



February House

Sherill Tippins

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February House is the uncovered story of an extraordinary experiment in communal living, one involving young but already iconic writers -- and the country's best-known burlesque performer -- in a house at 7 Middagh Street in Brooklyn during 1940 and 1941. It was a fevered yearlong party fueled by the appetites of youth and by the shared sense of urgency to take action as artists in the months before America entered the war.

In spite of the sheer intensity of life at 7 Middagh, the house was for its residents a creative crucible. Carson McCullers's two masterpieces, *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, were born, bibulously, in Brooklyn. Gypsy Rose Lee, workmanlike by day, party girl by night, wrote her book *The G-String Murders* in her Middagh Street bedroom. Auden -- who along with Britten was being excoriated at home in England for absenting himself from the war -- presided over the house like a peevish auntie, collecting rent money and dispensing romantic advice. And yet all the while he was composing some of the most important work of his career.

Sherill Tippins's *February House*, enlivened by primary sources and an unforgettable story, masterfully recreates daily life at the most fertile and improbable live-in salon of the twentieth century.

February House Details

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From Reader Review February House for online ebook

lauren says

i stole wishes from this book: i will live in a house, in brooklyn, with as many crazy creative people as possible, and we will create until the world explodes from our over-brilliance. and i will enjoy every second, for it's bound not to last for long. i also found new favourite authors (auden, mccullers) in it.

Tejas Janet says

A fascinating and well-researched book. I read half in mid-July then got side-tracked with some other books and projects. Read the second half in the past few days. Some might be put off by the level of detail of Tippins' writing, but she's very thorough and the whole thing reads rather like a scenario for some irresistible "reality television" program, starring an amazing cast of young, talented intellectuals, writers, composers, and artists.

Who knew that the beloved Burlesque stripper Gypsy Rose Lee ever shared a house in Brooklyn with W.H. Auden, Carson McCullers, and Benjamin Britten among others? Time-wise the story revolves around the pivotal year of 1940 to 1941 when the lives of these creative people came together for a short but productive and significant period for all those involved. It also corresponds to the time just before the US would enter World War Two.

Eduardo says

Having studied Auden in grad school I am always interested in his life so when a friend mentioned this book I picked it up at the San Francisco Public Library, it was amusing and inspiring, Auden living in Brooklyn with Gypsy Rose Lane, Benjamin Britten(the composer), Carson McCullers, George Davis and others as well as their artistic dinner guests such as Louis McNeice, Dali, & many many more. It was a snapshot of an experiment in artistic communal living as well as a snapshot of an America that was about to be plunged into WWII. A quick and wonderful read!

Lizzie says

Really interesting, with little mini bios of all the people, and great images like Carson and Gypsy running through the streets of Brooklyn chasing a fire engine in the middle of the night, holding hands. As they're running, Carson gets the image that helps her pull The Member of the Wedding together. Also a lot of stuff about expat Brits trying to figure out what, as artists, they should do about the war, and attitudes about them in the UK.

I've read a biography of McCullers, and Gypsy's memoir, but know almost nothing about Auden except that he was a gay poet, and there's a lot about his philosophical brooding about war, his romance with Chester Kallman, and other fascinating stuff. Ditto Paul and Jane Bowles, and now I'd like to find out more about them and read Two Serious Ladies.

Michelle says

Quirky and fun - just like me!

Jerry Oliver says

This was a very engaging read. I read the book in two days. Having recently lost my parents I find this period in history so interesting. In 1941 while America was on the brink of involvement in WW2 my mom was 14 and my dad 17. Though this book takes place far from the midwest farmland upbringing of my parents, it is still the period of time and country they lived in and fought for in the coming years. I find it so fascinating to understand the cultural voices of the time, the artists on the edge that were my grandparents ages and younger.

During this time a disparate group of iconic writers, artists and a burlesque performer took part in an experiment in communal living at 7 Middagh Street in Brooklyn NY. Sharing an urgency to take action as artists during these turbulent times many of these artists created some of their most renowned works while living at February House. Essentially modeled after the Paris salons of the 20's this creative crucible included W. H. Auden, Carson McCullers, Jane and Paul Bowles, Benjamin Britten, Gypsy Rose Lee and Salvador Dali. Stunning personalities and minds.

Hannah Garden says

During: Miss Tippins is not up to the task she has set herself. Primarily, I think, because she still seems to be laboring under the idiot, teenage delusion that "bohemianism," as defined by alcoholism and self-centeredness, is at all interesting, which it is NOT. Decidedly. The material is just so scrumptious, though, so I keep ticking away at this godawful bastard. A house devoted to art! In theory, at least. Fucking NICE. Let's do that! You an' me.

After: Maybe I am just not a nonfiction person. The smug way biographers fondle their little facts just fucking BUGS me . . . there's no assuming that an experience as described bears any fucking relation to the experience as lived . . . so these little turds offered up could be as like or unlike an onion, as like or unlike a river, a badge, a flag . . . you know?? Because who fucking KNOWS??? is my point. Not you, asshole.

Rachelle says

This book has served to inspire several people I know to change their lives. It has inspired me to quit my job (goal not yet accomplished), JC to throw a dinner party, and Steev to wear violet gloves. Who knows what it will do for you?

