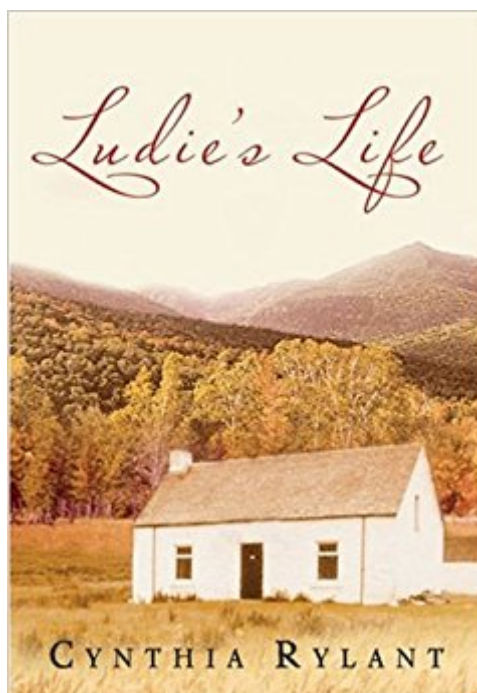


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# Ludie's Life



## Synopsis

Cynthia Rylant returns to her home state of West Virginia with this powerful and evocative collection of poems. In a heartbreaking narrative that flows like a novel, we follow Ludie from childhood to falling in love and getting married, through the birth of her own children, and on into old age. This is the story of one woman's experiences in a hard-scrabble coal-mining town, a story that brims with universal themes about life, love, and family—and all of the joy, laughter, heartache, and loss that accompany them. Would she tell you that six children were too many, that some disappointed, that others surprised, but that, all in all, six were too many and one would have been just fine. Would she tell you that she married that boy at fifteen not only because he was tall and kind but also because she needed a way out. "from LUDIE'S LIFE

## Book Information

Hardcover: 116 pages

Publisher: Harcourt Children's Books; 1 edition (November 1, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0152053891

ISBN-13: 978-0152053895

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.6 x 7.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 7.2 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #792,309 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #120 in Books > Teens >

Literature & Fiction > Poetry #1970 in Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Girls & Women

#2970 in Books > Teens > Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Family

## Customer Reviews

Grade 9 Up "Rylant uses free verse to tell the story of a poor West Virginia country woman, born in 1910, who lives into her 90s. Despite the poverty, Ludie's life seems engaging and rewarding, with six children and a loving husband. Her childhood of stealing table scraps from her stepmother didn't predict a happy life. A variety of vignettes are presented, not necessarily in chronological order, but more like someone in her 90s looking back. Those years include Ludie's marriage at 15 to Rupe, who was tall and kind; her mixed feelings about sex, which meant too many mouths to feed; and the good times with friends and relatives. In some ways, nothing terribly dramatic happens here, except for the incredible changes in lifestyle wrought by the 20th century. Rylant includes luminous moments told in lovely language, such as Ludie's first experience of snow. However, there is a

disconnect between this book and its intended audience. These are the kind of stories grandmothers tell, with family connections that bridge the lack of life experience in a young audience. Without that relationship, *Ludie's Life* seems to address readers old enough to be interested in and grasp the sorrow of having children but no money, or the reward of having Sunday school students return years later to thank you. There's an ageless dignity about the life portrayed here, but it's a story for adults. Pat Leach, Lincoln City Libraries, NE Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

CYNTHIA RYLANT is the acclaimed author of more than a hundred books for young people, including the poetry collection *Boris*, the beloved *Mr. Putter & Tabby* series, the *Henry and Mudge* series, and the novel *Missing May*, which received the Newbery Medal. She lives in Portland, Oregon.

An interesting biography, written in blank verse; creates a picture of a time and a place unfamiliar to many people.

*Ludie's Life* by Cynthia Rylant is amazing! It is a collection of poems written in narrative/novel form. It is set in the early 1900s and started with Ludie's childhood and worked its way through adulthood and old age with occasional flashbacks to her younger-adult self. There were three poems which stood out the most to me (of the 20 or 30 poems in total). I think they struck home for me. They spoke about the silent parts of a person that can't really be expressed. They were raw and honest and real. Very beautifully presented and powerfully emotional. I cried at the end. I loved it. It took me less than 2 hours to read the whole book. And I think what made the book perfect for me is that it didn't rhyme. I hate rhyming poetry, it seems too easy or too cliché. So this book was perfect. Definitely meant for a female audience but in a wide age span (I'd say 12-50, or even 70).

Beautifully written book.

