



Monsieur Proust's Library

By Anka Muhlstein

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Reading was so important to Marcel Proust that it sometimes seems he was unable to create a personage without a book in hand. Everybody in his work reads: servants and masters, children and parents, artists and physicians. The more sophisticated characters find it natural to speak in quotations. Proust made literary taste a means of defining personalities and gave literature an actual role to play in his novels.

In this wonderfully entertaining book, scholar and biographer Anka Muhlstein, the author of *Balzac's Omelette*, draws out these themes in Proust's work and life, thus providing not only a friendly introduction to the momentous *In Search of Lost Time*, but also exciting highlights of some of the finest work in French literature.

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Editorial Review

Review

"This gemlike exploration of the literary underpinnings of *A la recherche du temps perdu* reveals a Marcel Proust who did not so much read books as "absorb" them." -*The New Yorker*

"Anka Muhlstein, who most recently wrote about Balzac (*Balzac's Omelette*), here turns her attention to Proust's enthusiasms, antagonisms, and literary influences- a perfect subject during this centennial of *Swann's Way*. That herself is French and was brought up in Paris and in a not dissimilar *lycee* system makes her a reader who is sensitive to nuances of style and echoes of older standard French authors." -Edmund White, *New York Review of Books*

"With *Monsieur Proust's Library*, Anka Muhlstein has added another volume to the collection of splendid books about Proust. A woman of intellectual refinement, subtle understanding and deep literary culture...Ms. Muhlstein is an excellent provisioner of high-quality intellectual goods." -*Wall Street Journal*

"...Anka Muhlstein's *Monsieur Proust's Library*, which looks at *In Search of Lost Time* by way of the books that Proust himself read and the way they influenced both the book and its characters, has become a permanent addition to my Proust library, and is a must read both for Proustians and want-to-be Proustians alike...It's a marvelous book." -*Publishing Perspectives*

"Muhlstein shows admirable restraint, focusing on select topics to contextualize Proust's work in an accessible way...It's a quick read, and the tight focus and brisk, topical chapters offer an entrée to a work that is not always easy to penetrate." -*The Coffin Factory*

"This engaging little volume looks at the writers and literary works that influenced Marcel Proust, a passionate reader whose characters often appear book-in-hand. A helpful introduction to *A la recherche du temps perdu*, this new work reveals the ways in which Proust's favorite writers—Saint-Simon, Racine, Mme de Sévigné, Balzac, Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky—inform his magnum opus." -*France Magazine*

"The author of *Balzac's Omelette* offers another sensual appreciation of a classic author, this time submitting to the books that Proust loved...You don't absolutely need to know *In Search of Lost Time* to read Muhlstein's brisk little volume, a mini-biography that dissects the many literary influences of [Proust]." -*The Daily Beast* (Hot Reads)

"[Muhlstein] is thoroughly versed not only in Proust's life but also in his work; her knowledge of individual characters is especially striking...This biography is an easy and interesting read, even for the novice Proust scholar, and an excellent accompaniment to an *In Search of Lost Time* (re)read." -*San Francisco Book Review*

"Muhlstein has ideas of her own about the way in which Proust not only dealt with the anxieties of influence but also brought to a head a long and rich tradition -- something one can scarcely imagine a writer doing today." -*Gay and Lesbian Review*

About the Author

Anka Muhlstein was born in Paris in 1935. Muhlstein has published biographies of Queen Victoria, James de Rothschild, Cavalier de La Salle, and Astolphe de Custine; studies on Catherine de Médicis, Marie de Médicis, and Anne of Austria; a double biography, *Elizabeth I and Mary Stuart*; and most recently, *Balzac's Omelette* (Other Press). She has won two prizes from the Académie française and the Goncourt Prize for Biography. She and her husband, Louis Begley, have written a book on Venice, *Venice for Lovers*. They live in New York City.

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How did Proust read? As a child, like all of us: for the plot and characters. But even at a very young age he was outraged by the fact that grownups considered reading as something one did to amuse oneself. "My great-aunt," he recalled in *Days of Reading*, "would say to me, 'How can you go on amusing yourself with a book; it isn't Sunday, you know!'" putting into the word 'amusing' an implication of childishness and waste of time." For little Marcel, reading was not fun; it was traumatic. He cried at the end of every book and was unable to go to sleep, desolate at the idea of leaving the characters he had grown attached to: "These people for whom one has gasped or sobbed, one will know nothing more of them [...] one would have so liked for the book to continue."

Proust read as a moralist, in the sense that reading could lead to greater self-knowledge, a salutary discipline sometimes necessary to shock a lazy mind into action. And he read as a novelist, an artisan of the written word, endlessly analyzing the style and technique of other authors, whether he liked their work or not. Finally, Proust read as a homosexual, extremely sensitive to all transgressions and ambiguities of gender.

The scope of his reading was too vast to allow for a list of favorites. All the writers who are important to the characters in the novel are French, but Proust, although he did not read English with ease, had a special affinity for British and American literature and was greatly influenced by them. "It is curious that in all the different genres, from George Eliot to Hardy, from Stevenson to Emerson, there is no literature which has had as much hold on me as English or American literature. Germany, Italy, very often France leave me indifferent but two pages of *The Mill on the Floss* reduce me to tears," he wrote.

Users Review

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