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Arthur Gelb, Barbara Gelb
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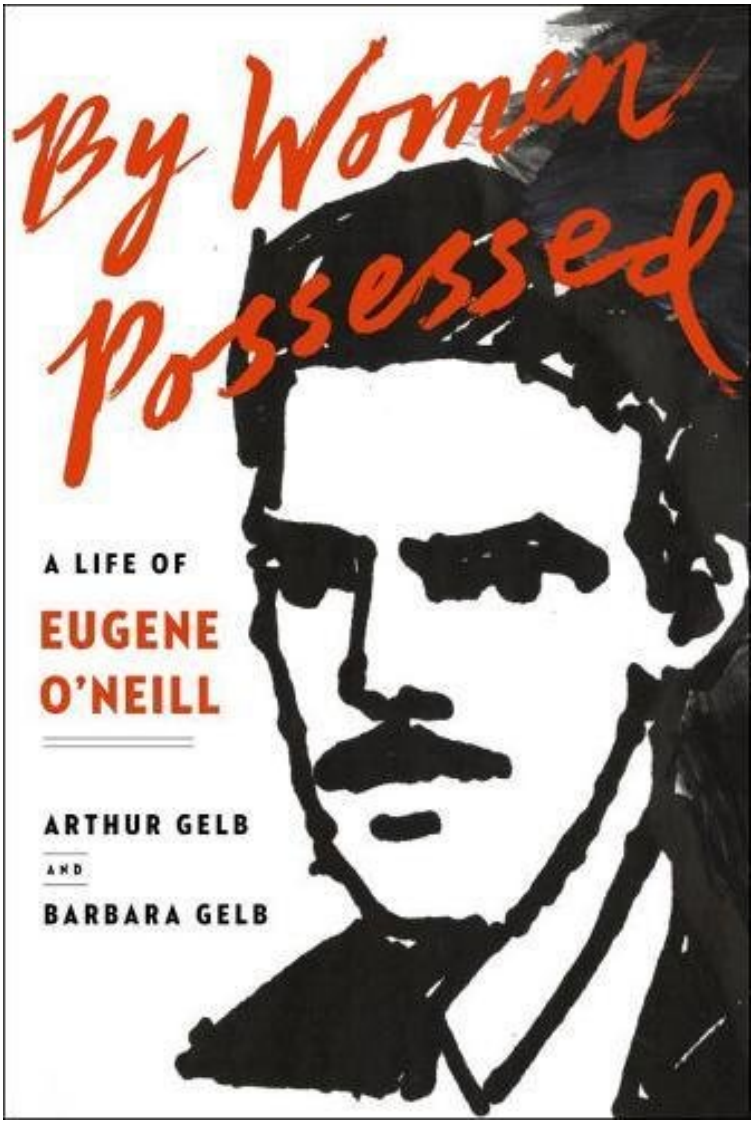

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Arthur Gelb, Barbara Gelb : By Women Possessed: A Life of Eugene O'Neill before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised By Women Possessed: A Life of Eugene O'Neill:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy carol aronowitzAwesome book.3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. I thoroughly enjoyed the bookBy John B. BracewellThis is a very insightful book. The authors have a past of expertise, but this book reveals information that they could not previously reveal. I thoroughly enjoyed the book. I am kind of a wonk for this ear in the United States, but it should be enjoyable for most readers.0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. the cultural news zombies stay up late for some brain flirtingBy sailing

up chit speakMy father read a play, Strange Interlude, when he was in college. When my grandmother was in college, Wagner's Ring cycle of music drama was attempting to orchestrate literary symbolic thinking at great length. Strange Interlude was a long play, and it was still in a bookshelf where I was a child or a student. When I was a university student, the movie Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was about how faculty parties can be followed by further getting acquainted as two couples drink and peel the label. My English class was assigned to go see the movie on our own time for lessons in movie star roles, emotional careers that get bogged down, and clink. By Women Possessed happens to mention a woman who had been living with someone else, but she was about to become the wife of poet e. e. cummings. From January 1928, when Strange Interlude was the long show in New York City, By Women Possessed examines a context of relationships that could change quickly after lengthy arguments. Eugene O'Neill was planning to run away from a wife and two kids when he had pop glory and a desire to be somewhere else.

