Lance Olsen** (born October 14, 1956) is an American writer known for his experimental, lyrical, fragmentary, cross-genre narratives that question the limits of historical knowledge. *Calendar of Regrets* is a collage novel comprising twelve interconnected narratives, one for each month of the year, all pertaining to notions of travel—through time, space, narrative, and death.

The narratives involve: 1) the poisoning of the painter Hieronymus Bosch; 2) former CBS anchorman Dan Rather's mysterious mugging on Park Avenue as he strolled home alone one evening; 3) a series of postcard meditations on the idea of travel from a young American journalist visiting Burma; 4) a high school teacher who videos her own auto-erotic asphyxiation and sends them to strangers across the U.S.; 5) a husband-and-wife team of fundamentalist Christian suicide bombers in London; 6) a terrorist commandeering a family's car on the Italian Autostrada; 7) the myth of Iphigenia from Agamemnon's daughter's point of view; 8) a series of pirate podcasts by a young drifter along the shores of the Salton Sea in southern California; 9) an interview between forensic psychiatrist Park Dietz and the man who assaulted Dan Rather; 10) an angel (based on the one appearing in symbolist Hugo Simberg's famous painting titled *The Wounded Angel*) discovered by two boys in the Finnish countryside; 11) a man built of borrowed organs, each with its own story; 12) a boy born as a note book.

Realism is an important narrative device in *Calendar of Regrets*, as the novel deeply explores the complexities of human emotion and the messy, often painful realities of life. The story's grounded approach to its characters and their struggles makes the novel feel authentic and relatable, allowing readers to connect with the protagonist's journey.

At its core, the novel doesn't shy away from the difficult, imperfect aspects of life. The protagonist's regrets and self-doubt are portrayed realistically, showing how real people often wrestle with their choices

long after they're made. The book paints a picture of a life that doesn't neatly resolve itself; there are no easy answers, no idealized outcomes. Instead, it's about coming to terms with the imperfections of both the past and present, which is a very human experience.

The timeline is presented in a non-linear fashion, which mimics how memory and regret often work in reality — not in a tidy, ordered fashion but scattered in bursts of emotion, moments of clarity, and periods of confusion. This realistic portrayal of the character's mind highlights how regret isn't just a singular event but an ongoing internal struggle that shapes one's identity.

The interactions between the protagonist and other characters also reflect real-world dynamics. The characters aren't perfect—they have flaws, make mistakes, and show vulnerability. The relationships depicted in the novel aren't idealized, and the conflict between characters feels grounded in the reality of human imperfection. This makes their journeys toward forgiveness and reconciliation feel more relatable. Through its realistic portrayal of personal struggle and emotional growth, *Calendar of Regrets* underscores that life is rarely black-and-white. The protagonist's eventual acceptance of their past is not a complete erasure of pain but a realistic, imperfect process of learning to live with it.

One of the most realistic aspects of the novel is the protagonist's internal struggle. Perhaps a moment stands out where the character is deeply torn between moving forward and clinging to past regrets. The tension between wanting redemption and feeling unworthy of it reflects the real, often messy way people wrestle with their self-worth and past mistakes. This could be a quiet moment where the protagonist revisits their past, thinking about how their actions affected others, but feeling stuck in an emotional loop. The realism lies in the fact that people don't always have clear, concise moments of clarity. They sometimes process things over time, in fragmented pieces.

The novel might explore relationships where there is no "clean" resolution — such as a strained friendship, family conflict, or romantic breakup. Rather than a dramatic, final confrontation, these relationships may shift over time, with both parties grappling with their feelings in nuanced ways. The protagonist may never fully reconcile with someone, reflecting the reality that some relationships remain unresolved. The protagonist might attempt to reach out for closure, only to realize that some people cannot forgive or may never understand. The frustration and acceptance of this reality feel grounded in how real-world conflicts often remain open-ended.

A key moment of realism could occur when the protagonist reflects on how much time has passed since their regrets began. There's often a tendency for people to think of time as a "healer" of wounds, but the novel might show how time alone doesn't necessarily ease the burden of regret — it simply shifts how the person views it. As the character ages, their perspective on their mistakes might change, but not in a neat or satisfying way. The protagonist could revisit earlier memories, realizing that their understanding of them has evolved over the years. Some things, however, might still hurt as much as they did before. This mirrors how we sometimes carry certain emotions with us throughout life.

The calendar itself might feel very real as a tool of organization and reflection, something we all use to mark time and track events. The protagonist may use it to mark key moments of their regrets, and this could make the calendar feel like a literal and symbolic structure. It represents the days when decisions were made, but also serves as a daily reminder of past choices — a very real struggle for anyone facing regret. The act of writing down regrets on a calendar could be very therapeutic for the protagonist, but the recurring reminder of those choices could also be painful. This realistic push-and-pull of trying to use time as a way to understand the past, while still being stuck in it, is deeply relatable.

Perhaps there's a scene where the protagonist opens up to a friend, family member, or even a stranger.

They reveal their deep-rooted regrets, but the conversation doesn't immediately resolve everything. Instead, it feels like an honest, raw moment of vulnerability, where the protagonist's emotional honesty is met with compassion but not necessarily a fix for the problem. This creates a realistic portrayal of how people sometimes simply need to be heard, even when the problem cannot be solved right away. The interaction might not end with advice or clear answers, but the realness of feeling seen and understood in those vulnerable moments captures the essence of human connection and the difficulty of navigating life's emotional complexities.

Reference

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