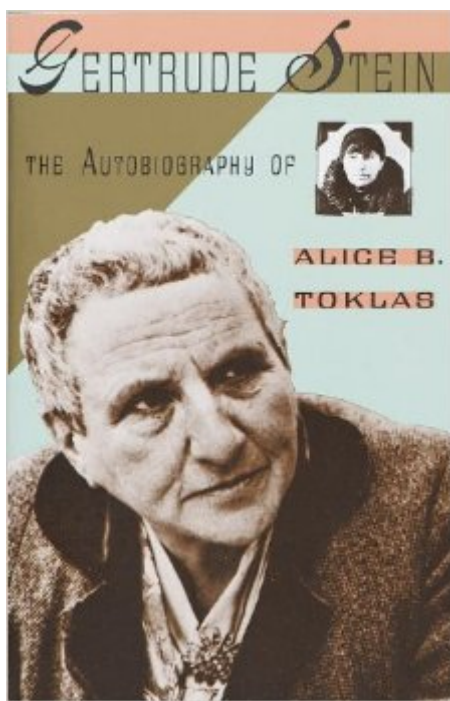


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The Autobiography Of Alice B. Toklas



Synopsis

Stein's most famous work; one of the richest and most irreverent biographies ever written.

Book Information

Paperback: 252 pages

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Customer Reviews

Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) is a singularly problematic writer whose work is very difficult to describe. In 1902 Stein moved to France and spent most of her adult life in that country; upon arriving she was quickly caught up in the Paris arts scene and soon became one of the earliest champions of such artists as Picasso and Matisse. Under their influence, Stein sought to translate the various arts movements and styles that swirled around her into literary forms. The result was an incredibly idiosyncratic body of work in which Stein tended to use language for the sake of language. Often described as stream of consciousness, Stein's work tends to divide readers and critics. Some greatly admire Stein; an equal number consider her a non-talent with a gift for self-promotion. Whatever the case, her writings proved unexpectedly influential in "high art" circles. Stein, a lesbian, met Alice B. Toklas about 1907, and the two remained a couple until Stein's death. Those who knew Toklas through Stein's numerous social events describe her as a small, ordinary woman with a tendency to fade into the background; in a world made up of artists and their wives, Stein played the role of artist and Toklas played wife. Published in 1933, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ALICE B. TOKLAS is often described as Stein's "most widely accessible" work. That is true only in the sense that Stein generally writes in a linear style and without the obvious word-games to which she was prone; the book is not typical of her work in either respect. On the other hand, it is extremely typical of Stein in

terms of concept. The book is essentially a view of Stein's world as it might have been described by the uncritical Toklas, presented in her voice and related in terms of what Toklas herself might have found most interesting. Stein herself seems to have regarded AUTOBIOGRAPHY as an elaborate literary prank written to amuse herself and those who moved through in circle, and the nature of that prank should be obvious from the title and authorship. Clearly, one person cannot write the autobiography of another, and while it might be reasonable to describe the book as the autobiography of Gertrude Stein the fact that it is filtered through Toklas' personality does not quite allow for that either. Whatever the case, AUTOBIOGRAPHY is a deliberately superficial work. Throughout the book Toklas describes Gertrude Stein as a great genius--but it is Stein, not Toklas, who writes, and so we really learn nothing on this point. The same is true of the many other names that swirled through Stein's life: Stein could have told a great deal and frequently hints as much--but the Toklas mask knows nothing about artists and art is consequently a great deal more interested in the hats worn to the party than in the people who wore them. If all of this sounds complicated, it is, and it begs all sorts of questions about what is fact, what is fiction, how much is accurately Toklas, and--most particularly--the fundamental nature of Stein's body of work as a whole. Was she really the genius that she proclaimed herself to be? Or was her proclamation a deliberate joke? Should her works be regarded as innovative masterpieces or was she a literary prankster? If the latter, does the marked success of these pranks actually grant her some claim to genius after all? Beats me, and I'm hardly alone in that response. Critics have argued about all this and more for decades and will likely continue to do so for decades more. I will say this: while I rather like Stein in limited doses, I do not recommend her to the casual reader. Taken cold, her work is more likely to frustrate and annoy than fascinate and inspire. If you are determined to read Stein, you really should read a fair amount about her first--and in the case of THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ALICE B. TOKLAS you would do well to have a solid working knowledge of early 20th Century art as well. GFT, Reviewer
In Memory of James and Shamsi Hyre
Killed 29 August 2005 in Ocean Springs, Mississippi
By Hurricane Katrina