Celebrated for their books on Eugene ONeill and enjoying access to a trove of previously sealed archival material, the Gelbs deliver their final volume on the stormy life and brilliant oeuvre of this Nobel Prizewinning American playwright. This is a tour through both a magical moment in American theater and the troubled life of a genius. Not a peep show or a celebrity gossip fest, this book is a brilliant investigation of the emotional knots that ensnared one of our most important playwrights. Handsome, charming when he wanted to be: ONeill was the flame women were drawn toall, that is, except his mother, who never let him forget he was unwanted. By Women Possessed follows ONeill through his great successes, the failures he was able to shrug off, and the long eclipse, a twelve-year period in which, despite the Nobel, nothing he wrote was produced. But ahead lay his greatest achievements: The Iceman Cometh and Long Days Journey into Night. Both were ahead of their time and both received lukewarm receptions. It wasnt until after his death that his widow, the keeper of the flame, began a fierce and successful campaign to restore his reputation. The result is that today, just over 125 years after his birth, ONeill is a towering presence in the theater, his workalways in performance here and abroadstill electrifying audiences. Perhaps of equal importance, he is the acknowledged father of modern American theater, the man who paved the way for the likes of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and a host of others. But, as Williams has said, at a cost: ONeill gave birth to the American theater and died for it.

Praise forBy Women PossessedA juicy and entertaining volume that brims with such offstage theatrics. TheNew York TimesNow, in By Women Possessed, we have by far their most comprehensive portrait of a man who was the ultimate example of a god with feet of clay the result of the accumulated work and reflections of over 60 years, the Gelbs have produced a monumental tomeIt stands as both a monument to ONeill and as a testament to their laborsthe industrious Gelbs demonstrate as profound a love for their subject as could be wished, and they regard detail unearthed as potential gold dust. Wall Street JournalIt is as difficult to put down this exhaustively reported reexamination of Americas first major playwright as it is to ignore fresh productions of his great plays. Washington PostThis extraordinary book is the final chapter in a fifty-year effort to help us to know and understand our greatest dramatist. Barbara Gelb and her late husband, Arthur, have given us the most important resource in illuminating the life and work of Eugene O'Neill.Brian DennehyThis is a compelling examination of one of the 20th centurys most passionate and troubled minds, and a prime example of expert, diligent, and wryly editorial biographical research.Publishers Weekly (starred review)A compellingly full-size portrait of a literary titan.BooklistThe Gelbs are renowned for their Eugene O'Neill biographies, and the new oneis packed with riveting details and rich portraits of O'Neill and the people in his life, particularly third wife Carlotta. It's also just a great read. The relationship of Eugene and Carlotta is shown as loving at times, shot through with angst and anger at others; oh, the drama!...By Women Possessed is a fine last legacy, a tribute to his and his wife's work and their fascination with and exploration of O'Neill.New London DayA fitting capstone to a lifetimes study of the strange and tormented man who revolutionized the American Theater. Irish Echo"Their illuminating third volume, bolstered by his third wife Carlotta Monterey's previously unreleased diaries, reevaluates the influence of his mother and his three wives. When his morphine-addicted mother Ella told him she wished he'd never been born, she betrayed O'Neill in a way he would never forgive. His love-hate for her shaped his work and his marriages to Kathleen Jenkins, fiction writer Agnes Boulton and Carlotta. The Gelbs describe how, after his death at 65 in 1953, Carlotta mounted productions of The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey into Night, solidifying his legendary status" BBCArthur and Barbara Gelb cornered the market on Eugene ONeill with their celebrated biographies ONeill and ONeill: Life with Monte Cristo. You wouldnt think thered be much more to say, but several years ago, they discovered unpublished diaries by ONeills third wife, Carlotta Monterey. The result is the fascinatingBy Women PossessedNot for the faint of heartBut neither, for the most part, are ONeills plays.New York Post"Besides drawing a precise and stirring portrait of the genre-defining writers tortured and inspired career, the Gelbs Arthur passed away in 2014 while completing this project to which the couple dedicated both of their nearly 70-year careers also present a fascinating account of the world of American theater in the first half of the 20th century. Harper's BazaarPraise for O'NeillOne is dragged into the very presence of a genius and made to feel his awful size. O'Neill was the great wrestler, fighting God to a standstill. The authors have brought out his failings as a writer and as

