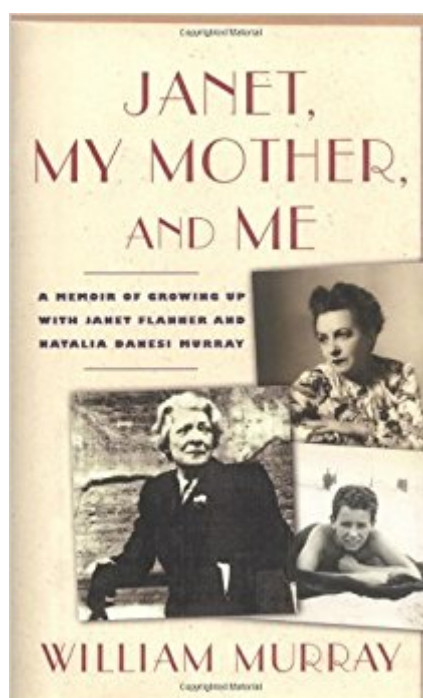


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Janet, My Mother, And Me: A Memoir Of Growing Up With Janet Flanner And Natalia Danesi Murray



Synopsis

Janet, My Mother, and Me is a charming, captivating memoir about a boy growing up in a household of two extraordinary women. William Murray was devoted to his mother, Natalia Danesi Murray, and to his mother's longtime lover, writer Janet Flanner. Even as a teenager, he accepted their unconventional relationship. His portrait of the two most important people in his life is unforgettable. Janet Flanner was already celebrated as the author of a new style of personal journalism for her "Letter from Paris" in The New Yorker when she met the Italian-born Natalia Murray on Fire Island, New York, in 1940. Their encounter, writes William Murray, was a "coup de foudre, a thunderbolt that instantly sent them rushing into each other's arms and forever altered their lives, as well as mine." Murray was already growing up in two cultures on different continents, in New York and Rome, when his mother's life changed so dramatically. He quickly accepted Flanner and the unusual household in which he found himself. (Natalia's mother, Mammina Ester, also lived with them in New York.) His memories of the women and of his own boyhood and adolescence are touching and often hilarious. Janet, My Mother, and Me offers a look at the world in which gay professional women moved in the decades before such relationships became more open and accepted. Murray's mother was a publishing executive and a broadcaster, and Murray, who originally hoped to become an opera singer and trained for that profession, eventually moved into the professions of both his mother and Flanner, becoming a novelist and then for many years an editor and writer at The New Yorker. This is an exuberant, warm, and often poignant memoir with a memorable cast of characters. Beguiling and unusual, it will remain vivid in readers' minds for years to come.

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Customer Reviews

William Murray, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* for more than 30 years and author of more than 20 books, had the good fortune to be raised by a couple who loved one another intensely and doted on him completely. That the couple was composed of two remarkable and remarkably independent women who happened to be lovers didn't faze Murray in the least, despite the prevailing social winds of the '40s and '50s. That those two women were Natalia Danesi Murray (his mother) and Janet Flanner, *The New Yorker's* celebrated author of the "Letter from Paris" column, added indescribable richness to his life and helped inspire him towards his own career as a writer. In this winning memoir, Murray narrates the life story of his mother (born in Rome, she would develop a diverse career that included freelance writer, radio broadcaster, actress, and publishing big wheel--a woman he describes as "an explosive force of nature"); his maternal grandmother, Mammina Ester (who lived with them and had herself been a journalistic and literary firebrand in Italy, and during WWI was the first Italian female war correspondent to ever visit a front); and Janet Flanner, who wrote under the pseudonym *Genève* and was lauded in Mary McCarthy's elegy as a "first citizen and patron of the arts, with some mythic quality in her like a splendid sacred bird." Murray tells his life story as well, growing up in New York and Italy, his life imbued with the fine arts of two cultures and the three women who raised him and molded him. His memoir is at once a movingly personal story, a revelation into the persona of three historic women, and an insight into how lesbians navigated their professional worlds and a disapproving society while maintaining a family life and a passion for one another. It's also a pleasant, gentle read, a story told in a genial tone about an earlier time. The individuals Murray describes are luminous personalities, and the reader feels privileged to share in their glow through the pages of this touching memoir. --Stephanie Gold

When Janet Flanner, the *New Yorker's* Paris correspondent from 1925 to 1975, met Natalia Danesi Murray, who was to become her lover of 38 years, Flanner's wit was so radiant that even Natalia's son, who was 14 in 1940, "lingered for nearly an hour just to be around her." Intertwined with Murray's memorable portrait of the two women is his own gently self-deprecating coming of age story. He emerges as a lusty, headstrong young fellow, forever resisting his deeply possessive Italian mother, yet profoundly shaped by her and the cultured life they shared. Pursuing what became a dead-end career as an opera singer, he found in Flanner both an ally who tempered his mother's persistent criticism and "a sort of surrogate father." His admiration for Flanner's writing was

