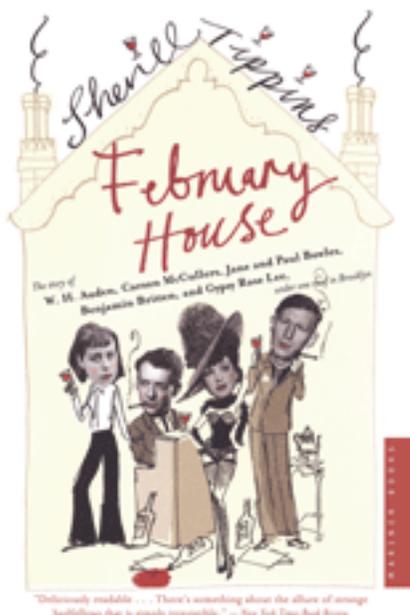


A Reader's Guide

February House

by Sherill Tippins

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [Questions for Discussion](#)
- [For Further Reading](#)



"A deliciously readable . . . story of young artists trying to become themselves." — *New York Times Book Review*

About the Book

Bombs were exploding in London. War stories filled the newspapers. World War II had begun in Europe, and nobody knew what would happen next. During this dark time, a group of young but already well-known poets, novelists, musicians, and other artists — plus one fabulous stripteaser — came together in a ramshackle house in Brooklyn, New York. There, in the months before America joined the fighting, they vowed to create their best work in whatever time remained.

February House: The Story of W. H. Auden, Carson McCullers, Jane and Paul Bowles, and Gypsy Rose Lee Under One Roof in Wartime America depicts this "perfect storm of creativity," writes the novelist Stacey D'Erasmus in *Newsday*, treating us "not only to a privileged, sensitive look at the personal lives of some of the most revered artists of the twentieth century," but also to "an insightful cutaway view of the architecture of the twentieth-century creative artistic sensibility itself . . . Somehow one wouldn't be surprised to hear that Henry James had returned from the dead just because the party was so good."

"Irresistible . . . The house itself has long since been demolished, but Sherill Tippins has rebuilt it with intelligence and charm." — *Washington Post*

"Tippins's research is prodigious and fun to go through, the personalities she depicts indelibly drawn." — *Los Angeles Times*

Chosen as a Best Book of the Year by the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

About the Author

Sherill Tippins moved to New York from Austin, Texas, at the age of twenty-two to pursue a career as a screenwriter and author. Ten years later, having settled with her husband and two children in Brooklyn Heights, a quiet neighborhood overlooking Manhattan at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge, she began volunteering for a neighborhood meal-delivery program to the elderly and infirm. It was from one of these neighbors that she first heard of the extraordinary experiment in communal living — involving a British poet, a southern novelist, one of the world's great opera composers, and a celebrated stripper — that had taken place sixty years earlier just a few blocks from her home. Her fascination with the house and its residents prompted her to begin collecting facts and anecdotes about their shared life in Brooklyn, and eventually to recreate their experience in *February House*.

Tippins is now at work on another untold story, of a century's worth of creative interaction and raucous living — stretching over the decades from Sarah Bernhardt to O. Henry, from Thomas Wolfe to Jackson Pollock, William Burroughs, Andy Warhol, Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, and beyond — set in New York's famous (and infamous) Victorian-era edifice the Chelsea Hotel.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *February House* for every reader.

1. George Davis wrote, "The house in Brooklyn is a symbol for me . . . it's a risk, it's a gamble with myself and others." Part of the gamble concerned the question of whether this group of young artists would create significant work during the months remaining before America's entry into the Second World War. Why did these artists consider such a goal important? What might have prevented them from succeeding?
2. Louis MacNeice observed that the residents of 7 Middagh Street were "ever so bohemian, raiding the icebox at midnight and eating the catfood by mistake." Was this eccentric, highly tolerant, and often chaotic environment a necessary part of the creative equation? What might the ideal conditions be for writing a novel or composing music — a routine, quiet life, as Gustave Flaubert suggested, or a life open to all of life's random elements and occurrences? Which kinds of conditions do you find best facilitate your own creative work?
3. Paul Bowles traced his wife Jane's increased alcohol consumption and, following Auden's example, her use of Benzedrine tablets to her stay at 7 Middagh. Years earlier, it was George Davis who introduced Auden to the stimulants in the first place. Do you see a pattern of drug and alcohol abuse in the house? What role did it play in setting the stage for the creative synergy that characterized the experiment? How would the house have been different without these substances? To what degree did they lead to the end of the communal living experiment?