Gertrude Stein's playful and witty story of her life with Alice Toklas (told via the life story of Alice) chronicles nearly thirty years, up to 1932. Crackling with energy and zest, the story unfolds like conversation at a party where Picasso, Hemingway, Matisse, and others are in attendance, and the reader is introduced to them all in succession. Documenting not only their exciting life together, the book also takes us through the dangers of World War 1, as well as detailing Stein's writing activities. Ultimately, it is Gertrude Stein herself who shines throughout the book, through the lens of Toklas,

and it is this portrait crisp and alive that makes this the most well-known of her works.

"The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas" made Gertrude Stein a household name in America in the 1930s, and for good reason. This is Stein at her most accessible and I must highly suggest it for any first-time readers of this literary genius. The book has a light, breezy tone, interesting subject matter (Picasso & various renowned artists pop up throughout), and Stein's trademark intellectual brilliance. The device of using Toklas as an approach to Stein's life is certainly interesting and is responsible for some of the most entertaining passages. And this book is certainly entertaining, thanks to Stein's supreme wit and her clever descriptions of the people she interacts with and situations she finds herself in. I highly recommend this book, especially for those who haven't read Stein before. Her vivacity, wit, intelligence and skill are on display here in an accessible, classic work.

I do have a confession to make regarding Gertrude Stein. You may not know this but the woman is a genius. Why you may ask? Because she tells us this over and over and over again in the book. I do have to admit that at first I had to suppress the urge to shred this book/autobiography/memoir to shreds. I grew immensely jaded reading the raw prose with not a hint of of emotion throughout. Thankfully, I eventually saw the light. It finally clicked. Gertrude Stein was a woman in the time of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Picasso, Matisse, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Quite simply she needed to stand out as a literary figure. Historians would later call this artistic time period the Roarin' Twenties. Stein needed a way to disconnect with other prominent figures and still remain in the literary circle. She did this by well executing this book. Though seemingly told through the perspective of her partner Alice B. Toklas, truly we are hearing Stein's. Her memories of meeting fascinating artists and writers in Paris are mind boggling. She adores the Parisian culture but also loves to be an American. Stein is very clever with how she formulates sentences in this book. She remarks on more than one occasion her obsession with the English language. Specifically the use of sounds. She begins to - paint - a novel with her words. Like the artist Picasso, who she is most fascinated with, her novel begins to paint a sort of cubist realism. There is no fluff here. And despite the very limited way she describes characters we eventually begin to see a full picture of them through Toklas/Stein's written words. Her words in way merge words, ideas, sounds, and create art. We also see how certain artists inspire other artists. Picasso and Matisse were inspired by African art but they made it into their own by what they created. Picasso, upon seeing a camouflaged cannon, remarked to Stein that THEY created this. Artists created this perception of

hiding something within plain sight. Stein discusses nationalism constantly. She remarks on many occasions that Spaniards and Americans can understand one another because they can "realize abstraction." The Americans do this with machinery and literature, and the Spaniards with the ritualistic bullfighting and bloodshed. In that way, both are also abstract and cruel. She also hashes it out with Germans, Parisians, Italians, Polish, etc. She categorizes people and their personality traits by their national identity. I really enjoyed that everyone came to her villa, that she shared with Toklas, and asked for her advice on their literary work. She inspired much reverence by her companions and peers. This by far is one of her more readable and enjoyable books. My advice is to go in with an open mind and truly appreciate her genius for what it is. I came in with stubborn intentions and almost missed out on a fantastic work of art.

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