a beacon that lit his path: he became a New Yorker staff writer for 30 years and the author of numerous novels (A Fine Italian Hand, etc.) and plays. Murray's descriptions of Flanner's often piercing insecurities and her devotion to her work are fascinating and inspiring; his less loving portrait of New Yorker editor William Shawn adds chiaroscuro. Drawing on Flanner's hauntingly articulate letters to Natalia, who assumed a succession of broadcasting, film and publishing positions in Italy as well as New York, Murray deftly conveys the interplay of passion, need and resolute independence that brought out the best and worst in their long-distance relationship. Although Murray's portrait of Flanner is crisper than that of his mother-perhaps due to the loss of Natalia's letters as well as her son's lingering ambivalence-this is a stirring account of the mature and enduring love between a mother, her lover and her son. (Feb.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I first got this book because I was curious about it from the obituary. I read it today in it's entirety. I think the author does deserve a superb job in allowing us to understand each of the real people with flaws and talents. I was led to believe that Natalia and Janet were always together but as I read. They were separated and torn apart for other reasons. Natalia never really comes out to acknowledge her sexual orientation. Bill never doubts his own. He reveals a lot about himself like losing his virginity to a prostitute. Bill's childhood was not entirely spent at home but at boarding schools in New England. I think Janet served as a father figure. When she was 83 years old, she had to retire to New York and live the last 3 years with Natalia. Why she kept coming and going to and from is puzzling to me? Janet was a complicated woman and these two women truly loved each other. Maybe the separations allowed them to love each other more apart. Will never really know? We weren't truly there ourselves. Bill allows us to see his childhood was normal. I was surprised that his mother would worry about his sexual orientation. I wondered what would have happened if he turned out gay himself. Would she blame herself? Who knows? I read about Alice, his second wife. I don't think Natalia understood their relationship. Now that all 3 members of that unique family is gone, I think Alice deserves some mention. Bill wasn't the best husband or father. They did live together for 5 years before their marriage. I say give Alice a break. They were together for 30 years. At the end of Natalia's life, she was unbearable probably because she was ill physically and medication often can contribute to a person's mental state. Bill and Alice stayed together for 30 years. I admire Alice and his first wife Doris who managed to deal with an overbearing mother-in-law. I also think Natalia had trouble letting go of Bill all his life and that's why there is so much trouble. Since Bill is gone, my condolences to Alice, Doris, Natalia, Julia, and Bill III over your

more recent loss. After reading this book, I became fascinated with Janet Flanner. I bought other books which educated me more about this situation. Sadly, this book is only a part of an amazing woman's story. I won't say that Janet didn't love Natalia but she had two other lovers, Solita Solano and Noel Haskins Murphy in France. Janet did not belong to anybody much less Natalia. Janet belonged to the world. She was larger than life. In fact, Noel and Solita did share a negative reception of Natalia's part of Janet's relationships. The reason that Natalia did not move to Paris was because Janet's partner Solita and Noel did not care too much for Natalia. They found her possessive and overbearing. Janet was not always happy in New York City with Natalia. She was happiest in Paris where she belonged. I won't say that they didn't love each other but it was not an ideal relationship. Natalia wanted Janet all to herself and Janet was torn between Noel, Solita, and Natalia. Janet was an amazing woman. This book only tells part of the story from Bill Murray's point of view. The book asks more questions than provides answers. I don't think Bill wanted to know about the true nature of Janet's relationships. She was not monogamous and she didn't belong to Natalia but she did love her to spend time with her. Regardless, they're all in heaven having a ball.

I'm a fan of William Murray's "Shifty Lou Anderson Series" novels, so that's what caught my interest for this novel. My rating of this book was good, but I was expecting more examples of how his mother and Janet had an effect on the development of Bill's writing. Otherwise the book is well written, although there is quite a bit of back and forth of the timeline of events.

As warm as the Italy he loves, William Murray has written an incredibly beautiful tribute to his mother, Natalia Danesi Murray and her long-time companion, Janet Flanner. He explores their deep relationship with great care, keeping the focus on them as he adds his own experiences growing up and growing older with them. What a triumvirate this must have been! Murray succeeds where many authors fail in noble attempts at "family" biography....he keeps just the right perspective in telling their story as well as his own. He relates the anguish of both women who experienced long separations from each other over their 38-year relationship but tempers it with the joy that Natalia and Janet felt during their many months, then finally years, together. I am impressed that Murray doesn't get carried away with general philosophizing about Lesbian working women, especially at a time when homosexuality was at its nadir...he rather simply, elegantly, and with several dashes of humor, becomes the camera lens through which we are able to view their personal and professional sides, especially through Janet's many letters to Natalia. In the end, I feel as if I have known all three for a long time.

I just finished this book and enjoyed it tremendously. This book appealed to me on several levels. As an American ex-patriate living outside Paris, I could relate to many of the comments Janet made. Although I love France, I will always be an outsider. This book is not so much an homosexual story as it is a love story among these people. It is a testament to how love can endure long distances, different cultures and social constraints. I recommend this book highly to anyone who enjoys reading historically based biographies with a love story intertwined. Besides, I can't resist buying a good book with good photographs.

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