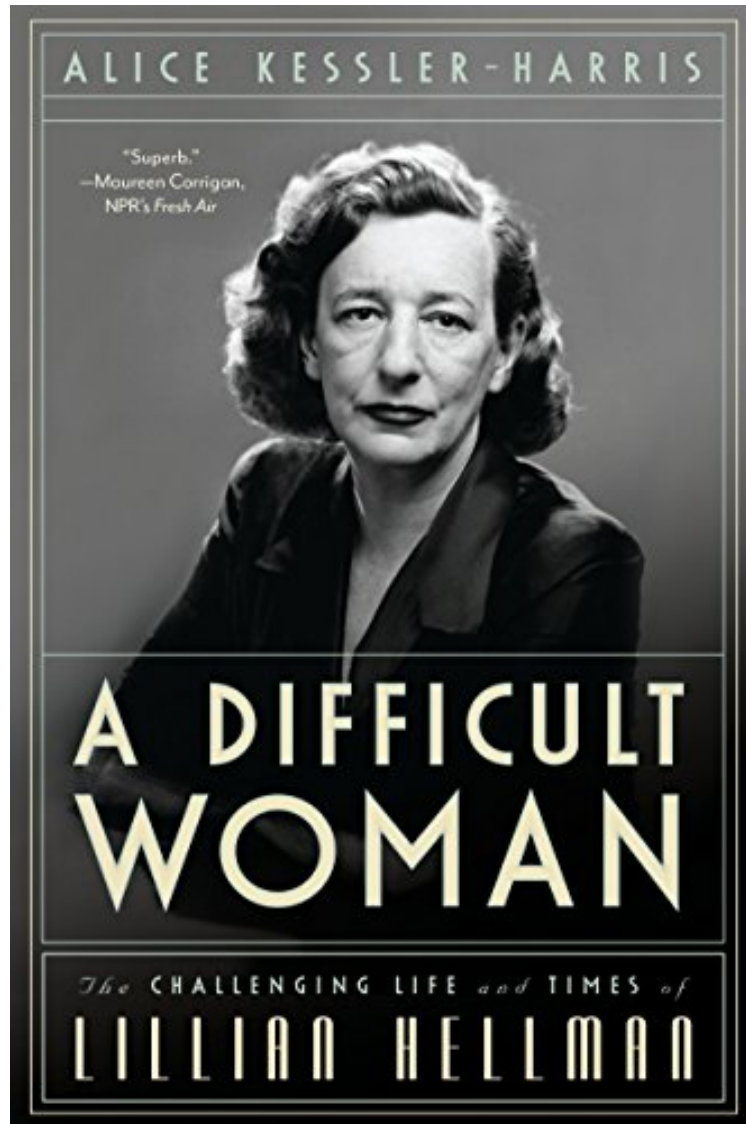


(Free) A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman

## A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman

*Alice Kessler-Harris*

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**Alice Kessler-Harris : A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A Layered History of Lillian Hellman By Pamela Gilbreath Kelly I ordered this because, after reading Hellman's three autobiographies, I felt mystified about who she was, as a person. Writing before texting and tablets existed, Hellman's writing seemed arch and opaque... I couldn't get a living-

