

Search for an author and a cat

MY YEAR IN PARIS WITH GERTRUDE STEIN: A FICTION

By Deborah Levy, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$27

Gertrude Stein remains one of modernism's most paradoxical figures. Both admired as a literary revolutionary and dismissed as a wilfully obscure author, she continues to divide readers more than most 20th-century writers. Deborah Levy approaches her formidable legacy with refreshing restraint in *My Year in Paris with Gertrude Stein*. She resists the temptation to produce a literary biography. Instead, she writes what she calls "a fiction": a hybrid work that folds biography, criticism, memoir and philosophical enquiry into a meditation on artistic freedom, female companionship, and the elusive nature of literary understanding.

The narrator, an unnamed British woman writer, arrives in Paris to write an essay on Stein. Research soon gives way to reflection. Her daily life in Paris begins to merge with Stein's world. Long walks through Père Lachaise, conversations with new friends, and the search for a missing cat gradually become part of the narrator's attempt to understand Stein. The cat, named 'it', develops into a recurring linguistic joke that draws attention to the slipperiness of words. Stein delighted in stripping ordinary language of fixed meanings. Levy follows this impulse with aplomb.

The narrative unfolds through association. Scenes from contemporary Paris sit beside episodes from Stein's life. Memories interrupt observation, literary history enters casual conversation, and Levy trusts readers to connect these dots. The method reflects Stein's own thinking about composition. In *Composition as Explanation*, Stein argued that writing should record consciousness in motion. While Levy respects this lesson, her prose remains controlled, graceful and unmistakably her own. She never imitates Stein's fractured syntax. Rather, through her writing, she lays bare the possibilities that Stein opened for later writers.

Levy traces Stein's intellectual formation through her studies with William James, her unfinished medical education at Johns Hopkins, her arrival in Paris in 1903 and the celebrated salon at 27 Rue de Fleurus. Picasso, Matisse and Hemingway appear naturally within this account. Readers fa-

miliar with Janet Malcolm's *Two Lives*, James R. Mellow's *Charmed Circle* or Francesca Wade's *Gertrude Stein: An Afterlife* will recognise many of these episodes. Levy contributes interpretation rather than fresh archival discoveries. Her interest lies in Stein's imagination and the choices that shaped it.

Alice B. Toklas emerges as one of Stein's quiet strengths. Levy presents their partnership with care and balance. Toklas appears as companion, collaborator and organiser of the domestic life that sustained Stein's work rather than Stein's shadow. The novel repeatedly asks what conditions allow creative work to flourish. Unwavering partnership becomes one possible answer.



Levy writes perceptively about Stein's prose. The narrator admits to irritation, fatigue and confusion while reading works such as *The Making of Americans*. Stein has attracted decades of critical reverence that, at times, discourages honest engagement. Levy refuses that convention. She recognises the demands Stein places on her readers. The book treats such difficulty as an invitation to sustained attention. Levy also refuses to simplify her subject. Stein appears ambitious, funny, difficult, vulnerable and uncompromising.

However, the contemporary storyline does not always possess the same vitality as the historical one. The search for the missing cat sustains the novel's central metaphor but loses strength in the closing chapters. These minor quibbles notwithstanding, *My Year in Paris with Gertrude Stein* reflects on the act of reading with intelligence. Every page asks what readers seek from literature and why certain books and authors continue to resist easy understanding. Stein remains elusive till the final page and this is what gives Levy's book its lasting appeal.

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