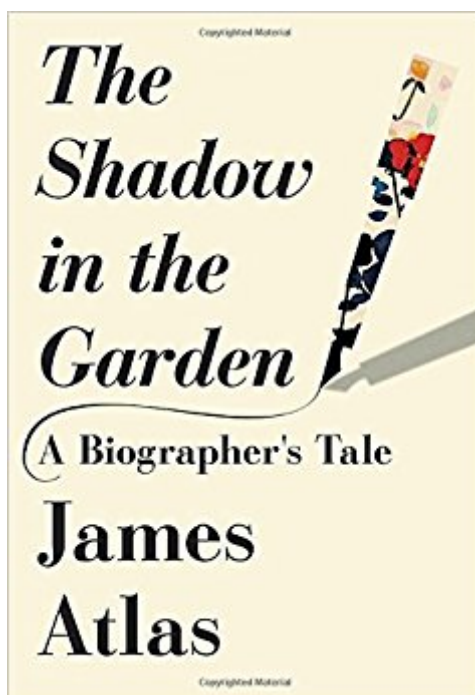


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The Shadow In The Garden: A Biographer's Tale



Synopsis

The biographer—so often in the shadows, kibitzing, casting doubt, proving facts—comes to the stage in this funny, poignant, endearing tale of how writers' lives get documented. James Atlas, the celebrated chronicler of Saul Bellow and Delmore Schwartz, takes us back to his own childhood in suburban Chicago, where he fell in love with literature and, early on, found in himself the impulse to study writers' lives. We meet Richard Ellmann, the great biographer of James Joyce and Atlas's professor during a transformative year at Oxford. We get to know Atlas's first subject, the "self-doomed" poet Delmore Schwartz. And we are introduced to a bygone cast of intellectuals such as Edmund Wilson and Dwight Macdonald (the "tall pines," as Mary McCarthy once called them, cut down now, according to Atlas, by the "merciless pruning of mortality") and, of course, the elusive Bellow, "a metaphysician of the ordinary." Atlas revisits the lives and works of the classical biographers, the Renaissance writers of what were then called "lives," Samuel Johnson and the obsessive Boswell, and the Victorian masters Mrs. Gaskell and Thomas Carlyle. And in what amounts to a pocket history of his own literary generation, Atlas celebrates the biographers who hoped to glimpse an image of them—as fleeting as a familiar face swallowed up in a crowd. (With black-and-white illustrations throughout)

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Customer Reviews

"A work of both depth and radiance . . . Expert, provocative, and enlightening . . . Atlas

relays all with wry hilarity, bighearted candor, and effervescent passion for the art of literary biography. — Donna Seaman, Booklist (starred review) — “In recounting a life largely subsumed by the lives of others, James Atlas reveals, with sincerity, humor, and incisiveness, the value and the difficulty of looking outside oneself for meaning. The Shadow in the Garden is a brutally honest look at the ways in which our lives are shaped — both with and without our knowledge — by the lives of others. — Amanda Foreman, author of *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* — “Illuminating . . . A brutally honest examination of the biographical craft and a good companion piece to Richard Holmes’s *This Long Pursuit*. — Kirkus Reviews — “Witty, conscientious, and perceptive . . . Part literary history and part memoir, this is a lively and elegant biography of biography itself. — Publishers Weekly — “The dishiest book ever written about serious literature . . . A master class in empathy: stumbling on it, learning to use it, applying it to your own life. — Jesse Kornbluth, *Head Butler* — “Atlas, with incredible knowledge of all things literary, and with self-deprecating (almost self-lacerating at times) wit and wisdom, gives us the history of the biography form itself. — Michelle Willens, *The Huffington Post* — “Biographers and their subjects engage in a prolonged dance of mutual seduction and betrayal and nobody elucidates this maddening psychodrama better than James Atlas. With candor, subtle insight, and almost heartbreaking humility, he narrates his pursuit of the deceased Delmore Schwartz and the often forbiddingly alive Saul Bellow, laying bare both the pitfalls and rewards of biography. Best of all his memoir is enriched by an encyclopedic knowledge of literary biography that enables the reader to measure his unending quest against the high standard set by James Boswell and Samuel Johnson and many other illustrious predecessors. Anyone even remotely interested in the art of biography will be captivated. — Ron Chernow, author of *Alexander Hamilton* — “I loved this book and was sorry to see it end — not simply because I happen to be one of the obsessive diggers drawn to this odd profession, as Atlas puts it, but because it’s a funny, amazingly candid, beautifully written, and, yes, profound meditation on the maddening (and ultimately impossible) business of understanding another human being. — Blake Bailey, author of *Cheever: A Life* — “How can a book be both modest and magisterial? James Atlas, in his confidences about his own methods as a biographer and in his thrilling presentation of the great biographers of the past (from Plutarch to Leon Edel), tells us everything we need to know, but lightly, sincerely — and definitively. — Edmund White, author of *Rimbaud: The Double-Life of a Rebel* — “The biographer slips into another’s skin; he is meant to assume

someone else—unconscious. By definition, he erases himself in the process. Writing of and around his books, Atlas triumphantly returns that fugitive figure—part sleuth, part scholar, part analyst, part medium, an emissary between worlds—to the page. The result is a lyrical, tender, and unexpectedly suspenseful take on a life in literature. There is no such thing as Biography School, Atlas laments at one juncture. There is now. Stacy Schiff, author of *Cleopatra: A Life*—“Oh God, Atlas has given it all away: all the trade secrets, anxieties, ploys, scruples, and obsessions of the literary biographer, the noble and ignoble inner workings of the craft, along with an enthralling history of it, and of its greatest practitioners. This excellent memoir may make you think twice about writing a life—i.e., subsuming your own to it—but it will inspire you to rush out to read one.” Judith Thurman, author of *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller*

