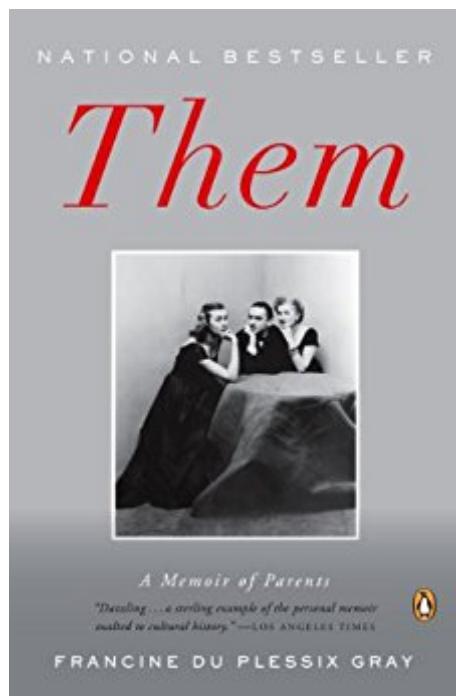


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# Them: A Memoir Of Parents



## Synopsis

Tatiana du Plessix, the wife of a French diplomat, was a beautiful, sophisticated "white Russian" who had been the muse of the famous Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. Alexander Liberman, the ambitious son of a prominent Russian Jew, was a gifted magazine editor and aspiring artist. As part of the progressive artistic Russian émigré community living in Paris in the 1930s, the two were destined to meet. They began a passionate affair, and the year after Paris was occupied in World War II they fled to New York with Tatiana's young daughter, Francine. There they determinedly rose to the top of high society, holding court to a Who's Who list of the midcentury's intellectuals and entertainers. Flamboyant and outrageous, bold and brilliant, they were irresistible to friends like Marlene Dietrich, Salvador Dalí, and the publishing tycoon Condé Nast. But to those who knew them well they were also highly neurotic, narcissistic, and glacially self-promoting, prone to cut out of their lives, with surgical precision, close friends who were no longer of use to them. Tatiana became an icon of New York fashion, and the hats she designed for Saks Fifth Avenue were de rigueur for stylish women everywhere. Alexander Liberman, who devotedly raised Francine as his own child from the time she was nine, eventually came to preside over the entire Condé Nast empire. The glamorous life they shared was both creative and destructive and was marked by an exceptional bond forged out of their highly charged love and raging self-centeredness. Their obsessive adulation of success and elegance was elevated to a kind of worship, and the high drama that characterized their lives followed them to their deaths. Tatiana, increasingly consumed with nostalgia for a long-lost Russia, spent her last years addicted to painkillers. Shortly after her death, Alexander, then age eighty, shocked all who knew him by marrying her nurse. *Them: A Portrait of Parents* is a beautifully written homage to the extraordinary lives of two fascinating, irrepressible people who were larger than life emblems of a bygone age. Written with honesty and grace by the person who knew them best, this generational saga is a survivor's story. Tatiana and Alexander survived the Russian Revolution, the fall of France, and New York's factory of fame. Their daughter, Francine, survived them.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This memoir is the crème de la crème of memoirs. First of all, it is beautifully written, wildly generous in detail, intensely interesting and yet in the style of writing, it gives enough space for the reader to read quietly on, while being drawn into one fascinating scene after another. The parents are complex, egoistic, selfish, successful, all seen through the eyes of their daughter, the author. She doesn't miss a thing, not the carelessness of dropping her off to another family when they want their hedonistic lives to continue, not the apparent warmth of Alex Liberman, the stepfather whose position in Conde Nast is rising rapidly, and not his devious dealings after her Mother's death. I have never read a better memoir and I have read hundreds. I borrowed it from my library, and then bought my own copy to have it on hand and never let it go. I relished it, loved it, admired it. This is the memoir you have to have.

I saw the author at Barnes & Noble earlier this year, and I admit I was skeptical about her book. Was this another self-involved memoir? Upon reading it, I was proven delightfully wrong! Her parents' story is so beautifully told, in sentences so artfully crafted as to create an esthetic experience of the highest level. You feel she has carefully adjusted every nuance, every word, and placed each sentence for maximum effect. In fact, I wonder if her gift for exquisite language is not akin to her mother's for the perfect placement of decoration on her hat designs. There is a similar obsession with the telling detail, a similar esthetic sensibility. I loved this story, it moved slowly but it was ultimately so satisfying. There are really several, four or five, stories -- the colorful Russian relatives, the family's escape from France and early years in New York, the author's upbringing as a

neglected child of privilege, the later years of Tatiana's decline and Alex's marriage to a Philippine nurse (read: interloper) and his alienation from Francine and her children. There is so much sheer story telling skill here, told with artistic virtuosity. Francine du Plessix Gray has entirely won me over, and I thoroughly appreciate her as a writer and as a woman of depth and generosity. Most of all, this memoir is indeed one "of parents", not of herself, and that she keeps herself fairly in the background is one of the foremost accomplishments of this luminous memoir.