breathing sense of her. So I was glad to find "A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman" on . It's written by historian, Alice Kessler Harris, who focuses on one layer of Hellman at a time - the "tough broad", the playwright, the communist, the Jew, the moralist and more - bringing each layer to life with rich historical details. It was fascinating to trace Hellman's political involvement, from the early days of Communism in the US, in the 1930's, and continuing through the McCarthy investigation of Un-American activities, during the 50's, in which she had to testify. Equally engrossing was learning about the roiling political scene in America, during the times leading up to World War II, and afterwards. Overall, Kessler Harris fleshes out in a very satisfying way the many facets of Lillian Hellman's character. 5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Difficult -yes, Fascinating-Yes indeed! By G. E. Melone I have long admired the writing of Lillian Hellman. I haven't read everything-just the short story trilogy that has *Pentimento* and of course I have seen *The Children's Hour*. What I didn't know was that at the end of her life Hellman was vilified by many critics, and it was a bit shocking to find that out. This book cleverly places Lillian Hellman inside the history that surrounded her, molded her and challenged her. Rather than taking a life as a linear progression, we are invited to view her through the window of the times in which she lived. What I liked most about this biography is the "take no prisoners" account of Hellman's character, which was alternately charming and totally bitchy. This character portrayal is backed up by Hellman's own words about how difficult she could be-as well as including Hellman's sly allusions to her capacity to make up things about herself and pass them off as the "truth"- or did she? Hellman was so many things I did not know about, and of course, she lived in fascinating times. Just for one example: we could all take a lesson from Lillian Hellman's ferocious dedication to the eradication of Fascism, since we seem to be on that borderline again in our own times. I approached this book thinking I would like Lillian Hellman a little less, but found I liked her even more! Warts and All 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. I loved this book By Nikki Hanna The amount of research that went into this book is incredible. Presenting the story of Hellman's life in a structure that is mostly topic driven rather than chronological works. The book is a history lesson as Hellman's life is portrayed in a national and world setting. The McCarthy era and other significant political events are revealed in conjunction with real people. I learned so much and about the times Hellman lived in. Kessler presented multiple perspectives on Lillian's controversial life in an objective way, leaving it to the reader to draw their own conclusions on this complicated woman. I was fascinated throughout. I loved this book.

Lillian Hellman was a giant of twentieth-century letters and a groundbreaking figure as one of the most successful female playwrights on Broadway. Yet the author of *The Little Foxes* and *Toys in the Attic* is today remembered more as a toxic, bitter survivor and literary fabulist, the woman of whom Mary McCarthy said, "Every word she writes is a lie, including 'and' and 'the.'" In *A Difficult Woman*, renowned historian Alice Kessler-Harris undertakes a feat few would dare to attempt: a reclamation of a combative, controversial woman who straddled so many political and cultural fault lines of her time. Kessler-Harris renders Hellman's feisty wit and personality in all of its contradictions: as a non-Jewish Jew, a displaced Southerner, a passionate political voice without a party, an artist immersed in commerce, a sexually free woman who scorned much of the women's movement, a loyal friend whose trust was often betrayed, and a writer of memoirs who repeatedly questioned the possibility of achieving truth and doubted her memory. Hellman was a writer whose plays spoke the language of morality yet whose achievements foundered on accusations of mendacity. Above all else, she was a woman who made her way in a man's world. Kessler-Harris has crafted a nuanced life of Hellman, empathetic yet unsparing, that situates her in the varied contexts in which she moved, from New Orleans to Broadway to the hearing room of HUAC. *A Difficult Woman* is a major work of literary and intellectual history. This will be one of the most reviewed, and most acclaimed, books of 2012.

From Booklist\*Starred \* Hellman was one of the most successful American female playwrights, and her own life was exceptionally dramatic. She is remembered as a caustic woman, a tough broad who made excuses for Stalin's brutality and made her own personal mythology. Renowned historian Kessler-Harris takes a penetrating look at the life and subsequent images of Hellman, a woman who defied the conventions of her time and has come to defy easy judgment. Despite her efforts to illuminate moral issues in her plays *Little Foxes* and *Toys in the Attic*, Hellman was accused of being overemotional. Politically, she angered anticommunists and communists alike during the Red Scare, and she pushed boundaries for women but eschewed the label of feminist. Married and divorced, she maintained a lifelong relationship with her ex-husband and his wife, along with a turbulent long-term romance with writer Dashiell Hammett and liaisons with a string of other men. Well into old age, she maintained a sexual vibrancy that belied her lack of conventional beauty. Kessler-Harris portrays a complex woman, full of contradictions and insecurities, volatile, generous, nurturing, sharp tongued, and quick witted. Though much has been written about Hellman, readers will enjoy this reexamination of what Kessler-Harris calls a "juicy character" in the rarefied New York literary set, one who led a life filled with sex, scandals, art, and ideas. **HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY:** This biography of one of the most controversial women of the twentieth century, written by an award-winning, renowned historian, is sure to receive plenty of critical attention. --Vanessa Bush "A brave and fair-minded job of traversing the thicket of -isms surrounding Hellman (Stalinism and Trotskyism, Zionism and anti-Semitism, communism, McCarthyism,

