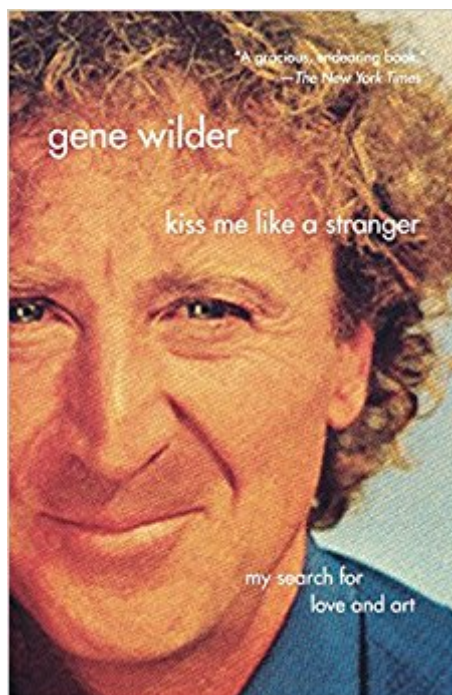


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Kiss Me Like A Stranger: My Search For Love And Art



Synopsis

Gene Wilder was one of the great comic actors who defined the 1970's and 1980's in movies. From his early work with Woody Allen to the rich group of movies he made with Mel Brooks to his partnership on screen with Richard Pryor, Wilder's performances are still discussed and celebrated today. *Kiss Me Like A Stranger* is an intimate glimpse of the man behind the image on the screen. In this book, Wilder talks about everything from his experiences in psychoanalysis to why he got into acting (and later comedy-his first goal was to be a Shakespearean actor) to how a Midwestern childhood with a sick mother changed him. He writes about the creative process on stage and on screen, and divulges moments from life on the sets of some of the most iconic movies of our time. He also opens up about his love affairs and marriages, including his marriage to comedian Gilda Radner. But the core of *Kiss Me Like A Stranger* is an actor's search for truth and a thoughtful analysis of why the choices he made-some of them so serendipitous they were practically accidental-changed the course of his life.

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Customer Reviews

About a month ago, I heard Gene Wilder being interviewed about this book on NPR from a theater in Berkeley, and was fascinated. He had a pleasant way of speaking, said intelligent things, and much to my delight, every time the audience would titter politely in the wrong places to show how hip they were, would ask in a perplexed voice, "What's funny about that?" (Are you listening Garrison Keillor?) I remembered Wilder from "Young Frankenstein," but other than that, knew little about him, including his marriage to Gilda Radner. This was an advantage, since I approached the

book without preconceived expectations. Having enjoyed the interview, I bought the audio CD version, and listened to it in the evening over several weeks while nursing a bad back. Audio books read by the author are usually a good buy, because the author adds meaning through pronunciation, timing, and inflection. Moreover, Wilder as an actor knows how to deliver his lines. He has spent his life as an intelligent misfit, and most of the book is taken up with his efforts to adjust to an outside world that proved both friendly and hostile. Thus his use of the psychiatrist Margie as a foil. One reader review suggests that Margie is merely a "hackneyed and lame device." I disagree; it's clear to me that Wilder has undergone psychoanalysis throughout his adult life, and because he prefers women to men, I suspect that the model for Margie actually exists. The best parts of the book are his descriptions of various movies he worked in and people he has known. He makes a good case for at least some of the people in that world being decent, while excoriating others. I found his descriptions of dealing with racial issues to be particularly thoughtful and moving. As for other readers' criticisms: 1. The book is not sufficiently serious: Wilder's previous literary experience was writing screenplays, which tend to focus on visual and auditory images, and be lean on intellectual content. So it is with this book, which is why I recommend buying the audio CD version. Anyone who has read novels by Terry Southern (also a screen writer) will recognize this phenomenon. 2. He does not sugarcoat his relationship with Gilda Radner: Sorry folks, but successful actors make their livings pretending to be someone other than the person they really are, and so it appears to have been with Gilda. Henry James once observed that the only test for a novel is whether the author achieves what he set out to do. Applying that test to this book, I think Wilder meets it. Perhaps most importantly, he at least tried to be honest, and to a large extent, succeeds.

