



The Making of Americans

Gertrude Stein , William H. Gass (Foreword by) , Steven Meyer (Introduction)

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In *The Making of Americans*, Gertrude Stein sets out to tell "a history of a family's progress," radically reworking the traditional family saga novel to encompass her vision of personality and psychological relationships. As the history progresses over three generations, Stein also meditates on her own writing, on the making of *The Making of Americans*, and on America.

The Making of Americans Details

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From Reader Review The Making of Americans for online ebook

Leo Robertson says

Yes, this book really struck a chord with me. And perhaps it did so because I don't see any of my Goodreads friends having read it yet, which is a problem I have connecting individually with a book when I see what others already thought about it- or even that they did think about it first. All I can then think of is someone else understanding it more, enjoying it more- or in the case that I'm enjoying it more, the imaginary reader tears the book apart with their superior intellect, and I'm an idiot for connecting with something so superficial and "done better by someone else". But this is no other reader's fault, this is simply my own inadequacy.

Anyway! Taking *The Tunnel* from the shelf and reading a page or two while making a cup of tea, I get it! It's not meant to be inaccessible- 'If you're not in the present, where the hell are you?' says Gass somewhere in there. This is Stein's argument and my argument too!

Re-reading my favourite section from *Infinite Jest* (which is the second section of the book about the guy waiting for the female weed dealer- yeah for me it's pretty much downhill from there) I get it! While Stein creates the encyclopaedic present, the idyllic present we should all be living in where every thing and every one is in tune, Wallace creates the horrific present through repetition- because that's the kind of guy he was. Proust creates an impressionistic present that it is a joy to live in (so I'm told- I'm not yet convinced, but Stein has armed me with new eyes- Proust would approve). This is how a book becomes an experience and not a story. Halfway through *In Search of Lost Time*, I get it! Does the title not mean trying to re-create that history, that past, that "lost time" and re-live it as if you were fully there, every detail and sense fully realised and experienced? Gaddis pointed this out in *The Recognitions*...

Is this maybe why everyone's enjoying Karl Ove so much?

Thanks so much Ms Stein!

The Making of Americans is the experience of (I hear this, I really do) a Joycean synecdoche- in his case the argument that in the city of Dublin was the infinite, in Stein's case the idea that one family can represent all families, that one person can represent the entirety of people. But this is not a book so much about insight or progression, it is an experience. You will not find the same wealth of literary tricks that *Ulysses* contains, or the same depth of character: this is about simplicity, concentration, understanding. So perhaps it was a mistake of Stein's to compare this to *Ulysses* or *In Search of Lost Time* in that there is no relation in how these books carry out their argument.

And I love the accessibility of the language: it is never a chore to read, as it is about developing a mindset and not presenting the reader with new words or sudden events or important snippets of dialogue, just about full concentration, which requires no distractions. Stein still wants to impress you in the immature way that most writers inevitably do, but she goes about it differently. She goes about it through demonstration of her own endurance and her test of yours.

Her choice of tense is very careful: she was clearly aware of the effects outlined in this article. Language and tense can affect your perception of time- in this case, as much as we might wish to stray, we are brought back always to the present. This is the experience of being in tune with the world, being in the present. I see I'm doing it too.

Now, I didn't read every page: I would only be trying to prove something if I did. Similar to how I managed to perform my fave Marina Abramovic's separating rice from sesame seeds for only 2 hours instead of the 2 days she recommends, I think 'Well, that would take some practice, and I have enough of a flavour of your message to carry with me in everyday life.' The same happens here: Skipping 200 pages I felt almost cheated in that I could barely recognise the difference between the pages! But that's the thing: it's about the experience of being purely in the present and in tune with all things, for which we use the present participle- not always as part of the present continuous tense, but we try not to stray- to convey this current thing that isn't a routine like the present simple, but what's happening right now: a connection to everyone, every thing, every family and every person that ever is or was, the set of all people that ever have been or will be:

Stein understands people, and has achieved and immortalised this, and that's beautiful, but it takes practice if you want to take part. As DFW put it: 'this is unimaginably hard to do'. But for a busy life, a flavour of it is good enough and highly recommended.

Not to say that it isn't quotable (imagine these a hundred pages apart and you get the idea), and for those with the time (??) the whole book begs to be read out loud. Maybe try it out with these!

'Men in their living have many things inside them, they have in them, each one of them has it in him, his own way of feeling himself important inside in him, they have in them all of them their own way of beginning, their own way ending, their own way of working, their own way of having loving inside them and loving come out from them, their own way of having anger inside them and letting their anger come out from inside them, their own way of eating, their own way of drinking, their own way of sleeping, their own way of doctoring. They have each one of them their own way of fighting, they have in them all of them their own way of having fear in them. They have all of them in them their own way of believing, their own way of being important inside them, their own way of showing to others around them the important feeling inside in them.'

'Every one then has in their living repeating, repeating of every kind of thing in them, repeating of the kind of impatient feeling they have in them, of the anxious feeling almost every one has more or less always in them.'

'To very many, to, sometimes any one would think, mostly every one some one's way of loving, some other one's way of keeping somethings and not other things, of throwing away some things and not other things, some one's way of buying some things and not buying other things is a foolish one. Mostly every one finds that things other ones are wanting are very foolish things for any one to be wanting, for that one to be wanting, to be buying, to be keeping. Each one has in him a very certain feeling of things any one having any sense in them should be wanting to have in living. It is very hard for mostly every one to understand why another one has that way of loving, that way of being angry in them that they have in them. Some try to understand the other one's way of doing these things but mostly every one finds it very puzzling. What can any one want with buying, keeping, wanting any such thing each one says of something someone has been wanting, buying, keeping. This is very common. Very many could forgive some one anything excepting the way that one has angry feeling or injured feeling in them. Some could let anything pass excepting the kind of way some one has of loving. That gives them an angry feeling, that is all there is about it to them. It is very common that some one could forgive anybody anything excepting the way they have of having angry or injured feeling in them. This is very very common. Some can never understand the queer ways in another one. Mr Hersland always was saying to his three children that the ways they had in them were only habits, there was no need they should have these ways in them. He had ways in him, they were him to him, the ways his children had in them were habits and it was not at all necessary that they should have any such habits in them. Many think that some one, some others could do the work they are doing in some other way from the way these are doing their working. As I am saying it is very, very common that some one could forgive some one anything excepting the way they have angry feeling, or injured feeling or loving feeling in them.'

