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Virgins and Other Endangered Species: A Memoir

Dorothea Straus

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Dorothea Straus : Virgins and Other Endangered Species: A Memoir before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Virgins and Other Endangered Species: A Memoir:

Book by Straus, Dorothea

From Publishers WeeklyThis reminiscence by the wife of famed publisher Roger Straus takes as its inspiration the wonders of Proust's involuntary memory. Looking back over a long and, by this account, extremely stimulating and comfortable life, the author evokes an era in upper-class New York Jewish society that perhaps has all but passed, or at least has been transformed into something no longer of solace to her. In a tone that alternates between the proudly agnostic and the unabashedly romantic, Straus recalls family and family-circle members in fashionable settings--extended holidays at Saranac Lake; the family physician (a brother to Alfred Steiglitz), who had O'Keeffe paintings in his home; and evenings spent with writers in Paris cafes. Memoirs often face the problem of making personal memories vital and of interest to an unknown reader, and this one is no exception. But for a portrait of Jerzy Kosinski, which is indelibly etched ("that swarthy face, with its hawk-like nose, the crest of hair, luxuriant and glossy as a raven's plumage springing from a peak on the low, broad forehead, the heavy black eyebrows, the small pointed ears, that body, thin as a razor blade"), Straus offers little that is memorable if you weren't there. Copyright 1993 Reed

Business Information, Inc. From Kirkus's Wispy memoirs of growing up in the cultivated German-Jewish milieu of N.Y.C., which take on more heft as Straus--widow of the late publisher Robert Straus--recalls with verve writers like Lillian Hellman and Jerzy Kosinski. Born into a world of wet-nurses, French maids, and annual trips to Europe on great liners, Straus describes these and other now-antique phenomena. Her prose is as languid and baroque as the past she evokes recalling family and friends: her father, a celebrated man about town until his marriage; her mother, for whom music was never compensation enough for the tedium of running a large household; the family doctor, brother of photographer Alfred Stieglitz, on whose apartment wall pictures by Georgia O'Keeffe and others "became a type of family portraiture"; the innovative founder of the Dalton School, which Straus attended; and "old maids"--a now extinct species--who visited the family home, grateful "for the hospitality dispensed by a member of the privileged order of matrons." Straus's comments on her writer friends are pithy and to the point: There's Lillian Hellman--whom Straus last saw a few weeks before the playwright's death, ill but still "witty and wicked," who "would gladly have traded all her success in exchange for the pretty kitten features of a belle, a white pillared mansion, and an indigenous Southern lineage"; Jerzy Kosinski, whom Straus had invested with a "supernatural invincibility" but who probably found his memories of the Holocaust too heavy to endure; Margaret Yourcenar, who had "the beauty of perfect control"; and Bernard Malamud, the voice of the Jewish immigrants that "continues to resonate." Better only to nibble at the early recollections--and then feast on the literary reminiscences: They really make the book. -- Copyright 1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.