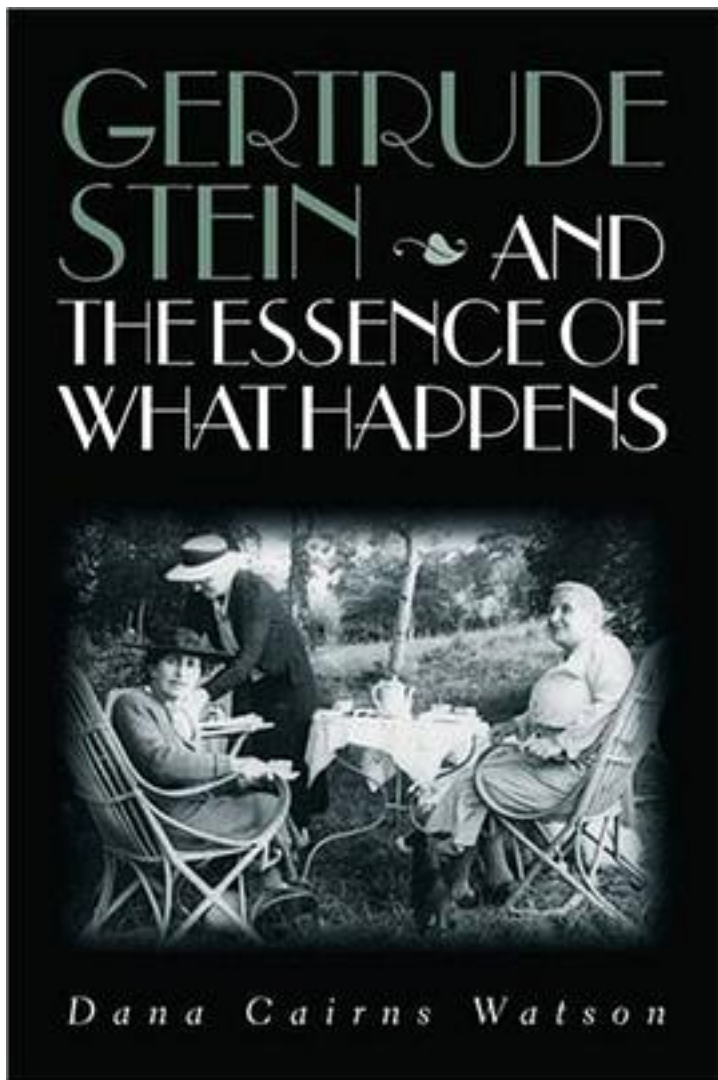


Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happens



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In this provocative study, Dana Cairns Watson traces Gertrude Stein's growing fascination with the cognitive and political ramifications of conversation and how that interest influenced her writing over the course of her career. No book in recent decades has illuminated so many of Stein's works so extensivelyafrom the early fiction of "The Making of Americans" to the poetry of "Tender Buttons" to her opera libretto "The Mother of Us All." Seeking to sustain Stein's lively, pleasant, populist spirit, Watson shows how the writer's playful entanglement of sight and soundaof silent reading and social speakingareveals the crucial ambiguity by which reading and conversation build communities of meaning, and thus form not only personal relationships but also our very selves and the larger political structures we inhabit. Stein reminds us that the residual properties of words and the implications behind the give-and-take of ordinary conversation offer alternatives to linear structures of social order, alternatives especially precious in times of political oppression. For example, her novels Mrs. Reynolds and Brewsie and Willie, both written in embattled Vichy France, contemplate the speech patterns of totalitarian leaders and the ways in which everyday discourse might capitulate toaor resistasuch verbal tyranny. Like recent theorists, Stein recognized the repressiveness of conventional orderacarried in language and thus in thought and social organizationabut as Cairns Watson persuasively shows, she also insisted that the free will of individuals can persist in language and enable change. In the play of literary aesthetics, Stein saw a liberating force.

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目录:

[Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happens_ 下载链接1](#)

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