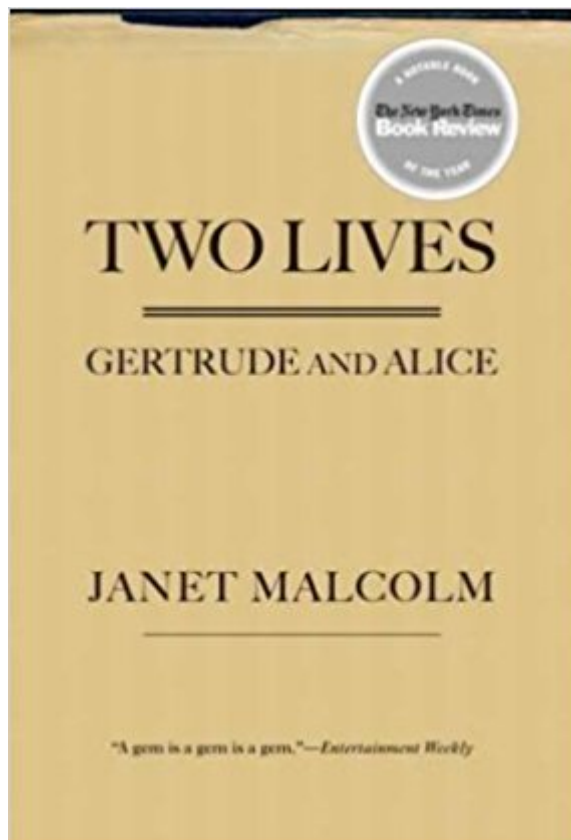


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Two Lives: Gertrude And Alice



Synopsis

"How had the pair of elderly Jewish lesbians survived the Nazis?" Janet Malcolm asks at the beginning of this extraordinary work of literary biography and investigative journalism. The pair, of course, is Gertrude Stein, the modernist master whose charm was as conspicuous as her fatness and whose thin, plain, tense, sour Alice B. Toklas, the worker bee who ministered to Stein's needs throughout their forty-year expatriate marriage. As Malcolm pursues the truth of the couple's charmed life in a village in Vichy France, her subject becomes the larger question of biographical truth. "The instability of human knowledge is one of our few certainties," she writes. "The portrait of the legendary couple that emerges from this work is unexpectedly charged. The two world wars Stein and Toklas lived through together are paralleled by the private war that went on between them. This war, as Malcolm learned, sometimes flared into bitter combat. Two Lives is also a work of literary criticism. "Even the most hermetic of [Stein's] writings are works of submerged autobiography," Malcolm writes. "The key of 'I' will not unlock the door to their meaning; you need a crowbar for that; but will sometimes admit you to a kind of anteroom of suggestion. Whether unpacking the accessible Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, in which Stein solves the koan of autobiography, or wrestling with The Making of Americans, a masterwork of magisterial disorder, Malcolm is stunningly perceptive. Praise for the author: "[Janet Malcolm] is among the most intellectually provocative of authors . . . able to turn epiphanies of perception into explosions of insight." David Lehman, Boston Globe; "Not since Virginia Woolf has anyone thought so trenchantly about the strange art of biography." Christopher Benfey

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. In this startling study of Stein and her partner, Alice B. Toklas, acclaimed journalist Malcolm (The Journalist and the Murderer) puts their relationship in a new light, demonstrating that lives and biographies are not always self-evident. Through careful readings of Stein's writing, Malcolm makes the case, quoting English professor Ulla Dydo, that Stein's lifting words from the lockstep of standard usage was indeed, the work of a (granted, self-described) genius. Malcolm gets into more controversial territory in exploring Stein and Toklas's stormy and complicated relationship—fraught with sadomasochistic emotional undercurrents—and their energetic sex life. But her real discovery is that Stein and Toklas—two elderly Jewish women—survived the German occupation of France because of their close friendship with the wealthy, anti-Semitic Frenchman Bernard Faÿ, a collaborator responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Freemasons. Faÿ continually intervened with the authorities on the pair's behalf. This friendship was so deep that after the war Toklas helped the imprisoned Faÿ escape. Malcolm's prose is a joy to read, and her passion for Stein's writing and life is evident. This is a vital addition to Stein criticism as well as an important work that critiques the political responsibility of the artist (even a genius) to the larger world. Photos. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Janet Malcolm, a writer for The New Yorker and an accomplished biographer, recognizes the limitations inherent in her chosen medium: "The instability of human knowledge is one of our few certainties. Almost everything we know we know incompletely at best." Malcolm consulted many scholars, literary critics, and journalists while researching this book, and they surface as characters. The very pursuit of information becomes a plotline in itself—to mixed reactions. Malcolm examines the sadomasochistic tenor of Stein's and Toklas's relationship, their dealings with the Nazis, and Stein's unreadable, experimental writing with honesty and clarity. Academic but charming, Two Lives isn't so much the biography of individuals as it is the story of a love affair and the extraordinary, sometimes incomprehensible, works it produced. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc. --This text

