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"How had the pair of elderly Jewish lesbians survived the Nazis?" Janet Malcolm asks at the beginning of this extraordinary work of literary biography, criticism, and investigative journalism. The pair, of course, is modernist master Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, the "worker bee" who ministered to Stein's needs throughout their forty-year expatriate "marriage." As Malcolm pursues the mystery of the couple's charmed life in Vichy France, her subject becomes the larger question of biographical truth.

Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice Details

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From Reader Review Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice for online ebook

Kp says

I just picked this up in a pile of books at the Russian River vacation cause I'm a little fascinated by Gertrude and Alice B. Toklas... or maybe just the idea of the brownies made me think they must be cool. Oh, and having read The Book of Salt that was tangentially about them, I was interested. Learning about them was interesting, but the book didn't thrill me. Gertrude Stein is a famous writer, however most of the books she wrote, according to the author, are completely unreadable, even by the critics. She is a self-proclaimed genius who was described, basically, as being extremely egotistical, heartless, and self-aggrandizing. She was the creative, joyful one, and Alice B. Toklas was her "wife," caretaker, and her conscious. Evidently Toklas was really jealous of her, too, because some men were interested in her. For example, in the book they quote Hemingway as having written, "She used to talk to me about homosexuality and how it was fine in and for women and no good in men and I used to listen and learn and I always wanted to fuck her and she knew it." So Toklas made Gertrude stop associating with him. He wrote about them in A Moveable Feast. Another interesting thing is that even though they were both Jewish, they rarely admitted it or talked about it and were even friends of a Nazi sympathizer/collaborator who was later sent to prison. They continued to defend him. Hmm. Somehow they don't seem so cool any more.

James says

Normally, a book about 2 dead lesbians would be the last thing I'd want to read.
But after the Journalist and the Murderer,
I developed a liking for Malcolm's style of writing.

Colorful metaphors, snappy one liners, a little psychological insight.

This book isn't as good as the other one but is still very enjoyable,
and confirms an insight as to the nature of the author.

Janet is basically a quidnunc who loves to expose the foibles of others.

Taking a cue from Stein, who's "autobiography" of Alice Toklas wasn't an autobiography, but rather a device Stein could use to flatter herself;
Malcolm also uses biographies of others to reveal her life.

She denies this, but her real life experience with libel was
almost exactly like the McGuinness affair.

And in this book in a number of places she comments in a mildly
disapproving way the fact that Stein concealed her jewishness
almost all the time.

Malcolm likewise never mentions her jewish background:
the family escape from Europe in 1939 e.g.

And her bio at Wiki doesn't mention it either.

Every jew who has a bio at Wiki has that fact listed at the top of the page,
except for Malcolm.

I assume she has something to do with that.

For a delightful bio of her, in her own style of writing,
go to salon.com.

<http://www.salon.com/people/bc/2000/0...>

What goes around, comes around ! :>

The old psychological bromide:
What you don't like about another person is something you
(usually unknowingly) have in yourself, is so true of her.

Looking forward to her other books.

Mostly she wrote for the new yorker mag.

Anna says

I was a bit 'meh' about the gossipy parts of this book - sometimes the colour of 1920s Paris can come off a bit "Henry and June" for me.

The part that really shone was the analysis of The Making of Americans - Malcolm's documentation of her struggle to read it, and when she finally did, what it revealed, rejuvenated my fascination with Stein and her style all over again.

Which doesn't mean that I'll read it, mind. Books that large are only used for squishing spiders at my place.

Also, Malcolm's confession that she'd got the wrong end of the stick completely regarding Stein's so-called advice to place a Jewish orphan with a Jewish family during the war - a death sentence in France at that time. Biographers do love a dramatic revelation a bit too much - the truth was more prosaic.

The implicit collusion of Stein and Toklas with Bernard Fay - who at the time was busily compiling lists of Freemasons for the Nazis to arrest - was troubling in the extreme. What they did to obtain and hold onto their beautiful country house may have been immoral, at the very least it was achieved with the protection of Fay and his like.

