



A House in St John's Wood: In Search of My Parents

Matthew Spender

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A son's personal exploration of one of the most influential--and troubled--artistic couples of the twentieth century

Stephen Spender's life, with all its secrets, successes, and contradictions, is a vivid prism through which to view the twentieth century. He made friends with W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood while at Oxford, and together the three had wild adventures in Europe, where they became early critics of Hitler and the rise of fascism. Like his friends, Stephen was drawn to other men, yet he eventually married Natasha Litvin, an ambitious young concert pianist, and they started a family.

Matthew Spender grew up in postwar England as the child of two celebrated artists deeply immersed in the political and cultural life of their times. Taught how to use adjectives by Auden and raised among an influential elite, Matthew led what might have been a charmed existence were it not for the tensions within his own household. His father, always susceptible to the allure of young men, was unable either to stop himself for the sake of his family or to reveal his secret; and his mother's suffering led her on a strange introspective quest of her own. Drawing on a wide range of unpublished letters and diaries, secret documents, and youthful memories, *A House in St John's Wood* is Matthew's remarkably clear-eyed attempt to make sense of the many conflicting messages of his unconventional youth and a deeply felt portrait of his magnetic father and guarded mother.

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