



Genet: A Biography

Edmund White

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In this revelatory biography of Jean Genet, we have the first full-scale life of one of the great -- and controversial -- figures of twentieth-century literature. Edmund White shows us the writer in all his permutations: poet, dandy, homosexual, thief; a 'thug of genius', as Simone de Beauvoir called him.

Moving from Genet's illegitimate birth in 1910 to his foster childhood in a farming village in central France, Edmund White explores the early milieu that transformed an inherently theatrical child into a petty criminal and prodigiously original writer, whose most startling creation may have been his invention of himself. Accused of stealing and running away, Genet was sent to reform school at Mettray, where his imagination flourished under the spell of an all-male communal life and his first homosexual experiences. In the 1930s, he deserted from the army and travelled in Europe as a vagabond, prostitute and thief, always on the lam from the police and the military. In 1942, he emerged from one of several prison stays with the first of his remarkable novels, *Our Lady of the Flowers*. It was admired by Cocteau, who undertook to get it published and interceded with the French authorities to keep its author out of prison. White shows us how Cocteau thrust the 'marvelous, mysterious, intolerable' Genet into the heart of literary Paris, where he enjoyed a curious celebrity as great writer and petty thief, was painted by Giacometti (from whom he stole) and was canonized by Sartre in his monumental study, *Saint Genet*.

By 1948, Genet had produced five highly original novels. In the mid-1950s, after several years of debilitating depression, he turned to the writing of plays, of which *The Balcony*, *The Blacks* and *The Screens* were immediately hailed as masterpieces. Despite his ambivalence about political movements, he supported the Paris student uprising in 1968 and turned up -- as a journalist -- at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In 1970, he became a spokesman for the Black Panthers, but in his last decade he immersed himself -- politically and aesthetically -- in the Arab world, championing the struggle for a Palestinian homeland and writing his last, posthumously published book, *Prisoner of Love*.

Edmund White explores the perverse extremes of Genet's life and separates the facts from the mythology that Genet himself fashioned. Drawing on interviews with Genet's friends, lovers, publishers and acquaintances, and using new material from correspondence, journals, police records, psychiatric reports and other original sources, White reveals a life animated by contradictory impulses: authenticity and dissembling, fidelity and flirtation, domination and submission, honor and betrayal. Throughout, he brilliantly interprets and appraises Genet's astonishing oeuvre, reading the fiction with the focussed attention of a novelist and opening up the dense invention of the plays. His masterful and intuitive biography fully illuminates a hitherto enigmatic literary genius.

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