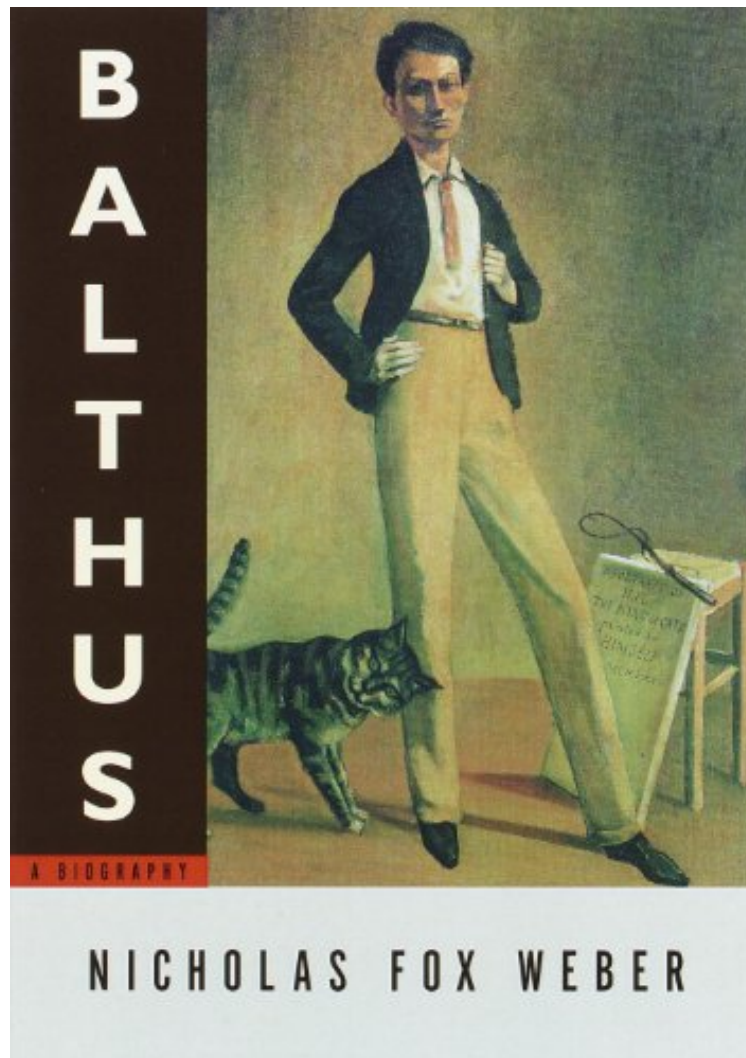


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Balthus: A Biography

Nicholas Fox Weber

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Nicholas Fox Weber : Balthus: A Biography before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Balthus: A Biography:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Colored by personal dislike By meadowreader Weber clearly despises Balthus, finding him to be a self-denying Jew (that seems to be Balthus' original sin), a control freak, manipulative, despotic, self-aggrandizing, and virtually a pathological liar to boot. Weber thinks some of this can be understood with the help of amateur psychoanalysis, which at various points he is only too happy to provide. The book contains a lot of information about Balthus's life and his art, but assertions and interpretations that otherwise might seem to be true, fair, and insightful -- and may, in fact, be all of those things -- are tainted by the ever-present noise of an axe being ground backstage. The book made me want to see a second opinion from somebody who actually found something,

anything, to like about Balthus as a person.²¹ of 25 people found the following review helpful. No perspective or sense of scale

By Seigo Tanaka

Balthus, The Count of Rola, The King of Cats, part ethnically Jewish Roman Catholic, self-invented, self-taught, king of the figurative painters of the last century, deserved a better biographer than this. Nicholas Fox Weber has very strong opinions about his subject. Unfortunately, his opinions take on the form of judgment and one can only have wished that he would have had the intelligence to bow out and leave the task to someone who could temper their passion with objectivity. Balthus wants to remain an enigma. This is well known. To assume he would be the one to gain the artist's full trust and candor was hubris on Weber's part. Of course, Balthus' reinvented past posed problems to the author but as he points out in his Afterword, he was forewarned. Instead of being persistent, even confrontational, Weber wimps out. He gives up. He proclaims Balthus a hopeless, self-deluded, pathological liar. And so, he relies almost exclusively on second- and third-hand accounts including those from excommunicated friends whose motives are questionable. Even worse, he stands in for the artist, assuming he knows what the artists would have to say about his observations and gathered conflicting facts. Weber's frustration is visible on every page-he takes it out on his subject. Like an adolescent discovering the fallibility of an adored parent, Weber magnifies the flaws and uses every opportunity to illustrate them. One senses the author, feeling challenged, is on a mission to strip the artist bare and then mockingly point out his shortcomings. It is not a question as to whether all accusations may be true; Weber makes some convincing arguments (as well as some amazing assumptions). But the tone is adversarial and without compassion, sense of proportion, and sometimes simple decency. (When Weber discovers that Balthus' two-year-old son died from Tay Sachs disease, he holds the fact up as proof of Balthus' denied Jewish heritage and some kind of divine justice. It's absolutely horrifying.) Weber lets us know that he is not above the vain snobbery he attributes to his subject, when in the last chapter he waxes rhapsodic when Balthus dotes over his two young daughters. But then, in the Afterword, he accuses the same man of being pedophilic when he dotes over another adolescent, his latest model Anna Valli, in a photo shoot. Like some beauty pageant stage-father he comments on Anna as being dressed "too sexy" a "knowing Lolita... delighting in her stardom." Catty and jealous beyond belief. Fortunately, the simple facts of the artist's life are fascinating enough, the anecdotes from his friends and enemies, colorful and sometimes insightful. I do care what these players think about this man. I don't care what Mr. Weber thinks about him one whit.