'Perhaps no one ever will know the complete history of every one. This is a sad thing. Perhaps no one will ever have as a complete thing the history of any one. This is a very sad thing.'

I like this quote, because it's always been my theory of the biography or autobiography, and a reason I think a lot of people are sad is that they think they can control their own story, or even that their life is a story, a singular linear pathway of interesting things that happened to them that everyone would agree was their story. That there are so many biographies and autobiographies, we can forget to question the very idea of them, of how we could completely record what a person does, who they were, that there would be some single idea or record of this. Only the very lucky, I guess, get more than one biographer, and those biographers often spend their lives puzzled... If you ever think 'I don't wanna end up like her, like him' it's

as if your life is a progression from past to future towards a happy or sad ending, and not just a series of beings in the present. Or if I'm approached by a certain type of person at a party, I get a little song and dance of stuff they do and things that happened to them geared up to impress me, and who can blame anyone for doing so? Only what I think is interesting about me might not be what's interesting about me to them and vice versa: it's something we have to feel out of each other, so the song and dance rarely lasts more than an opening pitch- and if it does, it's received by this face -- 'So me and my cousin right' -- 'We got this motorbike right' -- or my song and dance receives the same face: 'So I read this book right' -- 'So I wrote this book right' -- 'So people suck right' --

'It is hard to know it of any one whether they are enjoying anything, whether they are feeling something, whether they are knowing they are giving pain to some one, whether they were planning that thing.'

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Compendiously Nipping Pastiche. Clearseeing.

I bought this two years ago as a summer read and I still haven't read it.

There is a labored ugliness to Stein. Anyone expecting a *Buddenbrooks* type novel should be forewarned. *Every one always is repeating the whole of them.* Combined with Stein's repetitious style of writing, it becomes extremely tedious. The language is intoxicating. Yawn! I like my art post-modern and marginally comprehensible.

It's revolutionary prose and exactly what good writing should be. Then it just became as tedious as my, *always repeating is all of living, everything in a being is always repeating, more and more listening to repeating gives to me completed understanding.* Isn't that the writerly voice of someone who just likes to hear themselves talk? Boring; tired; she was cruising on her own self importance on this one; well written, educating and entertaining tale; crap. I wonder if she was obsessive compulsive. Repeating is often irritating.

I am rereading as write poems inspired from various passages. Worth the effort; currently reading this book...

Don't blame me if you love this book; repetitive, nonsensical, tedious, at times appearing to be hundreds of pages too long. Truly remarkable; a functionless piece of art for shock value but have little use for her writing. "You're not mad at me are you?" That Stein was wealthy & spoiled & egomaniacal & insensitive to others around her? A number of crazy men and women are writing stuff; the most eminent of the idiots. I've found myself drunkenly quoting. And no matter how much effort she puts into precision, there is no end to what can be said about a family. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth the pain and suffering. It's like breathing.

It's hypnotic, folding over itself and winding through people and thoughts and the lives they were leading. Anyway, whew, I haven't tried to read her in years and years; if you are okay skipping head; summarized as great writing by a brilliant game-changer. I was so hypnotized by its repetitions that I actually began to feel as if I was living. I just got bored. Every word spanked me; that's a summer job. Repeating can be irritating.

As I was saying, it is finished. That Stein was a relentlessly arrogant person. Adjectives don't really apply in this universe. It could be I don't know my ass from a hole in my head. As I was saying, he repeated them. Over & over; dry and repetitive sentences seem vapid, useless, and self-indulgent in the worst sense. Repetition, of course, is the key aesthetic device. Stein makes it redundantly stupid. Whatever. If you thought *Ulysses* was difficult to read don't try this; that includes the complete works of Plato. Something continuously

"in the making..."

Stein's truly mind-bogglingly tediously self-indulgent & largely contentless *The Making of Americans* thought poetys could learn something from it.. Perhaps the repetitions of a person can be used to define what's most common in that person. Big deal. So she likes the repeating, so she repeats, & repeats. All individuals essentially repeat others. What a bore.

.....the same five thoughts over and over and over and over.

It's repetetive Gertrude Stein to the extreme.

bad

unreadable

Kent says

For Stein, trying to describe the history of any one family is incredibly complicated. And no matter how much effort she puts into precision, there is no end to what can be said about a family, or even about a person. Some of my favorite gestures in the book involve her promises to say something about that person later, or to write a book someday about that part of the family. I would say reading this book is like getting beneath this incredibly heavy textual comforter and feeling smothered. But, oh, how I would love to be smothered by Gertrude Stein!

Mat says

I don't believe I have ever felt such a simultaneous mix of both love and hate for any book, ever.

Let's start with a short quiz based on what others have often said about this book.

I will try to answer and respond to each of these claims of excessive praise or vilification.

Is this book unusual? Yes, highly.

Is this book repetitious? You can say that again.

Tedious? Unfortunately yes (mostly)

Was this book revolutionary? For its time, undoubtedly it was.

Was this book enjoyable to read? Both yes and no.

Is this book long? HELL YES!

Would you recommend to the average person? No.

Would you recommend it to someone who is looking to read a book which does not easily fall into one genre? Yes.

Would you recommend this book to someone who is looking to read something out of the ordinary? Yes, actually, perhaps.

