

Marcel Proust

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Like all great novels, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* stands alone, creating its own world and its own independent reality. Yet far more than most, it is a work intimately and inextricably intertwined with its author's own life and the society through which he moved; while immeasurably more than a mere roman à clef, Proust's masterpiece acquires new resonance for readers who become familiar with its context.

The latest entry in the Overlook Illustrated Lives series, this concise illustrated profile moves easily among Proust's life, his writing, and the French haute monde that so fascinated him. Neither a full-dress biography nor a systematic literary appreciation, it is instead a deft portrait of the man and his world, filled with details that range from his famously eccentric habits to his relationships with family, friends, and lovers to the aesthetic and artistic influences that shaped his vision.

The author, Distinguished Professor of English, French, and Comparative Literature at the City University of New York, is an admirable guide; her fifteen brief yet insightful and informative chapters read like a conversation with a friend as entertaining as she is erudite. Her text is greatly enhanced by the color and black-and-white illustrations, which convey a vivid flavor of the Proustian era: photographs of the author and such contemporaries as Diaghilev, Cocteau, and Nijinsky; handbills from his beloved Ballets Russes; examples of his endlessly revised manuscript pages, and much more.

An abbreviated bibliography lists several dozen other titles on Proust as well as on a variety of related subjects, a useful resource for those seeking to pursue themes that are only touched upon here.

The book's only weakness, if it can be said to be such, is part and parcel of what makes it enjoyable: it tends more to glimpses and aperçus than to a steady gaze. Readers who already know Proust's work will find it rewarding and often revealing; those less familiar are likely to find themselves now and then at sea. But in fairness, they are not really its intended audience and as an adjunct to the novel itself and other more extensive biographical and critical studies, Marcel Proust succeeds very well.

PEYTON MOSS (November / December 2003)

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