12 of 16 people found the following review helpful. The Weber Case

By Anatole Upart

This book has disappointed me greatly. To all the negative reviews displayed here I can only add more... Its apparently well researched subject is just a cover-up for making yet another buck, using an artist who is lesser known, often misunderstood and provocative. Any biography of Balthus would have been appreciated at the time of the artist's old age and the obviously quick approach of death, and people like Mr. Weber, unfortunately, quite often are the first to write in such moments. This is not a book about Balthus or his life or his art, it is about quickly making a name for himself and some money off Balthus, in the name of his art, when it was still possible. Inaccessibility of Balthus the person has allowed only a small circle of friends, family members, and patrons to benefit financially, and socially from Balthus's name and Art, however Mr. Weber, a parvenue as he is, craved for some of it too. The result - is this book, a book about infiltrating oneself (or trying to) into a privileged society of artists, aristocrats, wealthy collectors, celebs etc. and then - just "telling all" about who they really are: pretenders, liars, perverts and above all - anti-Semites... I only regret three things about this book: That I have spent money to buy it (so contributing to the cause of Mr. Weber); that I have read this book ; that we have all here read this book. PS: To my knowledge, there is not a single Novgorod near Pinsk, or anywhere in Belarus, and Mr. Weber was probably alluding to Novogrudok (Nowogrodek, Navahrudak) about 125km from Minsk. (Weber might have thought that throwing in some obscure town names from Eastern Europe and embellishing that book with them would make his "research" look more professional)

The first full-scale biography of one of the most elusive and enigmatic painters of our time -- the self-proclaimed Count Balthus Klossowski de Rola -- whose brilliantly rendered, markedly sexualized portraits, especially of young girls, are among the most memorable images in contemporary art. The story of Balthus's life has been shrouded by contradiction and hearsay, most of it his own invention; over the years he created for himself a persona of mystery, aristocracy, and glamour. Now, in Nicholas Fox Weber's superb biography, Balthus, the man and the artist, stands revealed as never before. He was born in Paris in 1908 to Polish parents. At age twelve he first stepped into the spotlight with the publication of forty of his drawings illustrating a story about a cat by Rainer Maria Rilke, who was then Balthus's mother's lover and a crucial influence on the young boy. From that moment, Balthus has never been out of the public eye. In 1934 his first exhibition, in Paris, stunned the art world. The seven canvases drew attention to his extraordinary technique -- a mix of tradition and imagination informed by the work of Piero della Francesca, Courbet, and Joseph Reinhardt, but unique to the twenty-six-year-old artist -- and to their provocative content; one of the paintings, *The Guitar Lesson*, was so powerful in its sadomasochistic imagery that it was deemed necessary to remove it from public display. Continuously since then, Balthus's work has provoked both great opprobrium and profound admiration -- as has the artist himself, whether collaborating with Antonin Artaud on his *Theater of Cruelty*, transforming the Villa Medici into the social center of Fellini's Rome in the 1950s, or competing for the artistic limelight with his friends Picasso and Andreacut; Derain. The artist's complexities are clarified and his genius

understood in a book that derives its particular immediacy from Weber's long and intense conversations with Balthus -- who never previously consented to discuss his life and work with a biographer -- as well as his interviews with the painter's closest friends, members of his family, and many of the subjects of his controversial canvases. Weber's critical and human grasp (he acutely analyzes the paintings in terms of both their aesthetic achievement and what they reveal of their maker's psyche), combined with his rich knowledge of Balthus's life and his insight into the ideas and forces that have helped to shape Balthus's work over the past seven decades, gives us a striking, illuminating portrait of one of the most admired and outrageous artists of our time.