JAMES ATLAS is the author of *Bellow: A Biography*; *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet* (nominated for the National Book Award); and the memoir *My Life in the Middle Ages: A Survivor's Tale*. The founder of the Lipper/Viking Penguin Lives series, Atlas was for many years an editor at *The New York Times*, first at the book review and later at the magazine. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Vanity Fair*, and other journals. He lives in New York City.

James Atlas and I were at Harvard at the same time and surely took courses together and sat at the same table in the special library for graduate students and excellent undergrads, but the similarities stop there. He was a Rhodes Scholar, studied obscure texts; he took the higher road, toward literature. “*Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet*,” published when Atlas was 28, was praised on the front page of the *Times Book Review*, which named it one of the Ten Best Books of 1977; it was nominated for a National Book Award. He went on to write his big book: 700 pages on Saul Bellow. It’s not likely that you’ve read either of his biographies. Or that, in *The Shadow in the Garden: A Biographer’s Tale*, you’ll recognize the names of most of the scholars and critics he writes about. Or care about his insights on biography, or the inside baseball anecdotes about interviewing famously thorny literary figures. No matter. *The Shadow in the Garden* is a book that has value even for those who move their lips as they read. It starts like a thriller: “The boxes contained the accumulated detritus of the poet Delmore Schwartz, who died, of a heart attack, at the Columbia Hotel, in Times Square, on the night

of July 11, 1966, while taking out the garbage. His body lay unclaimed in the morgue at Bellevue for two days until a reporter noticed his name on a list of the dead. The next morning, a lengthy obituary, accompanied by a photograph of a tormented-looking Schwartz, appeared in the Times. He was fifty-two."It was his old friend Dwight Macdonald, one of the great critics of that era, who salvaged the papers that had been strewn about Schwartz's hotel room at the time of his death. They would have vanished forever if it hadn't been for a chance encounter in a bar between Macdonald's son Michael and the owner of a moving company in Greenwich Village."Macdonald took on the role of Schwartz's literary executor • no one else had volunteered • and for years afterward the papers were stored at Hofstra University, on Long Island, where Macdonald was teaching at the time. But three months before my visit, in the fall of 1974, he arranged for them to be transferred to his own alma mater, Yale. I would be the first person to examine what Macdonald had rescued • barely • from oblivion."It was nearly five now, and the library would soon be closing for the holidays. There wouldn't be time for more than a brief look at Schwartz's papers, but I was eager to see them. I was twenty-five and had signed a contract with the distinguished publishing house Farrar, Straus & Giroux, committing me to write a biography of Schwartz without having any idea whether, in fact, there was enough material to do so. What was in these boxes • they could have been the junk of a college student moving out of his dorm • would determine the course of my life."The first letter he finds is from T.S. Eliot. A few minutes later, he's holding one from W.H. Auden. That double shock produced "the moment of contact, when you travel in a startling instant from the present to the past, your subject suddenly alive before you on the page."If you read selectively, this is the dishiest book ever written about serious literature. Among the anecdotes: the critic who made Atlas match him drink for drink during their interview. (Atlas cheated.) Schwartz popping 20 Dexedrine a day. Atlas telling critics what Schwartz wrote about them in his diary, and getting righteous blowback. Literary titans lecturing Atlas: "You say whatever you like in print, you take on this big book, and then you sit here like a schoolboy in the principal's office." Saul Bellow, premature ejaculator. The rookie biographer, standing in a Grand Central phone booth, looking up numbers of minor characters he wants to call. The smut James Joyce wrote to Nora Barnacle. Jean Stafford: "I was just making some egnog. That way I don't have to eat."And there are the perceptions, worth marking. Like this wise phrase, delivered as a throwaway: "The first wife •

the one who lived through the early stages of a writer's career and set up a bourgeois household that eventually became suffocating and ended in divorce. Or this: "Journals are the log of the inner life. Letters are the life presented to the world, the face prepared to meet the faces that you meet." Or this: The biographer's dream is "to find the pattern in a life, even if it isn't there." English majors who become writers are, in their way, as ambitious as hedge fund managers. Certainly, from the beginning, James Atlas was: "I wanted to write a biography that some young writer would come across a hundred years from now in a second-hand bookstore, if such a thing still existed or at least track down on Abebooks and have delivered by drone. Delmore Schwartz? What a strange name? Who was he?" The currency of literary ambition and achievement is perception. There's a lot of wisdom lightly shared in these pages, but what stands out is the perception that sums up a life's work: "The key to writing biography is the capacity to be empathetic. Too modest, I think. Isn't empathy the key to every kind of writing? Isn't it one of life's largest lessons?" "The Shadow in the Garden" is a master class in empathy: stumbling on it, learning to use it, applying it to your own life. It's ironic. In the end, the best book James Atlas has written is the one about himself.

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