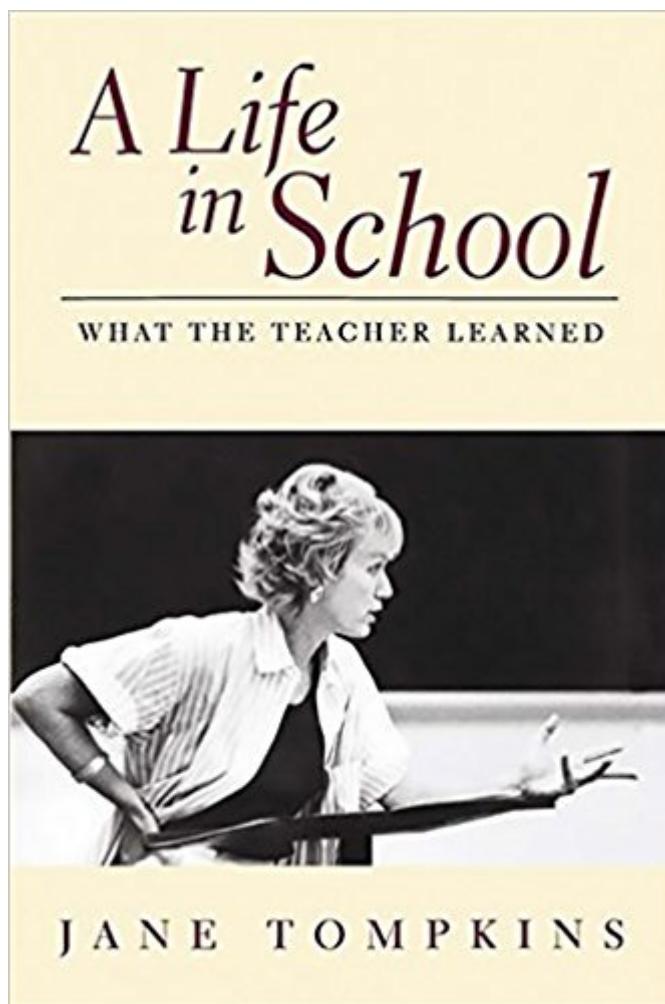


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# A Life In School: What The Teacher Learned



## **Synopsis**

Here one of our leading literary scholars looks back on her own life in the classroom, and discovers how much of what she learned there needs to be unlearned. Jane Tompkins' memoir shows how her education shaped her in the mold of a high achiever who could read five languages but had little knowledge of herself. As she slowly awakens to the needs of her body, heart, and spirit, she discards the conventions of classroom teaching and learns what her students' lives are like. A painful and exhilarating story of spiritual awakening, Tompkins' book critiques our educational system while also paying tribute to it.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

In this memoir by Tompkins, a professor of English at Duke University, there is no mind-numbing explication of favorite educational theories or classroom practices. Instead, the reader is taken inside the author's emotional education, which had its early foundation in a compelling desire to please, especially through success in school. This shaping and rewarding of intellect, which also instilled fear, is shown to have affected Tompkins's approach to her life?the grind of graduate study, the politics of becoming a professor, even withdrawal from two marriages. Through a subsequent union, a blend of professional and emotional excitement and contentment, the missing ingredients of her personality appear to have materialized. Tompkins travels painfully twisting paths by which a scholar and literary critic (*West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*) came to know herself outside the academic cloister with grace and humor as she challenges universities to conceive "education less as training for a career than as the introduction to a life." Copyright 1996 Reed

