

LOVE BIRDS

BY **LAUREN KIRSCHNER**

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TWO LIVES: GERTRUDE AND ALICE by Janet Malcolm (Yale University), 229 pages, \$25.74 cloth. Rating: **NNNN**

To talk about Gertrude Stein is to talk about Alice B. Toklas, her lover of 40 years, confidante, typist and cheerleader.

The couple met in Paris in 1907 and became bright stars of the expatriate community, entertaining and influencing the avatars of Modernism – Picasso, Hemingway, Eliot – in their salon at 27 Rue de Fleurus.

American Jews by birth, they risked everything by remaining in occupied France during the Second World War, a feat of will and wits.

So intermingled were their lives and art that when Toklas died in 1967 and was buried in Père-Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, her memorial was inscribed on the back of Stein's tombstone.

Indeed, in almost every photo of the couple, Toklas stands behind Stein, the eternal and willing handmaid of the literary giant. But in *Two Lives*, Janet Malcolm digs deeper into one of the 20th century's most symbiotic literary relationships.

Where Toklas has long been characterized as the self-effacing second fiddle to Stein and her monumental self-possession, Malcolm's close readings and interviews with Stein scholars show us a more complex portrait of a relationship replete with crazy compromises.

Just one example: Stein purportedly changed every "may" to "can" in a poetry manuscript so as not to inspire Toklas's jealousy. In college, Stein had fallen in love with a woman named May Bookstaver, who later broke her heart.

Two Lives unfolds associatively rather than chronologically, tapping the author's own experience of reading and appreciating Stein's work as much as the relationship between Stein and Toklas itself.

Questioning, personal and incisive, Malcolm is our guide in a volume that swims against the current of conventional biography.

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