cold war liberalism)hellip;For the reasons made clear in this valuable book, when the dust settles, this difficult woman's reputation will fare better than it did when Kessler-Harris began her Hellman journey.rdquo; Victor Navasky, The Nationldquo;Instead of probing inside Hellman's character for answers, Kessler-Harris searches outsidehellip;the tension between author and subject makes for some interesting reading.rdquo; New York Times Book ldquo;Kessler-Harris meticulously recreates the atmosphere and opinions of the left-leaning intelligentsia in the late '30s... Kessler-Harris's tone is consistently even-handed and nonjudgmental; Hellman is never excused for her conduct, for 'clinging to a false god,' or her inability to 'get her facts straight' but her actions are always painstakingly contextualized...Hellman's life provides Kessler-Harris with a fascinating, idiosyncratic viewpoint from which to dissect the intellectual currents of the 20th century. Kessler-Harris's previous books have been broad studies of women in the industrial age, and here she demonstrates the historian's skill with scope, but also compellingly threads in the minutiae of one woman's attempts to negotiate the 'sharp turns' of U.S. culture and politics.rdquo; Daily Beastldquo;Substantive hellip; here's one good reason why young women especially should care about the lessons offered by Hellman's life: Hellman, Kessler-Harris emphasizes, continued to be a bold creature of the 1920s long after Betty Boop became domesticated into June Cleaver. She paid dearly for that lsquo;disorderly conduct.' Kessler-Harris does a superb job of showing how gendered -- even misogynist-- the criticisms of Hellman's art and politics were.rdquo; Maureen Corrigan on "Fresh Air" and NPR.orgldquo;A Difficult Woman (hellip;) would be worth reading just for its portrait of the mid-20th century politico-cultural cauldron. It would be worth reading for its presentation of Hellman, lsquo;a juicy character' and lsquo;a difficult woman, impassioned, tempestuous, transgressive with regard to gender roles." It would be worth reading, too, for the historical light it sheds on the divisive ferocity of today's political discussion. That this book combines so many elements reflects its breadth and strength as history, biography, and cultural criticism.rdquo; Boston Globeldquo;[A] thoughtful book assuring readers that lsquo;it would be folly to try to capture the lsquo;real' Lillian, whoever that is'. Hellman is too slippery a subject and too uncooperative a source for that. Rather, this biography works to answer the question of why Hellman remains such a divisive figure, lsquo;a lightning rod for the anger, fear and passion' that divided Americans during an especially fraught ideological time.rdquo; The Economistldquo;The author does an admirable job.rdquo; Jewish Book Worldldquo;Alice Kessler-Harris's nuanced biography (hellip;) acknowledges the elusiveness of her subject while arguing that Hellman's complexity gets straight to the heart of many of the twentieth century's ideological battleshellip; Wisely, Kessler-Harris, a Columbia historian, emphasizes Hellman's social and political contexts, rather than speculating overly much about her personal motivations--contexts that are crucial to understanding Hellman's seemingly contradictory character, and the point of view of a woman who was simultaneously sidelined and center stage. A historical perspective is the very thing that may redeem Hellman from charges of naiuml;veteacute;, self-aggrandizement (perhaps least forgivable in a woman), and hypocrisy.rdquo; Vogue.comldquo;I don't know that I have ever read this good a rescue job. Columbia historian Alice Kessler-Harris's biography of dramatist and screenwriter Lillian Hellman made me feel like a stupid clichacute;; just another American who knows little of Hellman's life, and even less of her work, but feels totally comfortably judging her as an unrepentant Stalinist and a compulsive liarhellip; Kessler-Harris has persuaded me that Hellman, for all her lies, was brilliant, courageous and, above all, interestinghellip;a biographer's job is to understand, not bury, her subject. Alice Kessler-Harris has succeeded.rdquo; Mark Oppenheimer, The Forwardldquo;Superb hellip; Kessler-Harris provides in-depth analyses and objective commentary in a seamless, comprehensive biographical portrait hellip; this thoughtfully crafted work of scholarship, supported by extensive research and interviews, illuminates the life and output of a major literary figure as well as the times in which she lived. It will appeal to a wide readership.rdquo; Library Journal (starred)ldquo;Kessler-Harris offers a nuanced, fair-minded, and engrossing portrait of a controversial but indelible 20th-century personality.rdquo; Publishers Weeklyldquo;Kessler-Harris does not present, as she notes in the brilliant introduction, a lsquo;cradle to grave' biography. Rather, A Difficult Woman is a series of essays on each part of Hellman's life--as a playwright ... as a woman ... as a woman considered both ugly and sexy ... as a Jew ... as a sometimes naiuml;ve and overly idealistic political firebrand ... and on her generosity and her fabled penny-pinching. And Kessler-Harris places all of her qualities, both fine and infuriating, in the context of the century in which she lived -- the momentous changes wrought in an astonishingly short amount of time. This book is not a defense, an apologia. Rather, it is an un-retouched, balanced look at cause and effecthellip;Written by a woman, about a woman, this book is required reading for womenhellip;Along with better understanding Miss Hellman, perhaps this new book will revive interest in her great plays, often dismissed as "melodramas," or seen only as politically-themedhellip;Clearly, I recommend A Difficult Woman.rdquo; Liz Smithldquo;Alice Kessler-Harris makes an excellent case that Hellman represents the complexities and changing mores of the 20th century hellip; The concepts of truth and deception, or betrayal and loyalty, play large roles in her work and this insightful biography, rich with context, shows how they were also themes that defined her life. Not an apologia, but an exploration of nuances, A Difficult Woman gives us an infinitely more complex Hellman than the popular image that has survived her.rdquo; Shelf Awarenessldquo;Lillian's Hellman's body may have been in her grave,' writes biographer Alice Kessler-Harris of her subject's funeral in 1984, long after Hellman's rise to fame--and then infamy ndash;as, among other things, a playwright, a would-be patriot who refused to name names during the