Would you recommend this book to someone who is busy? No.

Would you recommend the abridged version of the full version? Most definitely the abridged version.

Did reading the full version sometimes test your sanity? Oh yeah.

Are there some sentences or passages of beauty or great insight? Insight yes. Beauty - hard to say.

So here we have it. A book which is very hard to review, partly because it caused me such mixed feelings and partly because there is absolutely no book out there I can compare it against.

Let's look at the positives first, before we decide whether to send Stein's work to the gallows or not.

THE POSITIVES

This book does have some great moments. In particular, there are some great maxims and observations on life. Here are some examples - "a romantic temperament, a feeling of themselves as being guided by a destiny always from the beginning and unchanging." (p. 359)

In some ways, Stein explores the psyche of characters more than any author ever has, even Dostoevsky. She does this through observing one type of person, or one type of personality and then she begins her permutations. Her permutations, which make up most of this book, are slight variations to one long string of words or ideas but they also reflect the infinite possibilities in the human spirit and mind. As Stein herself may have once said, this is sometimes interesting to some. This is sometimes interesting to many. This is sometimes interesting to many. Only a few may find this interesting. Yet, there may be some who may find it more interesting than others. You get my drift? This is how she writes for most of the book. Sometimes, when she is talking about something or someone interesting, I liked it. It read almost like a mantra. At other times, it was unbearably dull and daft. I actually found myself wondering throughout the book - did she have OCD or something?

She does explore characters deeply though and her observations of humans are sometimes extraordinary. One example is this - "she was the kind of women that have to own the ones they need for loving."

She is honest and to some degree self-conscious of what she is doing and what criticism will be levelled at her - "loving repeating is one way of being" (it is also something Stein herself must be very much into). At times she waxes slightly poetic - "listening to repeating, knowing being in every one who ever was or is or will be living slowly came to be in me a louder and louder pounding." (p. 302) In terms of the repetition, she did make me have a rethink about our traditional received perceptions of repetition in western culture and discourse. For example, in Japan, repetition is sometimes viewed poorly but sometimes perfectly acceptable. In Japan, when people speak casually to each other or when they are writing poetry, subtly and ambiguity and generally writing less is given higher literary aesthetic value. However, when it comes to speeches and writing certain types of essays, and even corporate documents (from my experience working in Japan), repetition is quite common, if not encouraged. This book made me think "can there be some value or, dare I even say it, 'beauty' in repetition?" Gertrude certainly seems to think so. The Japanese also think so, in certain contexts. But I'm still unsure.

Finally, there was the occasional sentence, here and there, which really stood out, written with a kind of poise and elegance and calculation which reminded me of some of the best moments in Proust. Here is one of my favourite examples - "she was an eager, impetuous, sensitive creature, full of ideal enthusiasms in her being, with moments of clear purpose and vigorous thinking but for the most part was excitably prejudiced and inconsequent in sensitive enthusiasm and given to accepting and giving and living sensations and impressions under the conviction that she had them as carefully thought out theories and principles that were complete from reasoning." (p. 429) Phew! If that's not a run-on sentence, then I'll eat my kimono....

Now I hand it over to the prosecution.

THE NEGATIVES

This book is more often than not tedious. While one may derive some beauty from the mantra-like endless repetitions of an unbelievably large number of permutations of one single idea, or one single sentence, this

gets highly tedious and annoying, very very quickly. A lot of it could have been cut out and in fact was in the abridged version, I'm sure. Oh man, I feel sorry for whoever the editor was for this book. I can just imagine the fights he had with Gertrude. Or not, perhaps he loved and believed in her that much, to let her pull off one of the most arrogant works of literature of all time.

Yes, that brings me to my second point. This is an extremely arrogant work. Man, I thought Bukowski was arrogant when he said he was the second best writer in the world after Celine but Stein takes the cake for sure. Her own belief in her own writing must have been stupendous. I have heard some interesting stories about where she came with some of her ideas on prose. For example, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, I think she talks about watching Picasso and Juan Gris paint and she becomes fascinated with their technique, with how they go back over certain parts of the painting to reinforce certain colours, or motifs or ideas. From this, Stein may have gotten the idea of repetition as a form of new instrument to highlight or bring closer attention to certain words or ideas.

The writing is also fairly 'clunky' and too mathematical in parts. There were far too many parts like this - "He was one living in being living..." which makes me feel either a) Gertrude had a tin ear and was never a poet or b) Gertrude was trying to break away from conventional prose and forge ahead with something completely new and ground-breaking and which would ultimately alienate her from a certain percentage of her (already small) fan base.

Finally, it goes without saying but 925 pages of a highly repetitious story of essentially two families (The Herslands and the Dehnings) could easily have been reduced to half that or even a quarter of that. However, if this had been done, it would not have been what Gertrude was trying to achieve. I do not know what she was trying to achieve but it did cross my mind that this was some type of long imagist manifesto and here she tried to stick a stake in the ground and say 'look, it's time we try something different with the English language.' Perhaps, Brion Gysin (who admired Stein and was on close terms with Stein's partner, Alice B. Toklas) put it the best way: "writing is 50 years behind painting." Should we applaud Stein for being one of the early 20th Century literature pioneers who tried to bridge this gap between literature and the other fine arts or should we condemn her for being an unbelievably arrogant and tedious writer with little flare for poetry or more elegant, conventional writing?

The answer is simply this: we should do both. Hence the rating of 3 stars. This book does not quite deserve the level of hatred and vilification that has been flung at it but neither should we start throwing roses at it and holding it the sky like a dye-in-the-wool Communist would hold Mao's 'red book' manifesto. Ultimately, I'll leave it up to you whether you should read this book or not. My advice is that if you are busy, even slightly busy, read the abridge version. You will keep your sanity and not feel as exhausted as I feel right now. If, however, you do have some masochistic bones in your body like me, then be my guest! Thanks to Rikkyo University Library for loaning me a copy of the full version!