I read Gilda Radner's book, "It's Always Something" which she completed only weeks before she died. And so when I was recently taking a flight, I picked up Gene Wilder's book to read on the plane. Sadly, I DID need another book on the way back. This one won't take you cross country. There are two camps in these reviews. People who blindly give this book 5 stars and say they love Gene Wilder. But they never actually tell us what they thought was so great about this book. WHY do they give it five stars? The other group, generously giving this book 2 stars, comments on his narcissism, his unwillingness to feel needed by anyone in his life, his current wife's greatest asset being that she hangs poetry on her refrigerator reminding her she is on her own. Here's the thing. Gilda Radner loved Gene Wilder unconditionally, even to the day she died. She loved every thing about him, even his insistence on pushing her away. She loved the way he smelled, his looks, his humor, his mind, his character. She loved him totally. Gene Wilder on the

other hand, doesn't seem to have loved her at all. He seems at best to have tolerated her---and that not very well or consistently. In one chapter he describes not having had sex with Gilda for about 6 months, (because she had had a grapefruit sized tumor removed from her body, was undergoing chemotherapy and radiation!) and perhaps as a tribute to what he sees as his own nobility, comments that he didn't ask her to "relieve" him in other ways. He then goes on to describe how, as a result of his deprivation he was of course immediately attracted to the woman who became his fourth wife, when he saw her skirts swishing about her legs. Gilda was sick in bed having chemotherapy, and he is having dinner in a new woman's apartment. And then, when Gilda dies, he discusses with his therapist whether it's too soon for him to get married again, because the tabloids might make him look like a selfish jerk (Because he IS one!). Look, I am all in favor of celebrity memoirs. Their artistic and celebrated lives create narratives of experience that we don't normally have access to. I like to read the kinds of books that give insight into famous people and in the circles in which they work and live, and I especially enjoy one person's reactions to them. Shelley Winters' three part autobiography revealed so much about the theatre scene of New York in the 50's, so much about her roommate, Marilyn Monroe, and so much about "the method". I felt as though I learned something in reading those books. Here I learned that a Gilda Radner was sadly mistaken in whom she chose to love, and maybe the best book to read would have been one from HER therapist. I'd like to understand how someone so consumed with love could have chosen someone so consumed with avoiding it. It's pretty easy to understand why Gene Wilder, one of the greatest narcissists ever, would have chosen Gilda Radner---America's sweetheart who adored HIM above all others. When I put this book down, I felt disgust.

If someone asked me to sum - up this book in one word, I'd say 'succinct'. If a friend had given it to me as their autobiography and asked me for an opinion I'd tell them that it needed 'fleshing out'. That's not to say it's a bad book - it really, really isn't! It's warm, funny, sad and an enjoyable read...but there are gaps: if you weren't a Gene Wilder fan, you'd have thought he'd made no films after 'Hear No Evil' as it's the last movie he mentions. Okay, as GW says, this isn't so much a biog as events in his life which have made an impact on his life (Serendipity?), but a better sense of 'history' would have been appreciated. Now maybe I'm being a bit picky as I've been a fan of GW's since Young Frankenstein and would have preferred reading a 'proper' autobiography with all his movies and recent TV work chronicled. I also have no sense of his family during this time: yes, we know how his marriage is failing, his adopted daughter angry...but they almost appear to be 'bit players' in the overall scheme of things. What did they think of his fame? How did they cope with

that? What were THEY doing whilst GW made movies, etc.? This work really ends with him getting over cancer and enjoying life with his current wife, Karen (nice Review Karen, BTW) and that's nice and warm and fuzzy...but it almost comes across as if his life has stopped somehow. And that's not true; even if you didn't know he'd recently worked in Theatre, you'd have seen Gene in Will & Grace, or his TV Movies, all of which garnered praise. The writing style is easy to read and bounces along nicely, but there seems to me an underlying anger which was never really expressed in the words on the page, and oddly enough that sums up a lot of GW's life. I only wish he'd told us more...

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