Nikki says

For most of my life, my favorite period of history has been the 35 or 40 years just prior to my own arrival. Whether tales of the Algonquin Round Table, Barbara Tuchman's *The Proud Tower* and *The Guns of August*, Schlesinger's history of FDR's presidency, or fiction set in the period, I'm always drawn to it. So when <http://www.todayinliterature.com> recently mentioned *February House*, I was pleased to find it at my local library. I had a hard time putting it down.

The book is the true story of one year in the lives of a group of writers, musicians, and artists who either lived at, or visited frequently, a house in Brooklyn Heights. The year is 1940-1941. The residents and their friends include such well-known names as Carson McCullers, W. H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Gypsy Rose Lee, Klaus and Erika Mann (son and daughter of Thomas Mann), Paul Bowles and his wife Jane Salvador Dali author: Christopher Isherwood.... George Davis, whose idea it was to rent the house and make it a sort of artistic commune, is less well known now, but was fiction editor at *Harper's Bazaar* when that meant publishing serious and even avant-garde fiction, and later married Lotte Lenya, the widow of Kurt Weill, and was instrumental in keeping Weill's music before the public.

February House is much more than a book full of famous names and entertaining stories. It examines the tensions of the period, when America was not yet in the war; when the American artistic and intellectual community was welcoming and assisting European colleagues to safety in the U.S., while simultaneously feeling competitive with them. Auden, Britten, Pears and Isherwood, as Britons who had come to the U.S. before the war, suffered both inner conflict and outward criticism for being away from their native land in its time of crisis. Many of the group were homosexual or bisexual, with all the problems that entailed at a time when one could be arrested for acting on that orientation. But most importantly, there was the creative impulse that unified them and sometimes divided them. How does an artist of any kind find or create the optimum conditions for doing his work? What should that work be, in a time of international crisis? And, as one might expect in a group of twenty- and thirty-somethings, where and how does one find love? A great deal of energy was expended on love -- requited or unrequited, romantic, Platonic, or triangulated.

February House is a fascinating book, almost guaranteed to make the reader want to dig deeper into the works of the writers, musicians and artists it describes, and also evoking an exciting and terrifying time in our history as well as a vanished (literally -- the house was torn down in 1945 for an expressway) part of New York. Highly recommended.

Elise says

In my poetry class in college, somebody mentioned this book, and I remember thinking, golly, if only I could remember what book they were talking about so that I could read it, la la la, I'll never find it again. Lo and behold, five minutes on amazon and I've located the book, and then I checked it out from the library. It's almost too easy, no?

I've been frequenting biographies lately, not heavy ones like of LBJ or something, but lighter ones, of Bobby Darrin and people like that - this was like the best of biographies with none of the garbage. I read about Paul Bowles, and Gypsy Rose Lee, and Carson McCullers, and Wystan Auden, and all sorts of tangential famous without having to hear every bloviating detail of their upbringing or muse for hours and hours about their inner struggles. It was like a sampler pack of 1940s American arts culture, and I loved that about it. I also love the idea of a bunch of Bohemian artists living together, Melrose Place-style, and then Auden

making sure everybody pays their bill and gets some creative work done. Tons of charming anecdotes and amusing quotes included.

I did find Auden's struggle with whether or not he should go fight in the war or not as a bit boring, and I also don't really want to read about his religious conversions and philosophical musings on the artist's job; aren't poets tedious? I would also like a bit more of a follow-up on everybody, such as telling me more about what the hell happened to Jane Bowles, and basically more Gypsy Rose Lee on every page, she's fabulous.

Rupert says

Highly recommend this one! Unbelievable true tale of an unlikely group of housemates. Great to read of such sterling personages when they were young, poor and crazy.

Ivan says

7 Middagh Street literally doesn't exist any longer. It was torn down to make way for an Expressway. During the last decade of his life the poet Frank O'Hara lived in four different apartments in Manhattan and at least one of them has a commemorative plaque. If 7 Middagh Street were still standing the entire building would have to be bronzed. George Davis, the fiction editor for "Harper's Bazaar," rented and renovated the house with the assistance of friends W. H. Auden and Carson McCullers. Together they sought to create a kind of year round Yaddo - a boarding house for artists. They were joined by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears, Jane and Paul Bowles, Gypsy Rose Lee, Oliver Smith and Klaus Mann (among others). This is their story. As you can imagine, life at 7 Middagh Street was anything but boring.

This is the kind of biographical history I most enjoy reading. It focuses on a very specific period of time, communicating brilliantly the personal and professional triumphs and failures, as well as the ravaging effects of current world events these artists were dealing with while living together. It provides just the right balance of background material on each resident without ever becoming bogged down in trivial details that interrupt the natural progression of the story. Yes, there is a certain amount of "dirt." The spats between Auden and Paul Bowles are well documented, and the endless parade of sailors, the parties that lasted until dawn, the battling McCullers. Most of the residents, even those who were married, were either homosexual or bisexual. The book, and this history, is simply fascinating. If you care at all about 20th century art - literature and music especially - this is a book you shouldn't miss.

Gina says

Who the hell knew Gypsy Rose Lee lived with W.H. Auden and Carson McCullers in a commune in Brooklyn Heights? Why don't they teach this in school?

I read this book a year and a half ago, but now there's a "February House" musical, so it's back on my mind.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Bob says

A fascinating look at a group of very creative people who lived together in some harmony and much discord between 1939-1941 -- very well written.