a person only to leave him larger than before. I for one will never forget the image of him the authors have made. O'Neill needed this book, we all did. The theater will always need it, for most of the time it is in the hands of triflers who will forever need the towering rebuke of his life and his work and his agony.Arthur Miller This is a wonderful book. It has the flow of fine fiction and the impact of reality. Its protagonist was a giant. He founded the American theater and his own story is as dramatic and as tragic as any of his plays. But this book is more than his life story. It reveals the making of an artist, the sources of his materials and insight into the mystery of his genius. The authors live in the theater; they know it and they care. They have sought out scores of people who knew O'Neill, and out of a monumental job of research, they have re-created the color of six decades. This book is a work of devotionand one of the very best books I have read about the American theater.Eliz Kazan Praise for O'Neill: Life With Monte Cristo [This book] is more than a biography; it's a truly magnificent, insightful and meticulously documented original work worthy of O'Neill's genius. Having thought I knew almost everything about O'Neill, I am truly wide-eyed at the discoveries that Arthur and Barbara Gelb have made.Jason Robards This is a great symphony of a book where Arthur and Barbara Gelb guide us to the lower depths of Eugene O'Neill's family. Here are many of the ingredients of a modern tragedyalcoholism, drug addiction, ethnic angst, spiritual despair and even success of a certain kind, all narrated and scrutinized with insight, eloquence and , above all, compassion. It doesn't matter that you know the fate of the O'Neill family: you still can't put the book down. There is only one place this book can be shelvedright next to the immortal plays of Eugene O'Neill. Like Richard Ellmann and James Joyce, the Gelbs and O'Neill are linked forever.Frank McCourtAbout the AuthorArthur Gelb and Barbara Gelb are the authors of ONeill (1962) and ONeill: Life with Monte Cristo (2000), each covering materials known at the time. By Women Possessed benefits from newly released archival material (diaries, letters) and a revisiting of material that was interdicted as long as the widow lived. It also benefits from the wisdom of age: The authors began their first ONeill book when he was thirty-two and she thirty. Life lived has a way of adding shading that youth cannot imagine. They were just completing this final book when Arthur, then ninety, died. Among her books, Barbara is also the author of So Short a Time, a biography of John Reed (Ten Days That Shook the World) and Louise BryantONeill's great flame, perhaps because she was the one who left him; and the one-woman play My Gene, based on Carlotta Montereys life and starring Colleen Dewhurst. Arthur Gelb served in many positions at The New York Times before assuming the post of managing editor. He is the author of several books, most recently, the acclaimed memoir City Room.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.1 Although it is only five o'clock on the winter-dark afternoon of January 30, 1928-three and a half hours earlier than the customary eight-thirty Broadway premiere-first-nighters are spilling from limousines and taxis in front of the new John Golden Theater. As they step onto the roped-off sidewalk, they are surrounded by a crush of celebrity-oglers who are being pressed back by a cadre of mounted police. The celebrities themselves blithely jostle their way to their seats, undaunted by the prospect of sitting through a performance that is double the length of a conventional play. They are here for the season's most trumpeted theatrical event, Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude. The author, globally heralded as the pioneer of American stage tragedy and the recipient (so far) of two Pulitzer Prizes, will not be present. Chronically nervous and wary of crowds, he usually sends his wife, Agnes Boulton, as his emissary on opening nights. Boulton, however, has her own good reasons for staying in Spithead, the Bermuda home where O'Neill, craving isolation, has settled near the sea that has called to him since childhood. Tonight O'Neill has designated as his emissary Carlotta Monterey, a former actress who is better known for her sultry beauty than for her talent. During the past year and a half, O'Neill has been twisting in the tempest of his on-and-off love affair with her. At thirty-nine, O'Neill is as handsome as Apollo, as haunted as Oedipus, and as conflicted as Hamlet. Although long a religious apostate, he was born and raised a Catholic, and his adultery torments him. "It's this and that, the this-that desire-more than desire, need!