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Life With Picasso



Synopsis

Francoise Gilot was a young painter in Paris when she first met Picasso - he was sixty-two and she was twenty-one. During the following ten years they were lovers, worked closely together and she became mother to two of his children, Claude and Paloma. LIFE WITH PICASSO, her account of those extraordinary years, is filled with intimate and astonishing revelations about the man, his work, his thoughts and his friends - Matisse, Braque, Gertrude Stein and Giacometti among others. Francois Gilot paints a compelling portrait of her turbulent life with the temperamental genius that was Picasso. She is a superb witness to Picasso as an artist and to his views on art...

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Customer Reviews

[Gilot's] recall of his [Picasso's] discussions about art, details of private visits to friends such as Matisse, Braque and Giacometti, and her intimate understanding of his temperament, make this work unique DAILY TELEGRAPH This memoir is both a vivid portrait of a monstrously difficult man and a brilliant depiction of a great artist at work NEW YORK TIMES ... no-one in the Picasso entourage was so close to him... fascinating. Tim Hilton

Francoise Gilot was made a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Minister of Culture in 1987 and a Knight of the Legion of Honour in 1990. Carlton Lake is a writer, editor and arts correspondent having contributed to numerous magazines.

Francoise first met Picasso in a restaurant in May 1943, when she was 21 and he was 61.

He was immediately fascinated by her and she by him. She started visiting him, and he prepared to seduce her, but he expected resistance and was put off by the fact that she neither resisted nor egged him on. She was then studying literature and law at the Sorbonne, but she really wanted to devote all her time to painting. When she decided to give up the university, her violent father beat her up and she left home and stayed with her grandmother. (October 1943). After that she began to feel more than an interest in Picasso - she felt they had much in common and felt totally at ease with him. Being in her own right an artist (good enough for Kahnweiler to put her under contract), she was very knowledgeable about paintings, and eventually about etchings, lithographs and about pottery also. She describes at length the objets trouvés which Picasso used as components of his sculptures. She records how Picasso explained to her what he was trying to do in his paintings and sculptures - and that may indeed help many readers to understand the mental processes and philosophies that lay behind the pictures. He also philosophized to justify his own selfishness and cruelty - he felt entitled to what he called his needs taking priority over everything, including the needs of others. Incapable of real love himself, he constantly complained about not being loved - though his studio was always thronged with admirers (whom he usually deliberately kept waiting for ages before he would receive them.) Of course he was a monster, and Françoise was perfectly aware of this; but she was still fascinated by him and thought she could cope with him and would not become a victim such as poor Dora Maar, his previous companion, had become by that time. But (against protests!) she allowed him to use her to humiliate Dora. At times he told her that she did not mean all that much to him and that there was nothing permanent in their relationship. She knew that quite well and refused to feel victimized. She would simply not see him for weeks at a time. But then again he said he needed her and urged her to come and live with him. In 1946 she succumbed, merely leaving a note to her beloved grandmother. On two occasions when she was unhappy with Picasso, he suggested she should have a child - that would take her mind off her such thoughts. And on each occasion she followed his advice, giving birth first to their son Claude (1947) and then to their daughter Paloma (1949). The book is brimful of anecdotes and of incidents in their every-day life - of Picasso's uncontrollable rages, his self-pity, his selfishness, his sense of entitlement, his bullying, his contrariness and perversity, his jealous possessiveness, his superstitions; of the cruel tricks he played on art dealers. She quotes in inverted commas long passages of what Picasso said to her: not only his theories about art but also his torrents of abuse. They are probably correct in substance, but one does wonder: did she have such total recall? Did she keep a diary? To what extent did she reproduce his sayings reliably. There are portraits of a plethora of dealers and artists who were in contact with Picasso: I thought those of Braque, of