fever of McCarthyism, a defender of the USSR, a bestselling memoirist, a mink coat model, and Dashiell Hammett's longtime lover. 'But quickly it became apparent that she would find no rest there.' Of the many, many words written about Hellman both during and after her lifetime, truer ones may never have been printed. Truth, as *A Difficult Woman* (...) demonstrates, is a tricky business where Hellman is concerned. Barnes Noble; Kessler-Harris is both a scrupulous historian and a sympathetic interpreter, and her even-handed, clear-eyed approach helps make ceding respect to Hellman a possibility even as her subject threatens to wear out her welcome--high-handedly trumpeting political bromides here, obstreperously haggling with her literary agents there, repeatedly declaring herself affronted by whatever injustice she thought was being visited on her. Kessler-Harris would never say that her subject was a self-aggrandizing blowhard who bulldozed her way through any obstacle that displeased her, but neither does she tamper with the copious evidence that such was often the case. Or shy away from rebuking Hellman for her silence on Stalin, or questioning her refusal to admit that the 'Julia' of her memoir *Pentimento* was a fictional creation based on the life of a woman she had never met. Still, Kessler-Harris succeeds at exonerating her subject. The time may be right. Contemplating Hellman's uncompromised freedom in a moment when blogs written by college-educated mothers read like reruns of the fifties' retreat to domesticity, one is tempted to forgive this difficult woman just about everything. Capital New York; An outstanding historical biography; [Hellman's story] has already been told in several previous biographies, as Alice Kessler-Harris generously acknowledges. So what can she possibly add? Kessler-Harris has plenty to add. While her work does not supersede what has gone before, it deeply enriches the work of others and brings our understanding of Hellman to a much higher level. Written with grace and impeccable scholarship, this is a stirring and enriching performance. Bravo! Minneapolis Star Tribune; A deft and vivid new biography of Hellman; Alice Kessler-Harris is an excellent guide to this fascinating life. Charleston Post and Courier; The reader doesn't read this book, but experiences it. Ms. Kessler-Harris could have employed any other adjective in her title, but clearly, Lillian Hellman was *A Difficult Woman*. New York Journal of Books; Kessler-Harris is right to argue that the life Hellman led 'illuminates the world she confronted,' most importantly the worlds of emerging women and of political fear and contention. Washington Post; Kessler-Harris presents a strong thesis; the different perspectives Alice Kessler-Harris provides in this book may pique the intellect and satisfy the reader's desire for new angles to explore. Washington Independent of Books; If you want to know how [Lillian Hellman] became legendary, Alice Kessler-Harris's new biography, *A Difficult Woman*, offers the most evenhanded, searching account to date. Kessler-Harris' clear-eyed study of this irascible, self-dramatizing, impassioned woman provides a sharply focused lens into many of the key issues of the 20th century. San Francisco Chronicle; [A] careful, voluminously documented study; some chapters in the book are riveting in their meticulous detail. Buffalo News; A hefty examination of one of the 20th century's most socially scrutinized, politically controversial and creatively frustrated writers. The portrait that emerges is at once riveting and distasteful, with the intelligence of her literary achievements, including *The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes*, standing in stark contrast to her affairs with married men and pointed declarations during the Spanish War. As with so many artists, it is in the context of Hellman's work that her innermost convictions, fears, foibles and mettle play out, and Kessler-Harris investigates every play opening, ill-advised sexual dalliance and heated debate with equal bite and nuance. A richly layered portrait of a woman whose literary might and sociopolitical daring continue to demand attention. Kirkus; Kessler-Harris portrays a complex woman... Though much has been written about Hellman, readers will enjoy this reexamination of what Kessler-Harris calls a 'juicy character' in the rarefied New York literary set, one who led a life filled with sex, scandals, art, and ideas. This biography of one of the most controversial women of the twentieth century, written by an award-winning, renowned historian, sure to receive plenty of critical attention. Booklist (starred); It's been 25 years since the publication of William Wright's *Lillian Hellman, the Image, the Woman*; now is time for a reassessment that will grab our imagination. Library Journal; This is more than the best biography ever written about a famous and famously controversial playwright and activist. With great empathy and authority, Alice Kessler-Harris uses Lillian Hellman's work and life to illuminate the intellectual and political conflicts of 20th-century America. The distinguished historian makes better sense of Hellman's life than Hellman ever made of it herself. Michael Kazin, author of *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*; Whether you are fan of or skeptic about Lillian Hellman, prepare yourself to be deeply engrossed in Alice Kessler-Harris's excavation of Hellman as a woman and as a subject artfully created by Hellman herself and her contemporaries. Kessler-Harris brilliantly demonstrates that fact and fiction were revealingly intertwined in the life story of *A Difficult Woman*. Elizabeth Cohen, author of *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*; Alice Kessler-Harris offers us a compelling and unabashedly flesh-and-blood portrait of a complex woman who was simultaneously cherished, despised and misunderstood. More than just a biography, *A Difficult Woman* uses Lillian Hellman's life as a way to explore the often controversial role that writers played in shaping the political life of Hollywood, Broadway, and American society from the anti-fascist struggles of the 1930s through the sexual revolution of the 1960s and beyond. This is a must read for anyone who wants to understand the woman rather than the legend. Steve J. Ross, author of *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie*