I had read a review of *Them: A Memoir of Parents*. I wanted to read Francine du Plessix Gray. *Them* seemed to be the right place to start. It was the right place. It's a history of Russians who immigrated to France. It's a history of WW II in France. It's a history of Vogue. I loved the tales of fashion, art, & her expression of emotion. Francine du Plessix Gray's story of family dysfunction is sensitive & stark. I really recommend it for the story & as a guide to psychological survival. The author seems to be one of the most lovely people in the world.

A bit self serving

This is a book of many parts. A daughter's memoir of extraordinary parents it is, which was what I expected. And indeed that is the organizing thread. But it also offers delicious insights into the Conde Nast publishing empire. It's about fleeing France in 1940 - about fleeing the Russian revolution in 1920 - about the emigre experience - about arrogance, pride, generosity, selfishness and monumental ego. It's about Paris between the wars and America during and after WWII. A story beautifully written, lovingly told - and I honestly couldn't put it down.

As a fan of biographies, particularly the insightful kind about subjects who are interesting yet slightly obscured by time and not already the subjects of countless books and articles (such as presidents, Lady Diana, Jackie O etc.), I enjoyed this book. As others have stated Francine Du Plessix Gray manages to accurately portray her mother, father, and stepfather as human people with faults, foibles and quirks, yet very interesting people who clearly loved her and passed along the necessary talent and backbone for her to become an esteemed writer. Against the fascinating tales of escape from one war after another in 20th century Europe, followed by the struggle to succeed socially and economically after managing to escape to 1940's and 50's New York City, the writer weaves a story of her own repeated attempts to make emotional contact and gain support from her mother Tatiana and stepfather Alex (her beloved pilot father having died heroically attempting to join

the French resistance). Unlike some of the other reviewers, I do not believe that Tatiana and Alex come off like self-obsessed monsters, at least not until they reach their old age when health problems and perhaps mental instabilities begin to plague them. Rather, they seem to be, at heart, good people whose own upbringing and emotional growth were traumatized and stunted by their own dysfunctional parents and the political upheavals and wars that forced them to live a somewhat nomadic existence, much of it distant physically or emotionally from their own parents. They developed their own coping mechanisms, dealing with upset and conflict through distance, control, and in Tatiana's case, by becoming a largely functional (until the end of her life) drug addict and alcoholic. One must remember in reading this book that the understanding of addiction in Tatiana's time was not the same as it is today and "rehab" as we know it did not exist. There were no Betty Ford clinics and indeed, many people depended on "mother's little helpers" and didn't even realize it was a problem as they were prescribed. My one criticism is that the beginning sections of the book, which focus extensively on Tatiana and Alex's ancestral background, tend to be disjointed and hard to "get into". The author also tends to skip around in time, coming back unexpectedly (and somewhat annoyingly) to a long section on her grandfather's gambling exploits after the reader believes she has moved on to Tatiana and Alex and dispensed with the topic of their parents. However, the book moves along more linearly and smoothly after the family finally arrives in New York and begin their career climbing. One senses that the parents are motivated partly by ambition, but also by a keen sense of survival of the fittest, a fear that any failure to be ruthless might result in the entire family being thrust into the bleak working-class climate of suburban factory life, where Tatiana's own father has already ended up. It is a bit unsettling at book's end to see the author in her sixties still striving to get some type of paternal love from her stepfather, who became even more distant after Tatiana's death, and threw most of his remaining energies into a relationship with his nurse. The author of all people should have realized that her mother, though perhaps the love of Alex's life, was also a difficult and demanding woman, and Alex perhaps is not to be faulted for wanting a more comfortable relationship with a younger woman willing to dedicate her own life to fussing over him for a change. However, the author does seem to understand and make peace with the situation by the time Alex too has passed away, so her criticisms of her stepfather as not grieving enough over her mother's long-drawn-out decline and demise may be forgiven. Overall, an interesting and thought-provoking work about history and family dynamics.

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