

Bookslut

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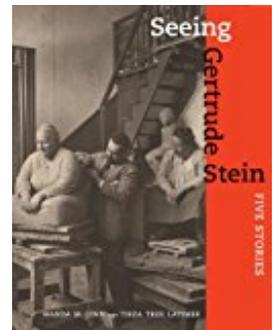
Jenny McPhee

The Bombshell

Adventures in Steinlandia

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.

Stein's lover and lifelong companion Alice B. Toklas did all the housework and cooking in their ménage, Stein never lifting a finger, so hard at work was she at being a genius. In *Everybody's Autobiography*, Stein explained, "It takes a lot of time to be a genius, you have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing." When she did put pen to page -- never for more than a half hour each day -- Malcolm writes, "Stein didn't even type her work -- she just oozed into her notebooks and Toklas did the rest." But careful study of the Stein-Toklas dynamic as revealed in their archives suggests that though Alice may have toiled all day over Gertrude, at night in bed it was Alice who was the more demanding and ultimately the more gratified.

Alice was fiercely protective of Gertrude, but evidently also of her own sexual supremacy. Alice's jealousy caused Hemingway's permanent banishment from the rue de Fleurus. Of greater literary interest, Dydo discovered that after reading the manuscript for *Stanzas in Meditation*, Alice erupted into a violent fit of conjugal distrust. It seemed to her that every page contained, often repeatedly, references to Gertrude's former lover May Bookstaver. To appease Alice, Gertrude removed the word "may" entirely from the text, which was then published untarnished by any perceivable betrayal. "May" has now been restored in the Yale edition.

Gertrude decided being an avant-garde literary genius was not enough. She witnessed her disciples and rivals -- F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, and Joyce -- enjoy ever growing fame. She wanted to be a famous genius as well, so she wrote the more reader-friendly *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* to gain a wider audience, which is precisely what happened. The book, a runaway success, led to her cover photograph on *Time* and a six-month lecture tour (1934-35) traveling the U.S. and delivering nearly sixty lectures. Her newfound fame, however, proved problematic; she began to identify with the overexposure of Wallis Simpson, the American divorcée whose appeal had caused the abdication of a king. Stein's extensive musings over the rise of celebrity culture resulted in the doppelgänger novel *Ida* (1941).

In her work, Stein notoriously defied literary convention -- linear narrative structure, traditional language, syntax, and sense. With her own constantly mutating versions of these tools she examined the possibilities of meaning itself. Malcolm describes Stein's style as "elusive ambiguity," and says she writes "as if the reader were an uninvited guest arriving on the wrong night at a dark house." Feminist literary theorists claim Stein as an example of "*l'écriture féminine*," but part of Stein's genius is that all desire to classify her is inevitably thwarted. On Stein's legacy Malcolm is characteristically circumspect and accurate: "Her influence on twentieth-century writing is nebulous. No school of Stein ever came into being. But every writer who lingers over Stein's sentences is apt to feel a little stab of shame over the heedless predictability of his own."

"I've been scooped," declared Barbara Will, author of *Unlikely Collaboration*, when Malcolm's book was published four years before hers. Both writers are obsessed with Stein's relationship to Faÿ and fascism. In truth, both writers had been scooped by Stein scholars over the years, most recently by Dydo and Burns in an essay appended to their edited edition of *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton Wilder* (1996).

Dydo and Burns reveal that Stein translated into English several of Vichy government leader Philippe Pétain's speeches. She was commissioned by a Pétain advisor, the director of France's National Library, the vehemently anti-Semitic Nazi collaborator Bernard Faÿ. "What she understood about Faÿ," write Dydo and Burns, "and how she saw the situation remains a troublesome puzzle."

Just how entangled Stein was with Faÿ -- the short answer is very -- is the substance of Will's intensive study. Faÿ's protection allowed the two Jewish-American women to survive the Nazi occupation and to do so in relative comfort. Faÿ is described by Eric Banks in his excellent review of Will's book as "a homosexual aesthete... whose standing amid the Left Bank expats was so established that he wouldn't have been out of place in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris*." Will convincingly argues that Alice apart, Faÿ was the strongest, most influential presence in Stein's life and work. Their mutual indebtedness was so enrooted that even after Stein's death, when Faÿ was incarcerated for his war crimes (as a Vichy official he sent hundreds of freemasons to their deaths in concentration camps), Alice sold a Cézanne to finance his successful escape from prison to Switzerland.

Much has been written on the connections between fascism and modernist male writers (e.g. Pound, Yeats, Céline, W. Lewis, Jünger, Marinetti, Eliot.) Placing Gertrude Stein in her literary and historical context, Will's book makes an invaluable contribution to the reality of what it was to be a woman and a writer at that time and place.

"The Presence" -- Stein's nickname at the rue de Fleurus salon -- is a consecrated genius, often full of shit as only a genius can be. Godlike, her deeds ranging from heroic to abhorrent, she begs to be known, knowing she is unknowable. Most impressive and important, she is a woman and an artist who refuses to go away. Her perseverance, in life and death, is of that vital maternal brand that challenges and pushes us, her Children. I can just picture that gorgeous old battleax riding this latest surge of attention mounted gleefully atop her surfboard hanging ten.

Jenny McPhee's most recent novel is A Man of No Moon. She lives in London, but mostly resides at www.jennymcphee.com.