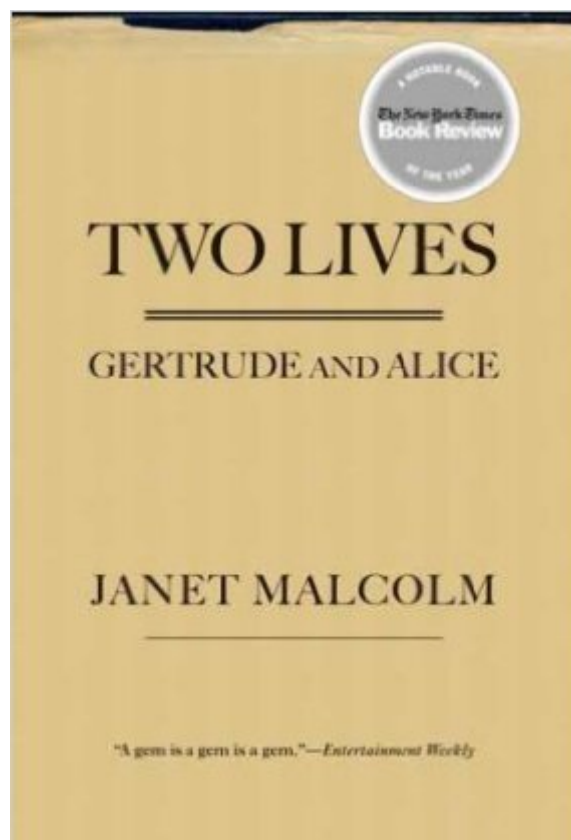


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Two Lives: Gertrude And Alice



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 "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." "Not since Virginia Woolf has anyone thought so trenchantly about the strange art of biography." Christopher Benfey

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Customer Reviews

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.

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