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When I was younger there were several long gone events that I regretted missing, the long lunches at the Algonquin Hotel with Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker, the parties on Long Island with J. Gatsby looking for Daisy, bumming around Europe with Hemingway, and the Paris soirees with Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas. (And if someone had told me about Max's Kansas City in New York I would have run away from home to get there). The best book that I ever read on Gertrude and Alice was James Mellow's *Charmed Circle*, which is a standard conventional life of Stein, Toklas and their circle expatriates which included Henri Rousseau, Matisse, Picasso, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald and went on for nearly 40 years in all manner of conditions. There was also Stein's charming book, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, a memoir as imagined by Stein of her long time partner and lover and Hemingway's *Movable Feast*. Janet Malcolm's book does not attempt to go over this well-trod ground. There are no stories about the banquet for Rousseau in which all the leading lights of modernism were doing homage to the grand old man of primitive art, no tales of how Picasso's portrait would one day look like Stein, the words "lost generation" are never uttered. There is no meditation on Alice's unconventional brownies recipe. Instead, Malcolm is attempting to do something different. This is mainly a biography of the reputations of Stein and Toklas and how scholarship and memoir has shifted overtime. Subjects that are not normally addressed, Stein's difficult to read works (*Everyone's Autobiography* and *The Making of the Americans*, even *Three Lives and Wars I Have Seen*), the relationship of the two women, with Alice playing less of quiet retiring role than previous, the way that Stein and Toklas survived World War II, and finally what happened to Alice after Gertrude, a tale that has overtones of *The Aspern Papers*. This is not the sort of book that one would recommend as the first biography one should read on Stein, the author presumes that the reader is well versed in the comings at 27 Rue de Fleurus and willing to go a little further. What emerges is just how unsure Stein was when she arrived in Paris and for many years afterwards, just how instrumental Toklas was in her development as a writer and how much she was an equal partner in Gertrude's life. If anything Malcolm, by her focus on Alice Toklas, provides a more well-rounded account of their relationship than was previously understood. Malcolm's short book incorporates not only the latest in academic scholarship when addressing the writing that so engaged Stein for many years, but also provides a fuller picture than I have otherwise seen on Alice's life after Gertrude's passing. For such a short book, the subjects emerge far more human and believable than I have seen in previous works.

Gertrude Stein, commenting on her wondrous line, "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" said this -- "I know that in daily life we don't go around saying 'is a . . . is a . . . is a . . . ' Yes, I'm no fool; but I think that in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years." No fool, indeed. To have made a lasting contribution to literature with one line? That takes a fool's fool, or rather, the kind of fool Shakespeare used in his plays. The man who could talk to the moon and tease the king at the same time. Gertrude Stein had the fool's charm to speak as she pleased and to throw her literary comments every which way, but it almost seemed she didn't care to be read. Maybe heard. But not necessarily read. Very few people I know have read Stein's big book *The Making of Americans*. The biographer of this many-faceted book, Janet Malcolm, says she couldn't read *The Making of Americans* until she solved the problem of the book's weight and bulk by cutting it up with a kitchen knife into six readable, and also portable, sections. In this way she made a discovery -- "It's a book that is actually a number of books." She also says: "If you listen to the book's music, you will catch the low hum of melancholy. If you regard it as an exercise in whistling in the dark, you will understand its brilliance." Malcolm is right. The music of a book is often the point of the book, and should be read as if one were listening rather than reading. But the great brilliance of Malcolm is that she writes sympathetically about the genius, Stein, and her cohort, lover, best friend, mate and savior, Alice B. Toklas. Their lives are intricately interesting, more so than Stein's prosody perhaps, but then, as Gertrude might've said: You get what you get and that's what you got.

Then don't read Janet Malcolm. Malcolm is not the kind of biographer who delivers more than you ever wanted to know about a subject. But if you want to know how biographers do their sleuth work, how one wrong date can determine whether we think Stein horrid or not, and how the personalities of Stein scholars have shaped what we do and don't know about this writer, then read Malcolm. Along the way, you will be treated to delectable prose and delicious literary gossip. And you will get to know the personalities of Stein and Toklas in all their lively and quirky splendor.

Though I use the Toklas cookbook (her recipes for bouillabaisse and for omelets can't be beat), and I liked *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, I couldn't bear Stein's experimental writing. No one thinks to mention that while she was an undergraduate at Radcliffe she participated with psychology Prof. William James in experiments on automatic writing. As Prof. B.F. Skinner pointed out, in an Atlantic article in the 1930's, Stein simply copied (or adapted to her egotistical purposes) the automatic (mindless) method of writing: that was her big innovation! Most of all, learning more about Stein's political views - her admiration of Mussolini and Franco, her indifference to the suffering of

French Jews during the Nazi occupation of France, her taking help from French anti-Semitic fascists -- all that made me despise her. Neither she nor Toklas would ever acknowledge that they were Jews and their independent way of life depended on the commercial enterprises of Stein's Jewish family back in the States. It is also shocking and dismaying to learn that Stein's family abandoned Toklas, who had lived with Stein for more than 40 years, and let her become destitute after Stein died. (Friends collected money to keep her going.) In her will, Stein gave Toklas the use (including the sale to support herself) of Stein's fabulous art collection, but the Stein family thwarted her by spiriting away the art work. Altogether a despicable family. Can't blame Janet Malcolm for that. She did a wonderful job of uncovering new information and telling the story, as always, so well.

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