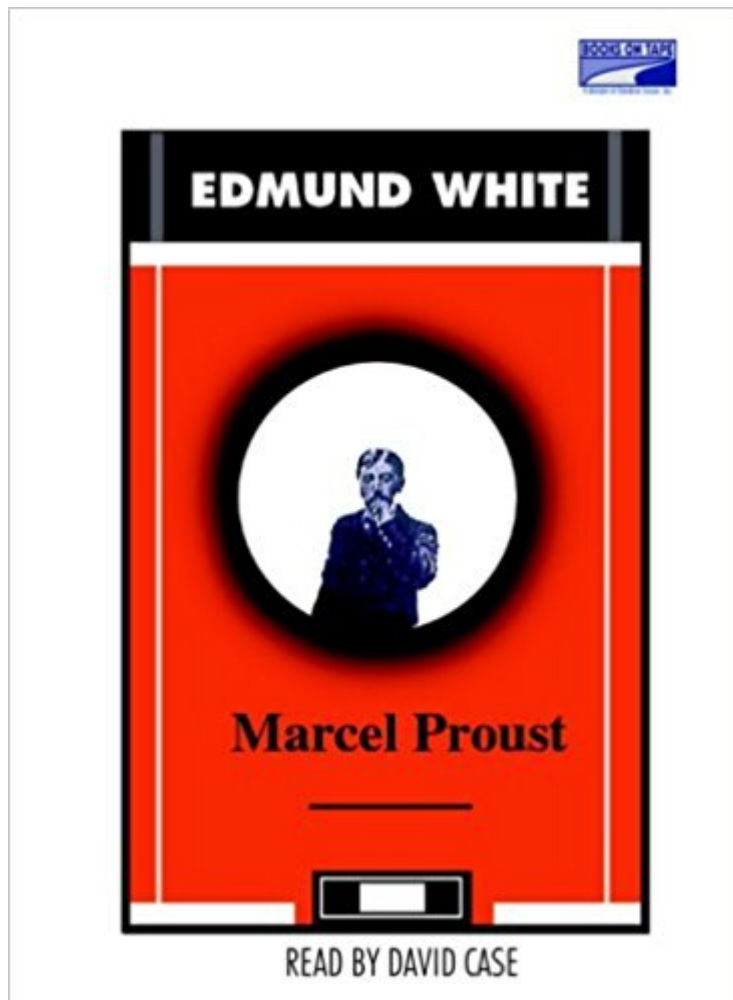


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Marcel Proust



Synopsis

If there is anyone worthy of producing an intimate biography of the enigmatic genius behind *Remembrance of Things Past*, it is Edmund White, himself an award-winning writer for whom Marcel Proust has long been an obsession. White introduces us not only to the recluse endlessly rewriting his one massive work through the night, but also the darling of Parisian salons, the grasper after honors, and the closeted homosexual—a subject this book is the first to explore openly. From the frothiest gossip to the deepest angst, here is a moving portrait to be treasured by anyone looking for an introduction to this literary icon. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

Marcel Proust documented his existence so lavishly--albeit in fictional form--that many of his biographers have functioned as little more than code-breakers, doggedly translating art back into life. It's a great pleasure, then, to welcome Edmund White's slender, superbly artful account. A novelist himself (as well as a biographer of Jean Genet), White beautifully evokes "the France of heavy, tasteless furniture, of engraved portraits of Prince Eugene, of clocks kept under a glass bell on the mantelpiece, of overstuffed chairs covered with antimacassars and of brass beds warmed by hot-water bottles." And he's no less canny at summoning up Proust's personality, in all its neurotic, contradictory glory. Of course, Proust's life can't truly be separated from his art. Every biography of him is bound to operate in the shadow of *Remembrance of Things Past*, and White has some shrewd things to say about that mammoth work, whose style he describes as "an ether in which all the characters revolve like well-regulated heavenly bodies." Yet the focus remains on Proust and on

his unlikely transformation from momma's boy to social climber to world-class genius. Like his subject, White often proceeds by anecdote. His book is packed with telling, hilarious little nuggets, which find Proust being snubbed by that "powdered, perfumed, puffy Irish giant" Oscar Wilde or luring back his lover Alfred Agostinelli by buying him an airplane. At the same time, White conveys the considerable pain that Proust endured as an invalid, an artist, and (more to the point) a closeted homosexual. No doubt these factors shaped his rather hopeless take on human affections, which impoverished his life even as they enriched his writing. "Proust may be telling us that love is a chimera," White writes, "a projection of rich fantasies onto an indifferent, certainly mysterious surface, but nevertheless these fantasies are undeniably beautiful, intimations of paradise--the artificial paradise of art." In White's view, this recognition makes his subject not only a supreme poet of impermanence but the greatest novelist of the century. Here, of course, it's possible to quibble. But the world would be an emptier place indeed without Proust's mighty masterpiece--and readers curious about its brilliant, bedridden creator should start with White's witty and exquisite portrait.