An oblique and conscientious approach to biography that was very welcome if a little too dry and dissertive (is that a word?). Oddly, the entire book might be read into the front plate image of Gertrude and Alice on the balcony of their farmhouse, taken by Cecil Beaton. It's arresting in the extreme.

Sketchbook says

Janet Malcolm craves attention. She landed herself and the NYer in a zilly dollar lawsuit some years ago. Now, she's at it again -- throwing stones at Gertie & Alice for daring to survive W2 Occupation in France. They didn't blow farts and scream obscenities at the enemy in Vichy; they had the temerity to stay civilized. Super writer Tom Junod once said of Mme, "She's full of shit." So are her pals high in publishing ozones.

Sara says

Exactly how DID two rather prominent Jewish lesbians manage to lead a rather idyllic French country life in the middle of the Nazi occupation of France? This is the question Malcolm starts with in her attempt to get a foothold in the much-chronicled, much more hinted and insinuated life of Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B Toklas.

Full disclosure: I spent my adolescence reading gossipy accounts of Gertrude Stein's involvement with William James, with Hemingway, with Picasso, with the Shakespeare and Co. people, with the whole coterie surrounding the first performance of *Les Rites des Printemps*. The woman knew every one who was even remotely fascinating in early 20th century western culture. Plus, she was so darn dramatic and moody, saying all kinds of epigrammatically horrible things about the people who were supposed to be her friends, and not really respecting any gender norms whatsoever. I read everything I could get my hands on about her, kind of the way other girls my age were reading all about River Phoenix.

So, when I opened up Malcolm's book, I was mostly just looking to regress into a world of familiar literary gossip where knowing who the key players were (and I did) would be much more important than actually knowing anything about what they wrote (which I actually do, but whatever). So Malcolm pleasantly surprised me, first by asking the most obvious of questions about Stein's and Toklas's life, which no biography I had read ever did, and secondly by allowing her investigation into the question spiral outward into both an analysis of what Gertrude Stein actually wrote (turgidly abstract prose fiction whose main charm lies in its wildly repetitive deployment of gerunds) and into a gossipy exposé on the small circle of professors who consider themselves Stein's literary guardians (if you are a writer yourself, you will probably want to avoid thinking too hard about the failed academic who refuses to allow anyone else access to hours of taped autobiographical interviews with Stein he conducted. Over fifty years later, he's still convinced that he's on the verge of writing her definitive biography).

What's the answer to Malcolm's original question? Easy -- Stein charmed local Nazi officials into turning the other way because she was so very famous. Stein never thought she was defined by categories such as "woman" or "Jew" that might limit others. She never really seems to have contemplated exactly how hideous her tacit collaboration was, either. But by the time we actually arrive at this answer, the cast of characters Malcolm has assembled -- those who surrounded Stein during her life, those who teemed through her arduous prose, and those who have assembled themselves around her body of work after her death -- are all making claims for brilliance, charm, and even moral bankruptcy that makes Stein seem merely typical.

Justin Evans says

I was really enjoying this when I started: I was hungover, I wanted to learn about Stein, and Malcolm can write sentences that sometimes rise above (or fall below, either way) the usual New York journalism. It was exactly what I wanted: three essays, one about Stein and Toklas in occupied France, one about Stein's work and academic criticism of it, and then one about Toklas' life. Also: super short, and really nicely designed.

Having finished it, though, I see that had I *not* been hung over, I would have been pretty annoyed. Malcolm writes about as much about Stein and Toklas as she does about some literary critics she met. She gets all meta with the "these people don't like this person and maybe this person is exploiting Stein but then aren't I just exploiting him too?" And slowly but surely we learn more about Janet Malcolm and the literary types she knows than we learn about Stein or Toklas. And what we learn about Janet Malcolm is that she just can't believe that there are some people in the world who don't care about their ethnic roots! Imagine the temerity! Your name is freaking *Stein*, how come you don't continuously write about being Jewish??

Because not post-Reagan America, that's why.