.com Balthus is as multifaceted and spellbinding as its subject, the 20th-century painter whose canvasses have been likened both to those of the ethereal Piero della Francesca and sadomasochistic erotica. Biographer Nicholas Fox Weber quotes Oscar Wilde when discussing Balthus's most notorious painting, in which a music teacher violently molests her young pupil: "It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.... And so Balthus claimed to me time and again. If viewers find *The Guitar Lesson* ... shocking or titillating, repulsive or seductive, they reveal only their own psyches, not his." Balthus repeatedly insisted on noninterpretive, pre-Freudian, stylistic observation of his paintings--mere studies in light and shadow, form and shape, composition and color--or so he would have Weber (and the reader) believe. Weber describes his own psychological near-seduction by Balthus's proffered confidences, and his brief, initial inclination to allow the artist to dominate their interviews. Despite Balthus's gift for prevarication--romance on short notice is his specialty--Weber is astute enough to sift through every possible document. He elucidates Balthus's mother's long affair with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke; her Jewish ancestry, which Balthus denied; the atmosphere of religious mockery among the surrealists; Balthus's marriages and affairs and his obsession with pubescent girls. As the book progresses, Weber delves deeply into an analysis of the artist's psyche. In the end, he achieves remarkable, sensitive insights into the nature of Balthus's character and subjects. He patiently builds a case for the theory that even the artist's female adolescent models reflect his secret selves and fantasies, developed in reaction to many kinds of childhood pain and confusion. Weber secures every important painting within a framework of historical reference, personal psychology, and stylistic influence. With this he demonstrates his uniqueness among biographers of artists--he actually understands painting, including its technical aspects. A hugely pleasurable read, this book compares to Hilary Spurling's *The Unknown Matisse* in its erudition and richness of detail. --Peggy Moorman

From Publishers Weekly A highly regarded art historian (Patron Saints), Weber ingeniously structures his biography of 91-year-old Balthazar Klossowska, or Balthus, by draping his voluminous investigations over facts that emerged during his visit with the famously reclusive painter and his Japanese wife at their elegant Swiss chalet in 1991. A French citizen of Polish ancestry who has claimed descent from Polish nobility, the Romanovs and Lord Byron, Balthus survived a childhood of economic hardship and displacement with the help of his mother's lover, poet Rainer Maria Rilke. In his work, Balthus uses Old Master coloring to depict scenes in canvases whose atmospheric haze and violated figures (many of them highly eroticized adolescents) belie the compositions' sturdy grids. Weber explores Balthus's many influences, from the work of Piero della Francesca to psychoanalytic theory and his brother's fascination with the Marquis de Sade. Again and again, Weber insists that the artist articulate the intentions behind each and every element in his work. Of course, no painter could, and Balthus, whether from age, puckishness or the sincere conviction that his art must speak for itself, toys with Weber throughout their conversations. The friction between the two forces Weber to do his own Aat times heroic Aresearch. Whether visiting a sex crimes unit in Manhattan, the New York apartment of Greek shipping magnate Stavros Niarchos or an acquaintance from Balthus's days as director of the French Academy in Rome, Weber assiduously records the evidence for his psychosexual view of Balthus's paintings. In the process, Weber does justice to both the artist and his art. If he occasionally adopts a gossipy tone, that's a minor flaw in a book that will remain a splendid account of a complex life and as fine an artist's biography as this season is likely to produce. 16 color plates not seen by PW; 116 bw illus. First serial to the New Yorker. U.K rights, Weidenfeld Nicholson. Reader Subscriptions Book Club selection. (Oct.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal With the artist's approval, Weber (Patron Saints) has created a portrait of the elusive and mysterious Balthus. Probing the inner man and his work, the author partially explains the mystique that has surrounded this critically acclaimed and self-invented painter whose surreal, sexually charged images are both disturbing and haunting. The artist would like to set the record straight for posterity, insisting that there is nothing psychological about his work, that he is merely painting everyday life. But through extensive meetings with Balthus over a period of years at his castle in Switzerland and a study of various documents, Weber interprets the myth and symbolic representations in the significant paintings, peeling away their meaning layer by layer to uncover the man who made them. More than official in tone (unlike prior biographers, such as Jean Leymarie) Weber is questioning, affectionate, and convincing Ayet he seems to solve only half of the puzzle. While the length of this well-illustrated book may be a deterrent, it should create a buzz in art circles, keeping everyone guessing Awhich may have been Balthus's intention all along. Recommended for larger public libraries and all 20th-century art collections. A Ellen Bates, New York Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.