Sunny says

Commendable effort in what is clearly an incredible experimental style of writing. if you thought ulysses was difficult to read dont try this!!! its about a few families set in the states and goes into detail about their characters. When i say detail i mean DETAIL. it explored relationships and the way one person thinks about any other. its impossible to be able to summarize this book. Easily the hardest book i have ever read and that includes the complete works of Plato. Maybe i missed the point in the 900+ pages or so of this mountain of a book but i really didnt see what all the hype was about.

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

As I was Saying, "The Making of Americans", y'know?

- tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE

review of the Dalkey Archive's 925+pp edition of Gertrude Stein's
"The Making of Americans"

- read from March 14, 2009 to May 22, 2009 (70 days)

THIS IS THE CAPSULE REVIEW. FOR THE FULL REVIEW SEE THE "tENTATIVELY, a
cONVENIENCE's writing" accessible thru my GoodReads profile @:

<http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/...>

or by going directly to: <http://www.goodreads.com/story/show/4...>

I finished it. The entire thing. As I was saying, it is finished. As I was saying I read all of Gertrude Stein's truly mind-bogglingly tediously self-indulgent & largely contentless "The Making of Americans". As I was saying, all 925 pages of it + the 29 pages of the Foreword & the Introduction. I AM THE ONLY PERSON IN THE WORLD TO EVER DO THIS. I don't believe the author of the Foreword, William H. Gass, has read all of it. As I was saying, I don't believe the author of the Introduction, Steven Meyer, has done this thing. As I was saying, I don't think the editor(s) of the Dalkey Archive have done this thing. As I was saying, I don't believe it. Maybe Alice B. Toklas did it, maybe. It is claimed that Alice B. Toklas typed all this for Stein.

Wch isn't to say that Gass's Foreword isn't excellent, wch isn't to say that Meyer's Introduction isn't even more excellent. As I was saying, both are excellent. Nonetheless, Meyer claims that "the author-narrator who, despite being unnamed, is perhaps Stein's most significant creation" [p xxvi:]. Furthermore, "The narrator of "The Making of Americans" is as much a creation of Stein's as is Melanctha" & "Readers are likely to forget this, however, and to attribute "characteristics" belonging to Stein to the narrator" [p xxvii:]. As I was saying, Meyer's claim is that a narrator exists who isn't Stein. While I'm sure Meyer has great scholarly knowledge to back this up I'm not convinced. To me, Stein is clearly the narrator & no effort is made whatsoever to create any presence contrary to this.

Stein's writing reminds me of 3 main things:

1. A friend I had who began almost every conversation w/ "You're not mad at me are you?". He had a problem. His problem was that he had about 10 phrases that he repeated. Over & over. As I was saying, he repeated them. Over & over. He repeated his sentences over & over. One wasn't mad at him the 1st time he sd "You're not mad at me are you?". One was probably not made at him the 2nd & 3rd times that he sd "You're not mad at me are you?". But as he repeated it over & over one got increasingly mad. "I told you that I wasn't fucking mad at you but now I'm getting pretty fucking sick of you asking me "You're not mad at me are you?" so will you please shut the fuck up?!" "You're not mad at me are you?"
2. Speech Crutches
3. Charles Berlitz's bk "The Bermuda Triangle". Why? B/c in this latter Berlitz has a few chapters worth of material wch he somehow manages to stretch into an entire bk by just rephrasing the same old sensationalist (but somehow simultaneously tepid) crap over & over. Just like Stein. "The Making of Americans" is 925pp. If one were to synopsise its content it wd surely be less than 100pp, maybe less than 50.

SO, let's give Stein the benefit of the doubt, let's say that the bk's content is NOT in its 'content' but in the telling of its content. What did I get from this telling? That Stein was a relentlessly arrogant person - assured that her blithering was somehow worth it. I don't agree. The Dalkey Archive shd be ashamed of killing off however many trees were sacrificed for the printing of this. As I was saying.

P 198: "Repeating then is always coming out of every one, almost always in the repeating in every one and coming out of them there is a little changing. All the repeating in each one makes a history of each one always coming out of them. There is always repeating in every one but such repeating has almost always in it a little changing, the whole repeating then that is always coming the whole repeating that comes out of them every one who has living in them and coming out from each one is a whole history of each one."

That cd be called the claim that justifies the whole 'structure' of the bk. Although I've only presented one small paragraph here - DON'T GET THE IMPRESSION THAT SHE EXACTLY MOVES ON FROM THIS & 'DEVELOPS' IT. I claim that she doesn't. She makes a few shallow statements & then permutes them. They never become less shallow. Perhaps the repetitions of a person can be used to define what's most common in that person. Big deal. A person has routines & habits wch, somewhat, make who they are.. But, "coming out from each one is a whole history of each one"? Nah.. I don't think so. Everything is infinitely complicated, Stein makes it redundantly stupid. For 925 pages.

Now every time I'll quote Stein here & every time Gass does & every time Meyer does the quote is fairly short & out-of-context. It's interesting by virtue of its 'exoticness', its unusual wording in contrast to Gass' & Meyer's & my writing styles. But, for me, that 'exoticness' wore off quickly. Like almost immediately. Then it just became as tedious as my friend's "You're not mad at me are you?". What do I learn from it? That my friend had an abusive childhood that left him severely neurotic & paranoid? That Stein was wealthy & spoiled & egomaniacal & insensitive to others around her?

[...]

Whatever. If you're expecting some magnum opus of detailed classification of human psychological types, FORGET IT. Stein's always beginning & getting nowhere. We 'learn' that there are, according to Stein "independent dependent" & "dependent independent" types & the development that these categories get cd be reduced to a few sentences - but, in "The Making of Americans" it goes on & on for hundreds of pages. There's "resisting", there's "attacking". That's about it.