Anyway, I appreciate that Malcolm has encouraged me to read a couple more of Stein books (Everybody's Biography and Wars I Have Seen), and reminded me that this kind of meandering, vaguely Sebald-esque thing (complete with grainy photos!) really, really, really isn't for me, unless my brain is otherwise non-functional and the lack of connection between paragraphs won't bother me (slash my inability to get with the innovativeness of not caring about those connections has been suspended for some reason).

Hermien says

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It was informative and entertaining. Having said that, I may read The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas, but doubt if I will try any of Gertrude's other works any time soon!

Kathleen says

"Posterity has not dealt kindly with Stein's alter ego. Deep mythic structures determine who is likable and who isn't among the famous dead. The practical spirit is an essential but unlovable spirit. Toklas remains the dour ugly crone to Stein's handsome playful princess."

Amanda says

This is not the book I had understood it to be, which is my fault. This is purely an academic work, and if you're not familiar with Stein's writing, then you will be at a loss. I also have to say I don't really care much for the style of the author of this book. It's more about name dropping. There's focus on her subjects in there, but she's much more interested in the historiography of the subjects than her subjects themselves.

What is good is that it's not necessarily about Toklas & Stein's sexuality. It's more equalizing, with less focus on their bedroom, and more on their works. In the vein of normalcy, this book is definitely there.

Lobstergirl says

I remain unconvinced of Gertrude Stein's importance to either literature or history (nor do I think Janet Malcolm was particularly trying to convince me on this front). What is always most interesting in any book by Janet Malcolm is Janet Malcolm writing about the way she works and writes.

Peggy says

Malcolm investigates the lives of Stein and Toklas and discusses some of Stein's impenetrable writing. Stein remains a significant, even legendary literary figure associated with the rise of modernism in art and literature. The mystery in my mind has always been--why? Malcolm describes her as a sexy, happy, self-proclaimed genius who naturally attracts followers. Stein learned early on that she was not creative, meaning that she could not create characters or conversations for the literature she sought to write, so instead she collected people in order to write about them. During the French Occupation, she and Toklas were protected by a collaborator. Stein hides as much as she admits (in inscrutable prose) and the truth of who she and Toklas were remains obscure, with Malcolm particularly interested in learning of their sense of identity as Jews.

Regardless as to its difficulty, Malcolm finds Stein worthy of the critical attention surrounding her work and, in fact, presents the case made by a trio of Stein scholars that Stein deserves a place in the academic canon. The final section of the book is devoted to Alice B. Toklas after Stein's death, a sad case of a spouse left penurious upon widowhood, despite a relationship that spanned decades and Stein's stated intention in her will that Toklas should be able to sell paintings should she need to do so to maintain herself.

A fascinating glimpse into the lives of two unique historical characters, Malcolm draws from all available sources to expose facets and contradictions to the characters of both women that make them more accessible, less monumental, in their depiction. This is a most welcome accomplishment. Thus fortified, it's time for me to seek out Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, to see another portrayal of the two.

Jenny McPhee says

If things truly come in waves, we seem to be riding a Gertrude Stein tsunami. Recent Stein events and books include:

-- "The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso, and the Parisian Avant-Garde" (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, February 28-June 2). This extraordinary show presents paintings collected in the early twentieth century by Gertrude Stein, her brothers Leo and Michael, and Michael's wife Sarah and displayed at their weekly salon at 27 rue de Fleurus. Visually demonstrating the family's significant effect on modern art, the curators have astonishingly managed to convey on multiple levels the compelling concept of how art -- collecting, promoting, and creating it -- is used to seek power within a family.

-- Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories by Wanda M. Corn and Tirza True Latimer. Published in conjunction

with the eponymous exhibit at The National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., this tantalizing, gorgeously illustrated book regards Stein through her objects -- paintings, drawings, prints, handmade gifts from artist friends, snapshots, brochures, programs, clothes, jewelry, wallpaper, stationery, even posthumous Stein kitsch.

-- Yale University Press's new editions of the Stein opuses *Ida* and *Stanzas in Meditation*, both books beautifully considered in last month's issue of *Bookslut* by Elizabeth Bachner.

-- Barbara Will's penetrating study *Unlikely Collaboration: Gertrude Stein, Bernard Faÿ, and the Vichy Dilemma* delineates the deep biographical and artistic connections between Stein and fascism.

