

MFAH Book Club

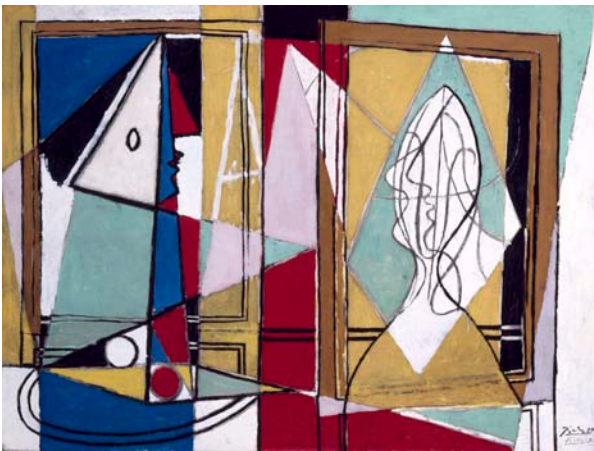
The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas
By Gertrude Stein
Spring 2011 MFAH Book Club Selection
(adapted from various sources)

Use the discussion questions on the following pages to facilitate your book club's conversation!

Then visit www.mfah.org/bookclub to request a tour for your group.

Tours feature works of art on view at the MFAH that explore subjects, themes, and ideas similar to those outlined in the questions below.

To get warmed up, how do you think these two painting relate to
The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas?



Left: Pablo Picasso, Spanish, 1881 – 1973, *Two Women in Front of a Window*, 1927, Oil on canvas, the MFAH, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore N. Law, 64.17 © 2011 Estate of Pablo Picasso/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Right: Juan Gris, Spanish, 1887 – 1927, *The White Tablecloth*, 1912-1916, oil on panel, the MFAH, museum purchase with funds provided by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund, 2006.389

Discussion Questions

1. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is not an autobiography in the true sense of the word. Why did Stein choose to write this story from the perspective of Toklas? How does doing so impact the story?

2. Stein and Toklas met in 1907. They lived together and remained committed to each other until Stein's death in 1946. Why do you think Stein was not more open about their relationship in the book?
3. Describe Stein's writing style – what makes it unique? Does reading the text out loud change your experience of the book?
4. In the book's first chapter, Toklas tells readers that she has met three geniuses in her life: Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and Alfred Whitehead. She says that while she has met many important people and many great people, these three are the only "first-class geniuses" she has ever known. What do you think she means by "genius"?
5. Describe Stein and Toklas' relationship. How do they interact with one another? Do they interact differently in public than they do in private?
6. Stein mentions a number of artists, writers, and other historical figures in the book. Who did you recognize? How were they portrayed?
7. How does Stein describe Paris in the early 20th century?
8. Matisse and Picasso are referred to in the book simply as such, and Picasso's wife is referred to by her first name, Fernande. However, whenever referencing herself, Stein chooses constantly to use her full name - why? She also refers to her brother as "Gertrude Stein's brother," and never by Leo, his first name. Why do you think she uses informal references for some of the characters and formal names for others?
9. Gertrude Stein famously said, "America is my country and Paris is my hometown." What do you think she meant by this statement?

Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas

From the time she moved to France in 1903 until her death in 1946, Gertrude Stein was a central figure of the Parisian art world. The salon she shared with her lifelong companion Alice B. Toklas at 27 *rue de Fleurus* became a regular gathering place for the talented American and European artists and writers of the Parisian avant-garde, among them Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson, Henri Matisse, Juan Gris, and Pablo Picasso.

During the early 20th century, European artists such as Picasso and Georges Braque started experimenting with a painting style that would later come to be known as Cubism. In Cubist paintings, the subject is presented from all angles at the same time. Stein took this approach to painting and applied it to her poetry and prose: whatever the subject at hand, Stein's readers encounter it from various perspectives and writing styles. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was Stein's only bestseller.

If you liked this book, you might also like:

These books by Gertrude Stein:

- *Three Lives* (1909)
- *Tender Buttons* (1914)
- *Picasso* (1938)
- *Paris France* (1940)

These books Alice B. Toklas:

- *What is Remembered* (1963)
- *Staying on Alone: Letters of Alice B. Toklas* (1973)
- *Baby Precious Always Shines: Selected Love Notes Between Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas* (with G. Stein, 1999)

Or, these related biographies, memoirs, and non-fiction:

- *A Life of Picasso: The Painter of Modern Life, 1907-1917* (1996) – John Richardson
- *Matisse the Master: A Life of Henri Matisse - The Conquest of Colour, 1909-1954* (2005) – Hilary Spurling
- *Everybody Was So Young: Gerald and Sara Murphy, A Lost Generation Love Story* (1998) – Amanda Vaill
- *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France – 1885 to World War I* (1968) – Roger Shattuck
- *Matisse, Picasso, Miró – As I Knew Them* (1991) – Rosamund Bernier
