Alien corn

You could *read this book for its descriptions, if you're patient. But you* should *read* Parisian Lives *for the funny, tender scenes with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Parisian Lives. By Samuel M. Steward. St. Martin's Press, 1984. 215 pages. $7.95

The best way to read *Parisian Lives*, Samuel M. Steward's character-study novel set in late-1930s Paris, is to have someone else read it first and put bookmarks at the good parts. Not the sex scenes, of which there are few. Not the revelations, which disappoint. Your reader should thumb the crisp and affectionate scenes involving Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas.

Books

Steward, who wrote erotic novels in the 1950s and '60s under the pen name of Phil Andros, visited Stein and Toklas at their summer home in Bilignin and made night time notes of each day's happenings. In the fictional *Parisian Lives*, Steward's jottings serve him better than his imagination.

What really happens in this book? An aspiring American writer/professor, visiting the French provincial summer home of Toklas and Stein in 1935, meets another of Stein's protégés, Sir Arthur Lyly, a British painter as renowned for his sexual exploits as his creative output.

The narrator, John McAndrews, quickly discovers that the painter's two main pursuits are inextricably linked. In a pattern that grows more and more disturbing throughout the book, Lyly becomes involved with men whose dangerous histories and threatening habits fill his life with trauma — at the same time they prime his artistic passion.

First Lyly travels with a purported Yale-educated broker from Chicago — actually, a notorious gangster who bilks him through an elaborate net of deceit. Then a stunning sailor, almost a caricature of himself, who develops a severe mental disorder. A brutal Parisian who introduces Lyly to the "pleasures of pain." And, finally, a 17-year-old Spaniard whose dim past provides the book's — and Lyly's — unraveling.

As "Mac" (McAndrews) learns more about Lyly's exploits, as his view of Lyly slips from fascination to concern to revulsion, he wonders about the motives that drive this obsessed, probably masochistic man. Does he thrive on others' torment, cultivate chaos in his life to nurture his artistic vision? What is the price of Lyly's endless pursuit of experience and sensation? Does this man care about anyone but himself?

These are important questions. But Mac's answers are limited by the few pieces of Lyly's life available to him — portions of a diary, some first hand retelling, much second hand retelling, his own few observations. If Lyly's life cannot, in the end, be unlocked, then Mac's own voice must fill the gap in understanding. While he serves as an adequate narrator, rendering some scenes with drama and powerful pacing, he's not large enough as a character to sustain interest.

The book is arranged in diary form, with small chapters bearing dates from July 1935 to August 1948. But the tone isn't intimate enough to make the diary framework believable. Early chapters are written from Mac's immediate perspective, while others were obviously constructed after-the-fact, including scenes at which he was not present. The form, meant to coax readers into the story, actually distracts from the telling, chopping a fluid narrative into timed chunks.

And because most of the entries are written with the hindsight of the present about events in the past, the reader, like the narrator, knows too much too soon. Early in the novel, we can guess how it will end — if not the specifics, then certainly the tone. The narrator's disillusionment is already apparent, the future a *fait accompli*. Why should we read further?

Perhaps for several small reasons. Steward does have a gift for rich scene-setting. From his descriptions of certain unsavory Paris cafés, with their young patrons eyeing each other, one can almost smell the cigarettes and sweat. He is equally evocative when painting the French countryside, the Parisian boulevards at the turn of spring or the Roman Coliseum at night. "Paris in April was wonderful," he writes. "The air in the morning was thin and clear like white wine with a little sparkling in it. In the afternoons the thinness turned into a golden haze, mellow and fine, and sometimes the sunsets were chill and lemon colored with the last of winter."

Such thick descriptions work best in small doses. Regrettably, *Parisian Lives* spills over with language that is often melodramatic beyond the point of mockery, beyond even the self-aggrandizement of an ambitious young writer in the '30s. "The blood was calling," he says in a typically hard-handed passage. "I heard my heart complain incessantly, and felt its uneasy murmuring for the banks of the Seine. So back I went to Paris after those nine long years, carrying my dreadful secret."

You *could* read this book for its descriptions, if you're patient. But you *should* read *Parisian Lives* for the funny, tender scenes with Stein and Toklas. Perhaps because these parts actually came from Steward's notes while visiting Bilignin, they ring with humor, naturalness and an authenticity not found in the rest of the book. He depicts Stein as sharp-witted, idiosyncratic, tender beneath a gruff shell; she cannot bear to kill two mice that she and Toklas have trapped in the house. Toklas tempers Stein with her pragmatism and wry humor. The recreation of their dialogue reveals a rich relationship, as well as providing some of the book's few funny, unponderous moments.

This novel, despite its period setting, seems born of the same mindset as Jay McInerny's *Bright Lights, Big City*, the fast-clipped, high fizz account of New York's club, sex and coke scene in the early 1980s. The settings may differ, but the chronicles have a lot in common. In both tales, a young male narrator somehow slips into a life of cavalier self-indulgence. And then he grows up.

At the end of *Parisian Lives*, confronted with yet another sordid scene, Mac has a momentary longing for "a shower of spring rain with the black dirt fresh under foot," an antidote to urban sloth and excess. His wish doesn't evoke much more sympathy than the closing scene of *Bright Lights, Big City*, in which the protagonist quenches his starved body and spirit on a stale roll he's found on a Manhattan street. Both narrators, apparently, have seen through the culture of obsession to its vacant core. But their revelations come too late, too tediously. Any reader with sense has long seen where all of this is going to lead. Rather than empathize, one wants to poke the protagonist and say, "Well, what did you expect?"

Mac's final gesture constitutes a breakthrough of sorts, but it's not quite clear what he's broken through *to*. Perhaps the moment merely signifies that his experience is over, complete enough to be set down in words; he breaks through so he can write the book. That's not enough. What could be an important shift in attitude becomes instead a self-justifying prompt for a self-indulgent narrative. *Parisian Lives*, finally, forms a closed circle that fails to deliver us anyplace we haven't been. ▼

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