As I was saying, WHATEVER. So she likes the repeating, so she repeats, & repeats. It reminds me of when I used to spend Thanksgiving at my mom's house. The same guests wd be there, the food was great, the conversation abysmal. Every yr I thought of just recording it & playing it back the next yr. Why? B/c i wanted to demonstrate that IT NEVER CHANGED. As such, no-one, except myself, every sd ANYTHING that wasn't just a formula, a fake form of conversation that just involved repeating whatever was 'appropriate' to their Personality Type. The MISSIONARY (yes there was one) spouted her missionary dogma, my mom was neurotic, etc.. I stopped attending.

[...]

I keep alluding to Stein as a spoiled rich one whose lifestyle wd've never enabled her to write this magnum poopus if she hadn't been taken care of her whole life, if she'd had to actually do something useful for other people for a living. & on page 717 we get to one support for this argument: "I was paying that one for teaching me that thing, the thing I was needing just then. Once I was saying to this one I will not be paying you to-day, I will pay you in three weeks, you will wait till then, I said to this one. This one said yes I will wait till then, but I am now asking you to tell me what you are meaning when you are saying to me and to yourself then that you have not money to pay me to-day for this thing. Do you mean that you cannot get the money to pay me to-day, is that what you are meaning, that you cannot get it to-day if you need it to day is

that your meaning. I said no that is not my meaning, I mean that I have not the money to-day and that I will have it in three weeks that is what I am meaning by what I am saying. You mean you will not get it to-day because you are feeling you are not really needing to have it to-day that is your meaning, said that one. No I said that is not the way to understand this thing, I have not got the money to-day and I will have in three weeks from to-day, my brother sends me the money every month that is what I mean by what I am saying. That is what my meaning is said that one, you are needing the money to-day to your feeling, I am needing the money today to-day we will say to my feeling but you do not need the money to-day to your feeling, that is what you are meaning, money is a thing like working you are giving it when you are feeling that you are needing the money to be giving it, I am giving work because I am needing money to be receiving it, said this one. I had a confused feeling then. Money was something I was owning yes, but not owning because it was like being in myself that I needed to be living, having money was as natural to me then as being in living and I could not be spending in irregularly, I must spend it as an income, I had it yes but not give except when regularly I had some." ETC!

In other words, Stein hires someone to do something, they do it, but then Stein postpones paying them b/c she wants the money for herself! If the person hired had broken Stein's arms it wd've been fine w/ me but that person wd've gone to jail & Stein wd've been legally the victim. Too bad Stein didn't live in Mexico during the revolution. NOW, here's the beginning of a section of her wikipedia entry:

"Political views

Gertrude was politically ambiguous, but clear on at least two points: she disapproved of unemployment when she had trouble getting servants (Hobhouse, 1975, p.209), and she had "a general dislike of father figures". (Ibid.)

As for the unemployed she said,

" 'It is curious very curious ... that when there is a great deal of unemployment and misery you can never find anybody to work for you.' 'But that is natural enough ... because if everybody is unemployed everybody loses the habit of work, and work like revolutions is a habit it just naturally is.' "

(Ibid., with citations to Gertrude Stein's words in Everybody's Biography)."

Are you picking up what I'm putting down? Stein was rich, Stein didn't work for it, Stein had time to jerk off w/ this self-indulgent largely contentless writing all day long while Toklas did the work for her &, yet, Stein had contempt for the unemployed. A wise one? Hardly. "It is curious [...] that when there is a great deal of unemployment and misery you can never find anybody to work for you." Maybe you shd've tried paying them in a timely manner, asshole; maybe you shd've realized that you were a completely privileged & largely stupid autocratic creep & that these 'servants' probably didn't want to be around you b/c they cdn't stand being reminded so brutally of how unfair it all is. Maybe they knew they'd want to rip you to pieces & serve that fat cat body to their starving children. Maybe you wd've deserved it! Eat the Rich, Feed the Poor!

I remember seeing a movie about Stein in 1987 w/ my friends Laura & Martha. We were riding the bus (yes, the public transportation system) home & I sd something to the effect of "I think I wd've hated Gertrude Stein but I like the writing." & that's still sortof true. The writing still exerts a peripheral fascination w/ its oddness. & I might read something shorter by her. But I highly DON'T RECOMMEND "The Making of Americans" as I was saying.

Page 821: "David Hersland knew some who were living while he was being living. He was with some of them very often. Some were pleased to be with him very often. Some were pleased to be with him but they were not with him very often. Some were certain that anyone might be pleased to be with him quite often. Some were certain that not any one would be pleased to be with him very often. Some certainly were with him very often. Some were certainly very pleased to be with him very often. Some were with him very often,

some were not pleased to be with him very often. Some were with him quite often, some of such of them were very pleased to be with him. Some were with him quite often, some of such of them were not pleased to be with him. Some were very certain that some one would be very pleased to be with him very often. Sometimes some one was very pleased to be with him very often."

Isn't that the writerly voice of someone who just likes to hear themselves talk? Over & over? DAVID HERSLAND KNEW PEOPLE. SOME OF THEM LIKED HIM, SOME DIDN'T. It's that simple & it's completely uninteresting to me. It's at times like these when I long for Hemingway's sparseness.

A tiny excerpt from alot more of the same: "When he was not such a young one sometimes he was with one. Sometimes he was with six. Sometimes he was with more than six. Sometimes he was with two. Sometimes he was with three." DAVID HUNG AROUND PEOPLE IN VARYINGLY SIZED GROUPS.