Giacometti and of Matisse are particularly vivid. (At this stage of their lives, in the late 1940s, the famous earlier rivalry between them had given way to as much friendship as Picasso was capable of.) Also excellent portraits of Marcel, Picasso's characterful and devoted chauffeur, and of Sabartés, Picasso's gloomy but equally devoted secretary. Françoise tells us the back-stories of Picasso's earlier women, and of course she would largely share their fate. Although he had urged her to have children, he became more distant after Paloma was born (just as he had been with Marie-Thérèse after she had given birth to his daughter Maia). He felt tied down to a stable family life, and told her she was no longer sexually attractive to him because she had become so thin. The difference this time was that Picasso said he still needed her (to help him in his work and to discuss his paintings with her), but in 1953 she decided to leave him rather than wait for him to leave her. What are we to make of Françoise? It is astonishing to me that she had put up for so long with so much ill-treatment and verbal aggression from Picasso because she loved him. She even dedicates the book "to Pablo", though this may be ironic. In relation to him she was both weak (in going along with him, often against her will) and strong (in apparently refusing to let him treat her like a doormat). The book is absorbing and extremely well-written (Carlton Lake, an American journalist, helped her to write it) - and although she says a good deal about her emotions throughout those years, she remains at the end something of an enigma to me.

Condition was okay but not all that great. Spine was in good shape but cover looked like it had a lot of wear and tear.

This is a great book if you just fancy an enjoyable read and, at the same time, get a glimpse into the private life of the 20th century's most famous painter. Gilot, who spent 10 years with Picasso and had two of his children, portrays him as vain, petty, childish, selfish and someone who cast off his various wives and mistresses when he got bored with them. However, he still involved them in his life, making their lives miserable and revelled in having women squabbling over him, according to Gilot. The fact that he became involved with Gilot, who was 40 years younger, shows he never learned from previous experiences. On the other hand, the fact that a 21-year-old woman fell for a bald 61-year-old man shows he must have been attractive and persuasive. Had this book been written in today's politically correct times, Picasso would, no doubt, be portrayed as a sexist monster. However, Gilot gets her revenge for Picasso's treatment of her by ridiculing him, thereby making the book more entertaining. No wonder he tried to ban it. A lot of what she says has to be

taken with a pinch of salt and the translation is unimpressive but the book is worth reading. It is certainly better than the feeble film version with Anthony Hopkins.

I had meant to read this book for a long time, and I finally did (in French) recently. I was left with a yearning for more sincerity and much less detachment from the author. I could not help thinking how different this book might have been if it had been written by Gilot alone instead of Gilot and Carlton Lake. Introducing an outsider when writing a memoir is bound to stifle or reinterpret a great deal of spontaneous feelings, memories, and even facts. It is also possible that, with Picasso still alive at the time of publication, Gilot had wanted to appear detached enough to give an unbiased version of her years with Picasso. If this was the case, it did not work for me, and she succeeded in making me view her as manipulative and cold, even though I do not question the veracity of what she says because James Lord, who knew Picasso well, later confirmed the truth about Picasso's sometimes appalling behavior. But Lord had the decency to wait until Picasso had died to publish his work on Picasso and Dora Marr, and therefore his book did not hurt anyone. This book, on the other hand, hurt not only Picasso, but especially the children Gilot had with Picasso. A high price to pay for a bit of fame.

It is refreshing and empowering to see the words with which Picasso describes his arts and his talents, and the talents of his contemporaries. If you have artistic intuitions, but, you can't really put a word to what you mean sometimes, it might be very helpful to read this book. For he is thoughtful. And he is egotistical. And, being both, he has quite a precise verbalization of the intellectual and analytical techniques he uses to make himself so successful. He paints by emotion, to be sure, but, when he steps back and evaluates his own work he is an accurate, and precise, and vicious critic. His own ability to express what his work lacks - and then address that identified issue - is inspiring and educational to artists and to scientists alike. In the later years (the book is chronological), Françoise will spend more time talking about the children and her emotional relationship to Picasso. In this, there is less value to 'take away.' But in the beginning two-thirds of this nonfiction narrative - with its intimate and intelligent insight into Pablo, Matisse, and Rembrandt (as well as those artists whom Picasso does not like) - is a treasure and I have gone to it many times to research half-remembered bytes of information. To be human, too, it is a wonderful depiction of an unusual love and courtship.

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