With a straightforward title and a simple, unassuming format, *LUDIE'S LIFE* by Cynthia Rylant would appear to be the story of an Appalachian woman. The narrative poetry should help the reader flow along effortlessly inside the days of an Alabama girl who marries and becomes a mother raising a family in the coal camps of West Virginia. The petite size of Rylant's book (5"X 7 1/2") and the concise length (112 pages) could make for a smooth, convenient read. But the life of Ludie in the

hands of Rylant is anything but smooth, simple and unassuming. It's compelling, heartbreakingly honest and haunting. As a West Virginia native, Rylant draws deeply on her roots and family connections to portray the life of an individual woman. A unique setting, the coal camps of West Virginia, provide a stark, work-till-you-die background to the comings and goings that make up a family grown against the backdrop of towering mountains. While the mountains provide, they also seclude, and mountain people tend to be self-sufficient because they learn early on how difficult the mountains can make life. Groceries, funerals, church and hospitals are always a challenge because of the mountains. Rylant explains how emotionally dangerous seeing the ocean can be to someone living in the mountains. "The ocean went on too far for Ludie, who preferred seeing only the next ridge out her kitchen window, where trees grew whose names she knew and a creek flowed, small enough." Rylant's depiction of Ludie as she experiences a plethora of events in marriage, children and life is stark and clean. This is exactly how Ludie liked her coal camp house built by the mine owners and set in identical rows at the base of the mountain. Ludie's house and life were simply furnished and regularly sanitized. Ludie's life is shared with the reader through her thoughts about this relative or that neighbor. Rylant writes as if she has been granted express permission to record Ludie's sometimes-harsh opinions and melancholy remembrances. Rylant turns a fictional character's voice into such a realistic pathos that the reader can feel like an unwelcome voyeur addicted to seeking the sordid intricacies of Ludie's existence. While Ludie lives a good woman's life, her own sense of reality leads her to think unkind things about everyone and everything, from children to church. Ludie lived a long life full of the "...joy, laughter, heartache, and loss..." that accompanies any life. There are more moments of painful reality than hilarity, but Rylant turns country humor with effortless grace. When speaking of her daughter finding religion after growing up refusing it, Ludie says, "Imagine the strain on that marriage. An ex-junkie from the Bronx and a born-again Christian hillbilly. It didn't last. He moved out, found a reasonable woman and remarried." Rylant has always been a master of irony and doesn't overuse the tactic in *LUDIE'S LIFE*, but inserts it when the reader least expects it. The effect is more realism, as if Ludie is sitting across the old kitchen table telling you a story and adding her own wry comments along the way. Rylant writes of one woman, but thousands and thousands have lived Ludie's life and will identify some of their own histories woven into the rich fabric of this book. Some will shout hooray, some will sob, and some will stoically close the book and lay it aside knowing that the real truth of their lives has been rendered in black and white for the entire world to know. *LUDIE'S LIFE* is a brilliant contribution to the growing collection of Appalachian literature that tells the story as honestly and purely as life in the mountains has always been and always will be. --- Reviewed by Joy Held

This small, but poignant volume speaks to the power of understatement, celebrating the long life of a woman who survives poverty, disappointments and hardship, carving out a niche of home and family that is distinctly American in flavor. Born in Alabama, but spending most of her years in West Virginia, Ludie comes of age with America, her aspirations simple, marriage, home, family, hard work and peace of mind. Deprived of a mother as a young girl, Ludie is uncomfortable in her father's home with a new stepmother: "Ludie's life was happy and sad... There was no thought to what work she might do in her life... Not when you're stealing food off your own supper table." Lack haunts Ludie; she never forgets the humiliation of stealing scraps from the dinner table, avoiding those who live in excess, content in the company of her husband, a West Virginia coal miner, and her six children. The stages of life follow, one after another, the changes in society reflected in Ludie's family, her children and grandchildren reflecting a century defined by the assassination of a president, an unpopular war and a fragmenting family structure. Yet this woman remains steady and resolute, a predictable rock to the family that returns to her. She never once sees the awesome beauty of the ocean, although her children do: "No mountain child ever finds words for an ocean", her resistance prompted by a history of poverty: "The ocean is free a luxury everyone can afford, but Ludie learned early on that there is a price for everything." Ludie moves quietly through the years, never asking much beyond what she and her husband can provide, an uneventful yet proud passage, adapting, caring for the children who call her "mother" instead of "mama". A godly woman with the core values of a simple existence, Ludie is the American woman of the 20th century, before the great cultural upheaval that would so define the second half of the century: "Ludie had seen too much of life to waste any time telling others how to live." She passes quietly one day "in a small narrow bed in a nursing home" at the age of ninety-five, her legacy the grieving children and grandchildren who found comfort in the stolid presence of a woman in tune with her century. Luan Gaines/2006.

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