Page 862: "He was being living every day. In a way he was needing to be certain he was being living every day he was being living. He was being living every day he was being living. He was being living every day until he was not being living which was at the end of the beginning of the middle of being living. He was being living every day." ETC. HE DIED WHEN HE WAS MIDDLE-AGED. This wd've been more interesting to me if the reader wd've discovered that, actually, David Hersland wasn't really alive, he was just a fictional character, but we were reading about him anyway - or that he was a ghost like in Flann O'Brien's great "The Third Policeman". But Stein didn't have the analysis of the wit for either of those - so, instead, we get "He was being living every day until he was not being living which was at the end of the beginning of the middle of being living." What a bore.

Chris says

I bought this because John Ashberry put it on the reading list for a poetry workshop. Why? Because he loved Stein's language, and thought poetys could learn something from it. At the end of the workshop, he admitted that he'd never made it all the way through it either.

Phillip Hays says

James Thurber said it best: "Anyone who reads at all diversely during these bizarre 1920s cannot escape the conclusion that a number of crazy men and women are writing stuff which remarkably passes for important composition among certain persons who should know better...[Gertrude Stein:] is the most eminent of the idiots."

Geoff says

Huh. Just got this email from the Bezosian overlords at GR:

"Hi Geoff,

We're reaching out because your review of The Making of Americans was recently brought to our attention. Since much of the review was copied from Nathan's review posted the year before, it has been removed from the site. A copy has been attached for your reference.

Reproducing content without the user's permission violates our Terms of Service. Please refrain from posting reviews like this in the future.

Sincerely,
The Goodreads Team"

What's up with that? Who's this Nathan? Certainly not the NR we know and love... Is something conspiratorial up here? Weird stuff, friends...

Paul says

I read a lengthy excerpt of this book and was so hypnotized by its repetitions that I actually began to feel as if I was living the narrative - a sensation which was very startling to experience, if a little trite to describe. Unfortunately, when I started the book from the beginning I just got bored.

Evan says

[On the right]: Dalkey Archive edition with foreword by Wm. Gass. A really beautiful-condition edition that came from an Amazon seller today. I had downloaded a copy but the book is too massive to comfortably read on a screen and my library had no copies on the shelves. So I got this for less than \$10. Very happy with this. It will take awhile to get through because Stein is not easy, but my comprehension of her is good now.

Ben says

This book is ostensibly a history of three generations of two wealthy families (and everyone they ever knew or knew them), but anyone expecting a *Buddenbrooks* type novel should be forewarned. Among other things, *The Making of Americans* is a philosophical and poetic meditation on identity, on what it means to be human living an everyday, mundane life.

The narrator utilizes an ever growing list of categories to be able to understand all kinds of men and women, to someday write a history of all types of men and women. These categories are mostly abstract, sometimes bordering on incomprehensibility. For example hundreds of pages are devoted to describing independent dependent/attacking vs. dependent independent/resisting being, the meaning of which can be intuitive at times but never adequately explained. Dozens of different kinds of being are explored in the 900+ pages. Adjectives don't really apply in this universe. Everything is recast into a state of being. For example, characters are not sweet or sad or angry, they have sweetness in them, are sad ones, or have angry feeling.

Repetition, or rather *repeating* – always there is a focus on the present tense – forms the basis of the narrator's knowledge. *Every one always is repeating the whole of them* . And again: *always repeating is all of living, everything in a being is always repeating, more and more listening to repeating gives to me completed understanding*.

Not only does one repeat oneself in all one's actions throughout life, all individuals essentially repeat others: *So it goes on always in living, every one is always remembering some one who is resembling to the one at*

whom they are then looking. So they go on repeating, every one is themselves inside them and every one is resembling to others. This focus on repetition calls into question the very concept of individuality so central to American mythology.

Repetition, of course, is the key aesthetic device. As other reviewers have mentioned, the book can sometimes be infuriatingly repetitive, nonsensical, tedious, at times appearing to be hundreds of pages too long (although by the same logic perhaps hundreds of pages too short). Despite the size, this book probably contains fewer unique words than most books a fraction of its size. Stein explains her radical method:

To be using a new word in my writing is to me a very difficult thing. Every word I am ever using in writing has for me very existing being. Using a word I have not yet been using in my writing is to me very difficult and a peculiar feeling. Sometimes I am using a new one, sometimes I feel new meanings in an old one, sometimes I like one I am very fond of that one one that has many meanings many ways of being used to make different meanings to every one. Sometimes I like it, almost always I like it when I am feeling many ways of using one word in writing. Sometimes I like it that different ways of emphasizing can make very different meanings in a phrase or sentence I have made and am rereading.

While this was a tough read, I was completely entranced for most of the book. It's like sitting through one extremely long Morton Feldman piece –limited sound palette, no real development to speak of, but with small changes, outbreaks of tremendous beauty. On a superficial level it sounds static, but when listening closely to the detail, everything sounds brand new. The book starts off concretely and slowly becomes more and more abstract until the end where the language is pure music.

Surely this book should sit alongside *Moby-Dick* as a classic of American literature.

Philip says

It's been so long since I had my big, big Gertrude Stein phase, but I loved this book tremendously. It's hypnotic, folding over itself and winding through people and thoughts and the lives they were leading.

Not for the casual reader, certainly, but enchanting.

Erik F. says

Many people say *Finnegans Wake* is unreadable, but at least Joyce's "dream language" contains real musicality and invention; *Americans* surely beats it in terms of infuriating unnavigability. 900 pages of dry and repetitive sentences seems vapid, useless, and self-indulgent in the worst sense, even when perceived as "literary Cubism." Maybe many years from now I'll give it more of a chance and it will "come alive" for me, but I doubt it.

Paolo says

As I re read this book, I'm realizing how slippery, if not non-existent altogether, the category 'post modern novel' truly is. That is, I'm not sure if any work of avant garde fiction that I've encountered post-Stein/WW2

period surpasses her monumental achievement in this novel. Truly remarkable.

Miriam says

Mellifluous, hypnotic.

I really don't know what to say about this. I have a few thoughts.