Stars Shaped American Politics

“Brilliantly researched and vividly written, Alice Kessler-Harris has gifted us with a splendid biography--relevant and needed--for this embattled moment. Who is American, what is un-American? Who decides? What are the consequences of a life of blunt courage? Or of silence, deceit, passivity? Who are the liars, cowards, hypocrites? These questions, for our time--for all time, are profoundly addressed in this often startling, life and times of Lillian Hellman--forever creative, consistently fearless, a combative playwright and essayist dedicated to civil liberties. She was 'a difficult woman'--rude, passionate, independent. This is a marvelous read--eloquent, unique, alive with lessons from the 20th century--we all need again to address.” Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of *Eleanor Roosevelt*, Vols 1 and 2

“The Hellman who emerges from these pages is dynamic and complex, fraught with contradictions. Indeed, many of those who knew her best testify to the warring forces in her personality...If the purpose of all biography is to separate truth from myth, that task proves particularly challenging in the case of this "difficult woman"--not least because Hellman herself sought to preserve that myth at any cost. But it is challenging also because Hellman, in death has come to symbolize far more than she did in life. If the questions that swirl around her are still unanswerable, it may be less because she was small than because the questions remain so big.”

Bookforum

About the Author Alice Kessler-Harris is the R. Gordon Hoxie Professor of American History at Columbia University, in New York City. She is one of America's most renowned scholars, known for her work on labor and gender history. She is the author of the classic history of working women, *Out to Work*. Her *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in Twentieth Century America* won the Joan Kelly, Philip Taft, Herbert Hoover, and Bancroft Prizes. In 2012 she will become President of the Organization of American Historians.