-that slow-poisons the soul with complicated contradictions," he lamented in a letter to his closest confidant, Kenneth Macgowan, the theater critic and author. "And do not mistake my nebulous cries for whinings. Beauty, either here or there, is worth whatever price one has to pay for it, here or there . . . Oh very much so!" Carlotta Monterey, who has recently ended an unhappy marriage, is O'Neill's age but, like Shakespeare's queen, age cannot wither her; a jazz-era Cleopatra, she glides down the aisle to her seat, warmly greeted by friends and stared at by strangers. She is escorted by James Speyer, a sixty-seven-year-old widower and powerful international banker and philanthropist. Carlotta's senior by twenty-seven years, Speyer is an elegant, sophisticated, undemanding man with whom she has had an intermittent love affair both before her marriage and following her divorce. Monterey, who affectionately calls Speyer "Papa," has led O'Neill to believe he is merely a fatherly friend. Speyer is so fond of her that he has long since secretly settled a sizeable annual income on her-with no strings attached. To O'Neill she attributes the money to a bequest from a childless aunt who raised her. Monterey's bearing is haughty, but her nose-in-the-air carriage stems from severe near-sightedness. Pointed and slightly overlong, her nose, together with a chiseled chin and a complexion both pearly and flawless, completes the veneer of aloof entitlement. Tonight she wears her hair-thick, lustrous, and black-drawn into a smooth coil at the nape of her long, slender neck; she is sometimes referred to in print as "The Swan." But it is her dark, deep-set eyes, feathered with long lashes, that are her most striking feature; "Shadow Eyes," O'Neill calls her, quoting Baudelaire. Her close friend, the actress Ilka Chase, describes her as "kind and funny"-even, on occasion, "ribald"-although Monterey herself insists she is "innately shy." Chase admires her

immaculate grooming and cites her predilection for couture suits and dresses. Her accessories, Chase notes, are "of the finest material, her shoes made to order of special leathers at great cost" and sometimes sewn with jewels. Monterey's recent divorce from her third husband, Ralph Barton, has been much gossiped about. He is a prestigious artist and a bon vivant-jaunty, openhanded-with unlimited entre; his caricatures appear prominently in The New Yorker and his renderings of Carlotta and his fellow Brahmins are also vied for by the editors of Vanity Fair, Life, Judge, and Harper's Bazaar, all of whom pay him exorbitant fees. He has been acclaimed for his witty illustrations for Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Anita Loos's best seller parodying the social and sexual excess of what is now the tail end of the Roaring Twenties. Barton adored Carlotta and she adored him. But she could not forgive his compulsive philandering. Opening-nighters who have been following the chitchat about Strange Interlude in the newspapers anticipate an uninhibited probing of Modern Womans psychic and sexual yearnings. Contemporary American novelists have explored this territory, but American playwrights have tended to sidestep any intense delving into the messy subject of sex. Not ONeill. Strange Interlude is O'Neill's nineteenth attempt in twelve years to soar beyond the limits of traditional theatrical creativity. He has confided to Carlotta, who has read the script, that the play is embedded in his own life: "Of course, there's almost everything in it that makes people mad with rapture or tortured beyond belief . . . This whole play is I, my experience, you might say." Carlotta has asked O'Neill if she has correctly recognized aspects of herself in Nina Leeds, the play's protagonist, and he has allowed that "there is a lot of you in the woman, I think . . . and yet, wholly unlike you." He hesitates to admit just how deeply he has blended her into the multifaceted Nina Leeds, but in truth his agonizing fixation on Carlotta