--James Marcus --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

In this quietly brilliant contribution to the Penguin Lives series (see review of *Crazy Horse*, p. 58), White has resuscitated the art of biographical appreciation?a form favored by the first generation of writers who could be considered to exemplify a gay sensibility (Walter Pater, Henry James, Edmund Gosse)?and brought it out of the closet. He follows Proust's evolution from social-climbing dilettante to dedicated artist, placing him in the social milieus of high-society Paris and turn-of-the-century arts and letters. As in his acclaimed full-length biography of Jean Genet, White uses the life of his subject to examine the modern history of homosexuality, and he does so with the same combination of earthiness and worldliness that has marked his essays and autobiographical fiction since the 1970s. By now Proust is perhaps the least mysterious of writers, blessed with several good biographies and many excellent studies (helpfully noted in White's bibliography); but while White claims that his work owes "everything" to the most recent of Proust's biographers, Jean-Yves Tadie, no one can match White's sensibility or his sympathy for the subject. His criticisms of Proust's work are consistently trenchant and insightful, and he brings to Proust's life the earned, respectful familiarity of a distinguished acolyte. Alain de Botton's *How Proust Can Change Your Life* marked a revival of popular interest in *Remembrance of Things Past*; White's small marvel of economy and organization should supersede de Botton's book as a handy introduction to one of the century's greatest novelists. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

A remarkable biography of one of France's greatest writers whose fame has traveled around the world. Who doesn't know the "madeleine" episode, where Proust describes at length how eating a special kind of cookie (that's what a madeleine is) called back memories of childhood and more? Proust did not study psychology but he was, as Edmund White so expertly explains, a natural master at it. In fact, it is the decrypting of the Proust mystery - because Proust, the social climber, was in fact a secret, intimate, tortured man - is what makes this book so fascinating. It unveils the tragedy of gay life in a time (the early 20th century) when "outing" was not permissible, in fact, Proust never even considered it. A must read for Proust fans but also for anyone who wants to understand how great minds work when confronted with social challenges like the opprobrium that haunted gay men in his days.

Edmund White's contribution to the Penguin Brief Lives series was very typical of their later additions, in that it's a highly personal account that reveals far more about the biographer than its subject. White's emphasis on Proust's homosexuality is welcome, and makes the work more interesting than it would be otherwise; but given the brevity of the text, it perhaps was not a good idea to include so many rumors about Proust's love life that were not well corroborated. You should realize that White presumes his readers' familiarity with *IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME* (for example, he makes mention of Saint-Loup, Charlus, and the Duchesse de Guermantes before he really explains who they are), which may be fair; what you should also be prepared for is his intense partisanship for Proust, such that he claims (flatly) that he is a more important international writer than Joyce or Woolf, and that he repeatedly takes to task anyone who has ever criticized Proust's writing. This partisanship is in many ways admirable, but at times the biography feels almost like it's trying to press something on you, as if White were a vacuum-cleaner salesman. The best thing about the book may be its survery at the end of criticism and other biographical work on Proust.

Marcel Proust a life is a vivid portrait in a small volume Edmund White made Proust accessible to me. After having read *Swann's Way* a couple of times, I now want to read the whole cycle. It has often been said that Proust's work rested on involuntary memory, the famous taste of the madeleine. But that leaves out the other qualities he possessed which made him capable of producing great art. For him memory was a bare face that he must later paint with invention. He was eloquent, had a deep psychological intuition; he observed society at all its levels, reflected on what he observed, and

passed it on to us. First dismissed as a society gad-about, being invited to great houses because he was so very funny; Proust wrote about love. He did know a lot about it. Actually having all the volumes on my book shelf for years, I confess to peeking at the end. Edmund White was responsible for this. Thank you! White calls Proust "the first to describe the permanent instability of our times", making him the first contemporary writer of the 20-th century. Readers - the line for purchasing this book starts here!

Someone at Penguin (James Atlas?) had a stroke of genius. The Penguin Lives series seems to takes its inspiration from seventeenth century writers like Izaak Walton and John Aubrey who churned out brief, engaging prose portraits of their contemporaries and other worthies. Readers know from the moment they pick up one of the Penguin Lives that they are not going to get a thorough-going, heavily annotated exploration of the person under scrutiny. They also know, when they check the page count, that they will not stall out midway and that they can easily finish it on a long weekend at the beach. The choice of "celebrity authors" to do the story-telling is also intriguing. Edmund White, for instance, may not have the final say on all things Proustian, but as a gay novelist and biographer of Jean Genet, we can be pretty confident that he will be forthright and honest when discussing Proust's sexuality and careful, appreciative, and insightful when discussing *In Search of Lost Time*. In fact, the balance White strikes in his discussion of the man and the novel is quite impressive. In contrast to many modern biographies that wallow in unflattering detail and leave the reader wondering how the subject ever managed to become a person worthy of being written about, White gives us a sense of what Proust was up against (personally and emotionally) without diminishing what he achieved. One piece of advice, if you do decide to buy this great little volume: Don't skip the bibliography. It's only nine pages long and White's descriptions of the books listed will point you toward some good reading (and away from some duds).

This series is, admittedly, intended to be a brief introduction to its subjects. This book provides a nice overview of a great but very troubled or at least eccentric author. I have promised myself that I would get through all 7 volumes of Proust's great work and so far, I have made it through the first two. "Remembrance of Things Past" requires a whole different mind set to read, kind of like reading Dickens or any of the great Russian novels. That said, I found if I just put everything else aside and allowed myself to sink into Proust's world, it began to flow and the pages turned quickly. Why did I stop? Life intervened, but now I am retired and plan to return to the great work soon. This little book was a kind of good nudge to start me in the right direction. Go for it!

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