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Tompkins's whiny musings on the state of American education, told through her own story of a lifetime in academia. Tompkins (*West of Everything*, 1992) seems to have had a pretty easy time of it: She grew up white and middle class, attended Bryn Mawr and Yale. She landed a teaching position immediately after graduate school, took some time off, got another teaching position, and was then tenured at Temple University. After leaving her second husband for the legendary scholar Stanley Fish, she and Fish were soon picked up and tenured by Duke University, where Tompkins now teaches English. It sounds like an academic's dream come true, but Tompkins doesn't see it that way. Here she picks through her schooling, finding fault with nearly everything she encountered: She didn't like going to school when she was young. She tried too hard to please the teachers. She once wet her pants in front of her sixth-grade class while giving a book report. Her mother, an insomniac, took naps in the afternoon. She hated a classmate who said something clever in a graduate English class. These somewhat disjointed remembrances and other anecdotes are Tompkins's proof of a malevolent force behind our educational institutions--the obsessive quest to educate (as opposed to a shared exploration by student and teacher). Her prescription is for teachers to adapt her style of instruction, using open discussions, intensive interaction, fluid syllabi. This may work for college English classes, but what about courses where a mastery of set material is more important than the immediate pleasure of the student and teacher, such as, say, medical school? While a nonstressful, nonconfrontational school environment is a wonderful goal, Tompkins offers little practical advice on how to attain it. -- Copyright ©1996, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Jane Tompkins had an epiphany about teaching late in her academic career: teaching involves relationships, and teachers should think about how students are making sense of the material. At elite colleges, this insight is depressingly rare, and when Tompkins first articulated it in an article called "Me and My Shadow," it made significant waves in the academy. "A Life in School" represents Tompkins review of her own schooling and her early teaching in light of this new understanding. Part of this book may surprise people who haven't yet figured out that schools should not be structured primarily by competition and shame; it's unusual to see such a prominent scholar arguing that classrooms should treat students humanely. But what were discoveries for Tompkins in the 90s have been standard practice for many teachers since the 1960s (and for some in the 1930s). I'd recommend Nancie Atwell's "In the Middle" or Vivian Gussey Paley's "The Boy

"Who Would Be a Helicopter" to those interested in teaching narratives that push beneath the surface. Although "Women's Ways of Knowing" focuses on girls' education, it also articulates in universally helpful ways many of the principles Tompkins is trying to develop. Jane Tompkins' publicity for good teaching has been immensely helpful, but there's a whole library of books published by Heinemann that can teach you more about building effective, caring classrooms.

I enjoy reading books by women about women as they perceive their journey through academe. This is an especially good piece of work. Tompkins is an English professor at Duke. The book is autobiographical and profoundly evocative. It is an intense interpretation of the innertwinings of her personal and professional life. Tompkins discusses her life--from elementary school, through her doctoral program at Yale, through her life as a nontenured and then tenured faculty member--and, in the process, discusses issues that are important to so many of us in the Academy. She writes wonderfully about teaching, learning, and working at a research university. This is a book that will make you laugh, cry, and shake your head because of the way that she is so thoroughly introspective and incisive. Here's just a sample: "Peachable kingdoms aren't born; they are made. And that is why it seems to me that the university, like other places of employment, needs to become aware of itself as a social organism. This would mean that the leadership would become self-conscious about the nature of human interaction on the campus, finding a way to involve everybody--undergraduates, secretaries, janitorial staff, administrators, professors at all ranks, part-time faculty, graduate students, and visiting scholars. It would mean devoting time and effort to building good relationships. Right now, the culture of the research university militates against the quality of life because such concerns are regarded as peripheral to the university's main business. They're perceived as unintellectual, more or less on the level of housekeeping.... But if research universities like the one I work at are going to become places where people like to come to work in the morning, where the employees have a stake and feel they belong, then they will have to model something besides the ideal of individual excellence--the Olympic polevaulter making it over the bar. By modeling the way that they do business, they'll need to model our dependence on one another, our need for mutual respect and support, acceptance, and encouragement. If the places that young people go to be educated don't embody the ideals of community, cooperation, and harmony, then what young people will learn will be the behavior these institutions do exemplify: competition, hierarchy, busyness, and isolation." Her observations about undergraduate education and teaching, as well as the description of her personal journey as a teacher, are first-rate. The chapters entitled, "Ash Wednesday" and "The Cloister and the Heart," are among the best--if not the best--in the

book. For example, in the "Cloister" chapter, she writes: "The university has come to resemble an assembly line, a mode of production that it professes to disdain. Each professor gets to turn one little screw--his specialty--and the student comes to him to get that screw turned. Then on to the next. The integrating function is left entirely to the student.... It would be more helpful to students if, as a starting point, universities conceived education less as training for a career than as the introduction to a life." This is a must-read for faculty and administrators. Enjoy! Frank Fear, Michigan State University

As a new member of the profession, Tompkins book enlightened me as to the reason we have paralysis in higher education - its not that the paralysis is required, but its a feature of those of who are a part of it. As I read about Tompkins discoveries, something as simple as recognizing that a teacher needs to 'read the room' and tailor learning to the mood, convinced me that I am doing something right. But the disturbing part to discover is that while Tompkins has awakened herself to new approaches to teaching, her colleagues are still largely unaware. her presentation of her childhood - and the final connection to how this affects her teaching was dead-on.

A Life in School fluidly incorporates autobiographical support for Tompkins' arguments for more humanity in the humanities. Entertaining and illuminating!

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