4. Both W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten were criticized for absenting themselves from England in the early stages of World War II. In defense of his decision to stay in the United States, Auden wrote, "If I thought that I should be a competent soldier or air-warden I should come back to-morrow. As a writer and pedagogue the problem is different, for the intellectual warfare goes on always and everywhere, and no one has a right to say that his place or that is where all intellectuals ought to be." Do you agree with him? What should the artist's role be in wartime? Is it better for artists to create or to fight? Can an artist successfully do both?

5. During their time spent on Middagh Street, Erika and Klaus Mann were devoted to a polarizing political cause. What effect did they and their politics have on the residents? Can artists really have any effect on political events, and if so, in what way? Was Erika and Klaus's political activity different somehow because they were so intimately and personally connected to the horrors going on in Europe? How might the newly arrived European refugees have viewed the group at 7 Middagh?

6. Both George Davis and Carson McCullers had an intense desire to recreate the unique sense of literary community Carson had experienced at Bread Loaf. Why do you think they were so eager to have other creative people around them? Does the essential solitude of writing create a desire for a palpable connection with the outside world? Or do you think they were more motivated by their own personal dread of isolation?

7. Carson's youth and southern upbringing and Gypsy's burlesque background and lack of formal education made them both somewhat removed from the established literary culture of New York. To what degree could you describe the residents of 7 Middagh as outsiders looking for acceptance? Who falls into this category and who does not? What is the role of the outsider in creating art? In what ways did group living create a nurturing, accepting environment in the house? What role did each person play in the group dynamic that ultimately emerged? Could the group have worked without any one of the individuals?

8. George Davis wrote only one, albeit critically acclaimed, novel and then for the most part gave up his own work to encourage and help other creative thinkers. Why do you think he made this choice? How much value can be placed on his kind of cultural contributions? How important was Davis to the community at 7 Middagh? Would the artistic output have been the same without him?

9. Denis de Rougemont, author of *Love in the Western World*, wrote, "All that was new in America emanated from that house." Do you agree? What ideas coming out of 7 Middagh do you see as being remarkably new or modern? In what ways did the residents influence each other's work, either directly or by example?

10. Could an atmosphere like the one George Davis and company created at 7 Middagh exist today? Could it even have existed once America entered the war? Was Davis's sense of prewar urgency justifiable? Which aspects of communal life at February House were tied to its specific time and place in history? If you were to create February House today, which writers, artists, or other personalities would you invite to move in?

For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers who enjoyed *February House*.

Auden, W. H. *Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson. New York: Vintage International, 1991.

Auden, W. H. *The Double Man*. New York: Random House, 1942.

Auden, W. H., and Christopher Isherwood. *Journey to a War*. St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 1990.

Bowles, Jane. *My Sister's Hand in Mine: The Collected Works of Jane Bowles*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005.

Bowles, Paul. *The Sheltering Sky*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

Britten, Benjamin and W. H. Auden. *Paul Bunyan*, operetta conducted by Philip Brunelle. EM/Virgin CD, 2002.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *Benjamin Britten: A Biography*. New York: Scribner, 1993.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *W. H. Auden: A Biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982.

Carr, Virginia Spencer. *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003.

Dews, Carlos, ed. *Illumination and Night Glare: The Unfinished Autobiography of Carson McCullers*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999.

Dillon, Millicent. *A Little Original Sin: The Life and Work of Jane Bowles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Isherwood, Christopher. *Berlin Stories*. New York: New Directions, 1963.

Lee, Gypsy Rose. *The G-String Murders*. New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2005.

Lee, Gypsy Rose. *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Berkeley: Frog Ltd/Blue Snake. 1999.

Mann, Klaus. *Turning Point: Thirty-five Years in This Century*. New York: Fisher, 1942.

McCullers, Carson. [*Collected Stories of Carson McCullers*](#) (including "The Member of the Wedding" and "The Ballad of the Sad Café"). Boston: Mariner, 1998.

McCullers, Carson. [*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*](#). Boston: Mariner, 2004.

McCullers, Carson. [*Reflections in a Golden Eye*](#). Boston: Mariner, 2004.

Spoto, Donald. *Lenya: A Life*. New York: Little, Brown, 1989.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.