was seldom out of his mind during the long months he labored over the play. As for O'Neill's own essence in Interlude, it is expressed in the character of the virile psychologist, Dr. Darrell, whose first name, significantly, is Edmund (the name O'Neill will later use to represent himself in his openly autobiographical Long Day's Journey Into Night). Darrell, like O'Neill, is "handsome and intelligent," his "dark eyes are analytical," and there is "a quality about him, provoking and disturbing to women, of intense passion." Illicitly in love with Nina, Darrell struggles against this passion. "Sometimes I almost hate her!" Darrell says in an aside, adding that if not for her, he'd have kept his "peace of mind"; he berates himself for being "no good for anything lately." And then O'Neill, surely thinking of his own early effort to evade Carlotta's conquest, causes Darrell to muse: "Got me where she wants me! . . . I'm caught . . . she touches my hand, her eyes get in mine, I lose my will." He vows to go away and "forget her in work!" But in the end, Darrell succumbs to Nina (foreshadowing O'Neill's own surrender to Carlotta). Nina Leeds is O'Neill's Everywoman. She is the emotional and psychological aggregate of all the tragic heroines of his previous plays. She embodies for O'Neill both the darkest and most seductive characteristics of her sex-qualities that O'Neill attributes not only to the cluster of women with whom he's had unhappy love affairs, but also to the unstable, withholding mother who had wished him unborn. The opening-night audience sits entranced by the plays convoluted and ever- more- lurid plot. It seems that Nina, the pampered, middle-class daughter of a widowed college professor, had sanctimoniously refused to sleep with her lover, Gordon Shaw, before he went off to war. Now, he has been killed in action, and Nina, crazed by guilt, hurls herself into a nursing career and sleeps with every wounded soldier who desires her. To save Nina from her self-destructive behavior, Dr. Darrell advises her to marry the dead Gordons best friend, Sam Evans, who worships her. Although she does not love Sam, she agrees, believing she will thereby atone for having allowed Gordon to die unfulfilled. Dutifully pregnant with Sam's child, Nina abruptly learns that (unknown to Sam) there is insanity in his family, and secretly undergoes an illegal abortion; unwilling to hurt Sam, she pretends she has had a miscarriage. Sam sinks into a deep depression, and Nina-intent on providing him with his longed-for child-persuades Darrell to impregnate her. A son is born, Nina presents him to her unsuspecting husband as his own, and Sam comes joyously back to life. Nina, meanwhile, has fallen in love with Darrell (who is equally smitten), and won't give him up. But Darrell finds it harder and harder to live with the guilt of betraying Sam and struggles to end his affair (as O'Neill is struggling to give up Carlotta). Time goes by. Lots of time. This, after all, is a five-hour, nine-act drama that unfolds over twenty-five years and has all the elements of a novel. Nina's affair with Darrell eventually cools; she loses the son she adores to a daughter-in-law she loathes; Sam's prosperous, happy life is cut short by a heart attack; and Nina allows herself to sink into a comfortable, asexual relationship with an old family friend, an elderly, timid mama's boy, who has always secretly loved her. At play's end, the widowed Nina longs for nothing more than to "rot away in peace." For its day, Strange Interlude was an audacious and triumphant challenge to the Broadway showplace. ONeills daringly raw scenes of sexual lust-not to mention his reference to the taboo topic of abortion-were years ahead of their time not only for the American stage, but also for much of contemporary American fiction. "Even the best of modern novels [are] padded with the unimportant and insignificant," and their authors are "mere timid recorders of life," O'Neill has complained to the critic Joseph Wood Krutch. Carlotta, herself at home in the theater, knows O'Neill scorns most of his fellow dramatists (in some of whose plays Carlotta has appeared) as scramblers after easy success; they wedge their characters into artificial situations and then melodramatically extricate them-all in the cause of sending their audiences home in a glow of happy endings. O'Neill himself has never stooped to crowd-pleasing; none of his previous successes had happy endings-not The Hairy Ape, The Emperor Jones, or Desire Under the Elms; nor the two for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, Beyond the Horizon and Anna Christie (although some of his critics, to O'Neill's dismay, misread the latter play's conclusion). In all his writing, O'Neill was