The repetitive nature of the writing draws attention to the circles people think themselves into--the statements they make about themselves and others, the observations they have and use to live by. And the small changes in these observations are very interesting--Stein shows in painstaking detail how people tell themselves stories about who they are and how those stories subtly change over time, sometimes even to become to opposite.

I don't buy the whole "dependent independent vs. independent dependent" dichotomy, with the attacking and resisting personality traits, if for no other reason than that her categories are so vague as to mean nothing--sometimes someone seems to be resisting, but it's really attacking and vice versa. While I think some of this could be a jab at people who want to arrive at a single classification system to encompass everyone (which therefore has to be vague enough and flexible enough to fit all types and types of types), she spends so much time on it that I'm not convinced it didn't have meaning for her.

The experience of reading this points out how little differences in words turn into big differences in meaning. Or the placement of a "not" can change the whole meaning of a sentence. She uses both nouns and verbs with "-ing" endings, and it takes some effort to parse it. Or her use of "the," "they," "then," "than," "there," etc, in short order. The language is often simple, but the meanings are multiple and complex.

One thing I noticed: she very easily describes the lives of "men and women" and acknowledges that just saying "men" doesn't accurately cover all human experience. One of the things that my students often tell me in our gender-neutral language discussions is that it's just "too hard" to say "men and women." It adds too many words. This is just laziness and convention, not really true. It's NOT harder to say both, it DOESN'T make the language clunky. It's worth doing to be more accurate and inclusive.

??????? ????? says

There was no past or present in this book, there was existence in this book, there were characters in it but there was nothing important inside it, there was nothing past or present or in the future that would be connected to it, it had existence enough to make of it a really existent thing inside itself, existence was strong in it in every moment of it, strong enough to make it be real inside itself. It is the nature of myself to become bored with repetition, this comes from the bottom nature of myself and sometimes from the natures in myself mixed up with the bottom natures inside myself, but this is no reason to be bored unless it is within my nature to bored with myself; there is something in this book that spans the existence and repetition of thought and feeling and people and it is something magic, I think.

Mary says

Whoah. This book is 1,000 pages of circular sentences, many of which were constructed in Gertrude Steins's head while sitting for a portrait by Picasso. If you are okay skipping head, the last page includes a remarkable passage on dying. There's also a taped recording of this section at many library under, "The Making of Americans."

Jonathan says

"I am all unhappy in this writing. I know very much of the meaning of the being in men and women. I know it and feel it and I am always learning more of it and now I am telling it and I am nervous and driving and unhappy in it. Sometimes I will be all happy in it." p348

This is not the novel I thought it was. At least, I chose to read it as other.

This is the voice of uncertainty, of isolation and confusion, of a desperate attempt to understand through categorisation. The narrator is caught between a desire to map out the "kinds" in people, to delineate and "tell" the arrangement of discrete pieces which comprise Being, and the recognition that this is impossible.

" Alas, I say then, alas, I will perhaps not ever really ever be knowing all the repeating coming out of each one....I am desolate because I am certainly not hearing all repeating."

There is a mania here. And a despair.

"It makes me a little unhappy that everything is a little funny. It makes me a little unhappy that many things are funny and peculiar and strange to me. It makes me a little unhappy that everything and everyone is sometime a little queer to me. It makes me a little unhappy that every one seems sometime almost a little crazy. It does make me a little unhappy that every one sometime is a queer one to me. It does make me sometime a little uncertain, it does sometimes make me very uncertain about everything and always then it is perplexing what is certain what is not certain, who is a queer one, what is a funny thing for some one to be wanting or not wanting or doing or not doing or thinking or not thinking or believing or not believing. "

She has always already failed in her self-appointed task.

At times I thought of "Not I" by Beckett. The voice here is certainly a speaking one. Hearing it in my head as I read made the process much more bearable.

"Always repeating is all of living, everything that is being is always repeating, more and more listening to repeating gives to me completed understanding. Each one then slowly comes to be a whole one to me, each one slowly comes to be a whole one in me, slowly it sounds louder and louder and louder inside me through my ears and eyes and feelings and the talking there is always in me, the repeating that is the whole of each one I come to know around, and each one of them then comes to be a whole one to me, comes to be a whole one in me. Loving repeating is one way of being. This is now a description of such being."

She is a finder of patterns, a watcher and a recorder. She is separate. She is alone. There is much anguish here, a fact which those who accuse her of arrogance or superiority simply fail to understand.

This is a text of madness. A text of genius, yes, but not one in full control of itself.

What does it mean for someone without a family to write so extensively about the familial? Remember Stein's mother died when she was 14, her father when she was 17. As a lesbian, of course, in 1900, she was

severely isolated from "ordinary" men and women. Her preoccupation with death, with "dead ones" at the end of the novel is surely no coincidence.

"Perhaps no one ever will know the complete history of every one. This is a sad thing. Perhaps no one will ever have as a complete thing the history of any one. This is a very sad thing....This is very discouraging thinking. I am very sad now in this feeling."

And we are always in the moment in the melancholy, all these present participles, passive verbs, and intransitives means that this Being is always a doing, an extension out into time. We are in the midst of a failing, we are listening to a failing and a breaking:

"Every one has experiencing in being one being living. I am saddening with not feeling each one being experiencing as each one is having that living. I am saddening with this thing. There are so many being in living and there are so many that I am knowing by seeing and hearing being in living and each one of these is experiencing in being living and I cannot be feeling what way each one is experiencing, I who am suffering and suffering because of this thing. I am in desolation and my eyes are large with needing weeping and I have a flush from feverish feeling and I am not knowing what way each one is experiencing in being living and about some I am knowing in a general way and I could be knowing in a more complete way if I could be living more with that one and I never will live more with every one, I certainly cannot ever live with each one in their being one being living, in my being one being living. I tell you I cannot bear it this thing that I cannot be realising experiencing in reach one being living, I say it again and again I cannot let myself be really resting in believing this thing, it is in me now as when I am realising being a dead one, a one being dying and I can do this thing and I do this thing and I am filled then with complete desolation and I am doing this thing again and again and I am now again and again certain that I will not ever be realising experiencing in each one of the very many men and very many women..."