-- Finally, the oceanic tremor of a book and harbinger of the Gertrude Stein tidal wave, Janet Malcolm's *Two Lives: Gertrude and Alice* (2007).

My adventures navigating this Steinian wave began with *Two Lives*, a book I was drawn to more out of my interest in Malcolm than in Stein. The book's title, I discovered, is misleading. The story is less about the literary world's most fascinating couple and more about Malcolm's struggle to understand the seriously enigmatic life and work of Gertrude Stein, the mother of modernism and as such a Mother of Us All. Malcolm's enticing account of her own journey into that formidable, apparently inaccessible country -- call it Steinlandia -- with the marvelous triumvirate of Stein scholars, Ulla E. Dydo, Edward M. Burns, and William Rice, as her Virgil, allows her readers to follow vicariously up and down all sorts of Steinian alleys, at once surprising and mundane.

Read the rest of the column at *Bookslut*: http://www.bookslut.com/the_bombshell...

Stephanie says

I returned this to the library before I could properly quote from the way Malcolm sort of unravels, against her will, especially in her reading of *Making of the Americans*. It may be true she has no 'intuition' towards Stein (something Malcolm loves to admit, endlessly comparing herself - negatively - to Ulla Dydo, I think she even sets up a metaphor somewhere of Dydo as the foodie of Stein criticism and Malcolm as the eater of hamburgers and french fries, I wish she'd have said 'hamburger helper' instead, but anyways) what this book taught me or reminded me is that resistance and reluctance and even dis-inclination remain underrated as reading positions, who cares if in Malcolm's book (literally) the following quotes (dug up from an email) aren't intended as praise?

"the author has regressed to a state where evidently she cannot differentiate writing from shitting"

"Perhaps no other novel makes it so plain to the reader that it is being written over time, and that, like life, it is inconsistent and changeable. Just when it looks like Stein has taken permanent leave of her senses and will never stop gibbering about the mushy sausage-like things she has replaced her characters with, she snaps out of it"

"if her characters do not resemble the characters of fiction (it is amusing to think of *Anna Karenina* as a mass

of gritty dried stuff held together by skin. Or Emma Woodhouse as something white and gelatinous), neither do they resemble the characters of biography, memoir and reportage."

As always, if you've written a book of poetry or a book about poetry, you get FIVE STARS. From Stephanie.

Lark Benobi says

Janet Malcolm begins with this question: How did two elderly Jewish lesbians survive the Nazis? and then takes us on her journey of investigative journalism that leads her, and us, to ever more unexpected places. The book never really answers the question with which it begins. Instead the book becomes a loving meditation on the nature of how we remember other people. Malcolm explores how our understanding of even those we love most, and know best, is distorted by the limitations of language itself. indeed this perspective on language--on the bleak hope that language has of breaking through to some sort of truth--is what drives much of Stein's writing. Malcolm demonstrates, through passages quoted from Stein's works as well as Toklas's and many other people who knew them both, how the words we use to describe our experiences frequently obscure as much as they enlighten--as do the words we leave out. And yet by the end of this small book I did feel enlightened and hopeful and closer to the human-ness of these two women. I understood much more about the persona each created for the public--that it was a persona. I had more of a feeling about the hiddenness and complexity of who they really were--and an appreciation of the complexity of each of us.

A tantalizing read that gives me even more respect for Janet Malcolm.

Sarah B. says

Although this is a very well-written book, I found it dry. Malcolm has done a wonderful job piecing together the evidence to form the narrative of Stein and Toklas' lives. I loved the story of how Stein defaced her poem *Stanzas* by crossing out every instance of the word "may" and replacing them all with "can", even when the change made nonsense of the sentences, because she was erasing any allusion to May Bookstaver in order to appease Toklas's jealousy. But, in the end, if Stein was a warm person, it rarely shows in her writing or in this book. She seems clever but still so distant.

Just a case of the wrong book at the wrong time, I guess. If one were primarily interested in Stein's writing, I can see how this book would be a lovely companion to her work.