obsessed with man's battle against fate, a battle he inevitably loses. It is the bedrock of his creativity and he has never flinched from expressing it. "Most modern plays are concerned with the relation between man and man. But that does not interest me at all," he has declared. "I am interested only in the relation between man and God." In Strange Interlude, O'Neill has chosen to focus on the relationship between woman and God; Nina Leeds is every bit as God-forsaken and afflicted as any of O'Neill's earlier suffering male protagonists. The knowledgeable opening-night audience is quick to realize that Strange Interlude is ONeills most ambitious effort to date, offering a feast of insights into the psyches of his characters-particularly when they voice their sometimes startling inner thoughts in spoken asides. He makes no apology for borrowing this archaic device; he is just as ready to pinch Elizabethan technique, when he thinks it will work, as he is to appropriate stagecraft from the ancient Greeks. He is, however, quick to deny that he has been influenced by Freudian gospel, as some of his critics will assert (this being, after all, the dawn of psychoanalytical enlightenment). He has more than once insisted that every creative artist since the beginning of time is an instinctive psychologist and doesn't require Freud's assistance. As the curtain rises (shortly after five fifteen) on part one of Strange Interlude, Carlotta is in a flutter. She and ONeill have made plans to secretly slip away to Europe in ten days, and if the play is a hit-as she suspects it will be-his freshly garnered notoriety will make it all but impossible for them to maintain their privacy. As she strains to sense the audiences reaction, she doesnt know if shes more terrified or thrilled by what awaits her. Forewarned that the five-hour performance will break for a dinner intermission at a quarter to eight, many playgoers plan to return home to change into the black-tie attire that is de rigueur for a premiere (but gauche at five in the afternoon), before reclaiming their seats for the plays second half, at nine oclock. Others, more interested in nourishment than fashion, are already in formal attire, and scurry to nearby restaurants. The Golden Theater, somewhat isolated (on Fifty-eighth Street near Central Park) has fewer dining choices than the pulsing midtown theater district, but the nearby Park Central has tailored a "Dinner Interlude" between seven forty-five and nine for the Strange Interlude audience, and the Au Grande Vatel promises (in the Playbill), "You Will Be Repaid by Walking Three Blocks South on 7th Avenue for Your Intermission Dinner," which (including dessert and coffee) is available "from 75 cents to $1.75." It will be a shivery walk, though, with the temperature in the low twenties. Carlotta is among those who forego dinner. She is driven to her Upper East Side apartment where, before changing into an evening gown, she telephones a jittery O'Neill at the Wentworth Hotel on Forty-sixth Street near Broadway. The audience is savoring the play, she reports, and she pictures her lover's rare smile of pleasure, the light in his piercing dark brown eyes. His image is seldom out of her mind-his silky brown hair and mustache, the lean muscular body of the habitual swimmer. She thinks of the moments shared with him at the back of the dark, near-empty theater during rehearsals, watching his play evolve, her hand enclosed in his long-fingered grip. In looks, he is her perfect male counterpart; they relish posing together for portrait photographers, all of whom are sworn to withhold the photos until after their marriage. While she speaks to O'Neill on the phone, she imagines him pacing his two-room suite, tense about his newest work, wishing it were over, missing her, fighting his anxiety and guilt. O'Neill also gets a favorable report from Lawrence Langner, his producer and the principal founder of the Theater Guild. During intermission, Langner ducks into a nearby drugstore phone booth to give O'Neill "a blow-by-blow account" of how the play is being received. Unknown to Carlotta, O'Neill-in a characteristic gesture of nostalgia for his vagabond youth-has chosen to wait out the evening in his suite with Bill Clarke, a former circus daredevil known as "Volo the Volitant," who once turned loops in the air while riding his bicycle down a precipitous incline at Madison Square Garden. (O'Neill will later partly base the character of Ed Mosher, "one-time circus man" in The Iceman Cometh, on him.) O'Neill has invited Clarke to join him for dinner.