This was the hardest book I have ever read.

And, to put it in context, this means she is competing with Finnegans Wake, Miss Macintosh, Being and Time and the complete works of William Gaddis and Joseph McElroy.

Its difficulty comes not from the language really, and certainly not the words (which are short and simple) but from the sheer SLOG of the whole thing. I was, at times, bored with it. This may well be my fault. It is a great work of art, for sure, and one I am very glad I read, but certainly not one I will be traveling through for a second time...That is fails is part of the point, as should be clear from the quotes above, but at times it is simply too much to take...

Regarding all the repetition (as this is probably the most commented upon factor), it is useful to note her own comments here:

From Stein's lecture On the Making of the Making of Americans:

"I then began again to think about the bottom nature in people, I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different..... When I was up against the difficulty of putting down the complete conception that I had of an individual, the complete rhythm of a personality

that I had gradually acquired by listening seeing feeling and experience, I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time. Now that may never have been a trouble to you but it was a terrible trouble to me. And a great deal of The Making of Americans was a struggle to do this thing, to make a whole present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out, but it was a whole there then within me and as such it had to be said"

From page 343 - an example of the difficulty and the beauty and the psychology/philosophy:

"The way I feel natures in men and women is this way then. To begin then with one general kind of them, this a resisting earthy slow kind of them, anything entering into them as a sensation must emerge again from through the slow resisting bottom of them to be an emotion in them. This is a kind of them. This bottom in them then in some can be solid, in some frozen, in some dried and cracked, in some muddy and engulfing, in some thicker, in some thinner, slimier, drier, very dry and not so dry and in some a stimulation entering into the surface that is them to make an emotion does not get into it, the mass then that is them, to be swallowed up in it to be emerging, in some it is swallowed up and never then is emerging. Now all these kinds of ways of being are existing and sometime there will be examples of all these ways of being, now all these ways of being have it in common that there is not in them a quick and poignant reaction, it must be an entering and then an emerging mostly taking some time in the doing, the quickest of these then are such of them where the mud is dry and almost wooden, where the mud has become dry and almost wooden, or metallic in them and it is a surface denting a stimulation gives to them or else there is a surface that is not dry and the rest is dry and it is only the surface of the whole mass that is that one of which there has been any penetrating, and in some in whom the whole mass of the being is taking part in the reaction in some of such of them habit, mind strongly acting can make it go quicker and quicker the deep sinking and emerging. This is then a kind of them, the resisting kind of them, and there are many kinds of that kind of them. This is a very sure way of grouping kinds in men and women. I know it and I see men and women by it. Mostly to any one new it means nothing. I will begin again then this explaining. "

There is also, as one would expect, some good gender politics in here too, and some excellent analysis of certain kinds of male-ness.

From page 87:

"A woman to content him could never be outside him, she could never be an ideal to him, she could never have in her a real power for him. With men, outside him, there was for him a need in him to fight with them. A woman could never be for him anything outside him, unless as one who could in a practical way be useful to him as his sister Martha had always been and now she had been useful to him and made a marriage for him, had found a wife for him who was pleasing to him, who had come out with him to Gossols to content him. Such a woman as his sister was for him, was like any other object in the world around him, a thing useful to him or not existing for him, like a chair in his house to sit in or the engine that drew the train in the direction in which he needed just then to be going. Such a woman as his sister Martha, as a woman could never be interesting to him, nor any other woman who remained outside him, either when she could be to

him an ideal for him or a power in any way over him, not that some women with power in them were not attractive to him, but with such a kind of woman, and he met them often in his living and they had power with him, such a woman always did it for him by entering into him by brilliant seductive managing and so she was a part of him, even though she was apart from him, and so she had power with him. Such a one until he would be an old man and the strength in him was weakening and the things he had in him did not make inside him a completely tight filling and so things outside him could a little more enter into him, until he would come to be an old man and the need in him would come to be more a senile feeling, an old man's need of something to complete him, such a one could never come to be a wife to him, could never be a woman to be his wife and content him. He needed such a woman as his sister Martha had found for him, a woman who was to him, inside him and appealing, whose power over him was never more than a joke to him, who sometimes when a sense for beauty stirred in him was a flower to him, whom he often could forget that she was existing, who never in any big way was resisting, and so she never needed fighting, was always to himself a part of him and inside in him, and so in every kind of way she was contenting to him. "

In summary, if the quotes above have interested you, I would certainly suggest giving it a try - it seems that either she clicks with a reader or she does not...But I certainly do not think her work should be ignored or casually dismissed.

Nils says

I understand why a great many readers dislike this book; nonetheless, I do not think their reactions to it could be even a scintilla more wrongheaded.

A few disjointed, inchoate thoughts:

This is one of the few books I have read to move beyond the "language as process" one might find in McElroy or the more extreme passages of Pynchon; it instead approximates something more along the lines of "language as being."

Will is an illusion to the extent that humans are a composite of cellular interactions molded by and entangled with genetics and environment. My "being" is not something I decide. My consciousness tells me I make decisions for myself, but the way my mind operates, the decisions within its realm of possibility / phase space / "body without organs" if we want to get Deleuzian, are predetermined by the "being inside of me" over which I ultimately have no control.

Of course Stein's sentences are maddening. The circularity abstracts characterization into universal truths. (It's also poetry, pure and simple...er, gorgeously complex, rather.)

Upon arriving in America, families see themselves divested of cultural particulars, increasingly with each successive generation. This deculturalization is often resisted, but in the end it will prevail: it is inexorable, inevitable.
