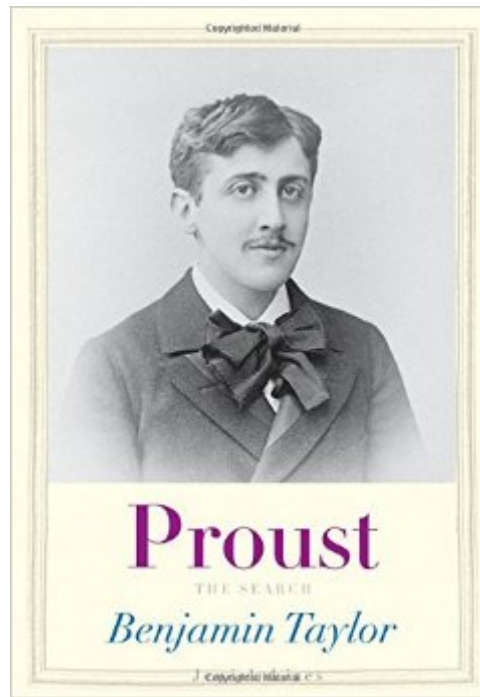


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Proust: The Search (Jewish Lives)



Synopsis

An arresting new study of the life, times, and achievement of one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century — Benjamin Taylor's endeavor is not to explain the life by the novel or the novel by the life but to show how different events, different emotional upheavals, fired Proust's imagination and, albeit sometimes completely transformed, appeared in his work. The result is a very subtle, thought-provoking book. —Anka Muhlstein, author of *Balzac's Omelette* and *Monsieur Proust's Library*

Marcel Proust came into his own as a novelist comparatively late in life, yet only Shakespeare, Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky were his equals when it came to creating characters as memorably human. As biographer Benjamin Taylor suggests, Proust was a literary lightweight before writing his multivolume masterwork *In Search of Lost Time*, but following a series of momentous historical and personal events, he became —against all expectations— "one of the greatest writers of his, and indeed any, era." This insightful, beautifully written biography examines Proust's artistic struggles —the "search" of the subtitle— and stunning metamorphosis in the context of his times. Taylor provides an in-depth study of the author's life while exploring how Proust's personal correspondence and published works were greatly informed by his mother's Judaism, his homosexuality, and such dramatic events as the Dreyfus Affair and, above all, World War I. As Taylor writes in his prologue, "Proust's *Search* is the most encyclopedic of novels, encompassing the essentials of human nature. . . . His account, running from the early years of the Third Republic to the aftermath of World War I, becomes the inclusive story of all lives, a colossal mimesis. To read the entire *Search* is to find oneself transfigured and victorious at journey's end, at home in time and in eternity too."

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Customer Reviews

There are Prousts and Prousts. Depending upon who is doing the asking, different writers create their own: the snob, the social climber, the neurasthenic, the aesthete, the consummate artist who forsook the world for his Great Work. There are massive Prousts (Tadie, Carter, Painter) and brief Prousts (White, and now Taylor). And while Taylor doesn't neglect the gay Proust (the focus of White's bio), he now gives us the Jewish Proust. Which would probably have surprised Monsieur P as, though his mother was Jewish and that technically makes him a Jew, neither his father nor his upbringing was. Nor did he identify as Jewish. Taylor acknowledges this but still foregrounds all the connections with Judaism, particularly the Dreyfus Affair as can be guessed. As this biography is part of Yale's Jewish Lives series, one wonders if it got lost somewhere on the way to the publishers and came out a wrong door. But if you overlook that elephant in the room, this is a very solid, entertaining, well-written and enlightening addition to the groaning shelf of books on Proust (should you wish to read about his overcoat or his library, they have volumes of their own). Compiled heavily from secondary sources, it is perfectly suitable for the general reader. And his selections of quotes and references are apt and often revealing. The problem with all Proust biographies is that the cast of characters is vast. Proust knew so many aristocrats, artists, friends and relations that to recall which Duchess is which can be very difficult. This is especially apparent in this brief work as the names fly by so fast. A Who's Who would have been appreciated (although an Index including names is supplied).

Biographers must tell the facts, describe the historical context, relate the life to the works, describe the mechanics of writing and publishing, offer occasional judgments about the author's behavior and (very occasionally) let the reader appreciate the biographer's own personality. This biography achieves a delicate balance of these diverse elements. As an example, one of the main themes of *Recherche* is that the attempt to know everything about your lover not only fails, but also brings about the ruin of the relationship. In the book, we see this with Swann and Odette and Marcel and Albertine. But there is evidence that in real life Proust himself was the victim of his need to trespass on the limits of his lover's inner life. Taylor writes, "On June 20, 1896, at Marcel's insistence, he and Reynaldo (à œyou whom along with Maman I love best in all the world •) sealed

a solemn covenant to tell each other about everything in their lives, including (or especially) their sexual desires. Such pacts are predictably the prelude to estrangement. The beginning of wisdom is to understand that your lover's inner life is not yours to know. Bargains in which each pledges to tell the other everything are the sure path to mutual recrimination. Marcel's jealous drive to possess inwardly whomever he loved was to be repeated again and again, and hurried each attachment to its end. Predictably, he and Reynaldo quarreled and decided not to spend their August holiday together."This is biography at its best. About Proust's religion: the title of the book as it appears in the Kindle edition is Proust: The Search (Jewish Lives).

There have been many biographies of Marcel Proust, some nearly as long as his masterful novel *In Search of Lost Time* (aka *Remembrance of Things Past*). William Carter's *Marcel Proust: A Life* is the best comprehensive biography in English, and, in French, there are several, including a recently published volume, *Marcel Proust: Une vie à écrire*, by Jérôme Picon. (Do avoid the tedious biography by Jean-Yves Tadié, both in French and in its abridged English version.) But if you want to learn about Proust, you may not want to read a biography that is 600 or 1,000 pages long. Benjamin Taylor's *Proust, The Search* focuses on how Proust became a writer, and how he wrote his great work. Instead of going into a lot of detail, Taylor looks at the parts of Proust's life that were integrated into his fiction. He doesn't ignore the first forty years of Proust's life, before he started writing *La recherche*, but he gives enough background information to provide context for Proust's search, and how he finally found himself as a writer. This brief book is 168 smallish pages of text, and another thirty of back matter is part of a series called *Jewish Lives*. As such, Taylor does pay attention to Proust's Jewishness (his mother was Jewish), but this isn't a book about Proust as a Jew. He wasn't much of a Jew, in fact, since he didn't practice any religion, but he was aware of his heritage, particularly during the turmoil of the Dreyfus affair, which heightened anti-semitism in France. Taylor is both a good storyteller and an insightful critic of Proust's work. He doesn't attempt to analyze the fiction, but he does make some salient comments about Proust's intentions and themes.

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