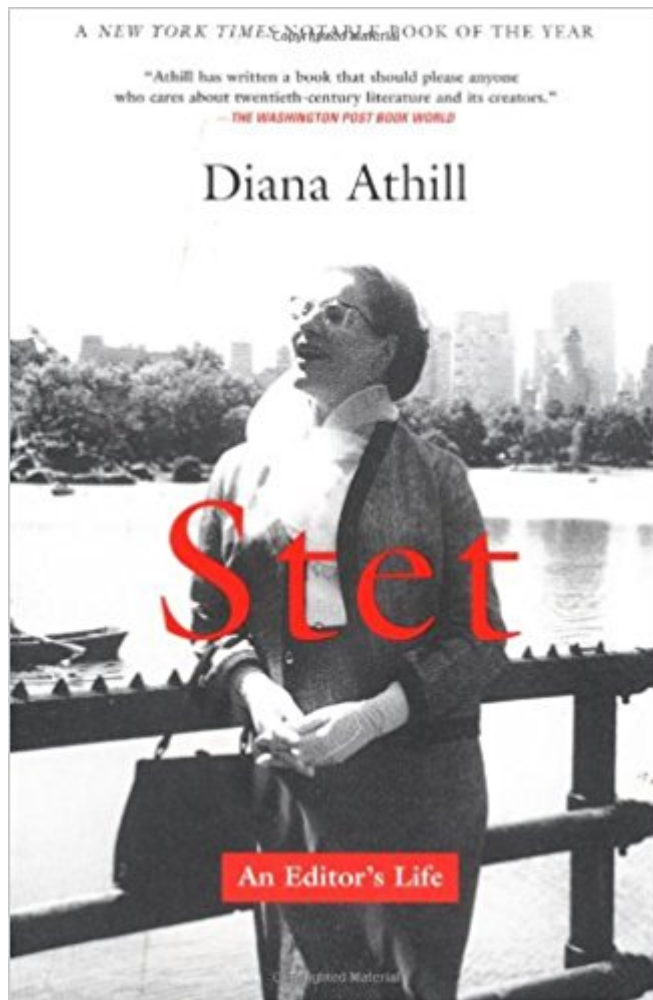


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Stet: An Editor's Life



Synopsis

Diana Athill's *Stet* is "a beautifully written, hardheaded, and generally insightful look back at the heyday of postwar London publishing by a woman who was at its center for nearly half a century" (The Washington Times). A founding editor of the prestigious publishing house Andre Deutsch, Ltd., Athill takes us on a guided tour through the corridors of literary London, offering a keenly observed, devilishly funny, and always compassionate portrait of the glories and pitfalls of making books. *Stet* is a must-read for the literarily curious, who will revel in Athill's portraits of such great literary figures as Jean Rhys, V. S. Naipaul, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, Mordecai Richler, and others. Spiced with candid observations about the type of people who make brilliant writers and ingenious publishers (and the idiosyncrasies of both), *Stet* is an invaluable contribution to the literature of literature, and in the words of the Sunday Telegraph, "all would-be authors and editors should have a copy." "Wryly humorous ... notable for its extraordinary lucidity...." -- The New York Times Book Review "A beguiling tonic to book business sob stories... *Stet* can barely contain Athill's charm and great big heart." -- Newsday "In addition to telling a good story, Athill writes profoundly about how she is affected by the books she loves." -- The Boston Globe

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Diana Athill was born in 1917. Together with Andr Deutsch she established the publishing house that bore his name, where she worked until her retirement in 1985. Her earlier books include *Instead of a Letter* and *After a Funeral*, now republished by Granta Books. Diana will be doing a lot

of national and regional radio around the time of publication including appearances on Woman's Hour and Book of the Week on Radio 4, and in London on GLR and BBC Thames Valley. Both Diana and Stet will be appearing in all the major national newspapers.- catch any one of these to see what the fuss is about! --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

I was somewhat nonplussed when I first read this, four or five years ago; I was irritated by Athill's privileged background and was disappointed that she highlighted authors I had not read and, in several cases, had never heard of. But I sensed I was missing something. Rereading the book after several years, I see that I was. Diana Athill was born in 1917 and brought up as part of the "county set" in Norfolk; she went to Oxford, and spent the war in the BBC "a job she got through a personal contact in its recruitment office; class was as powerful then as now. Disappointed in love, she fell into a series of relationships, one with a young refugee met at a party. ("He sat on the floor and sang 'The Foggy Foggy Dew', which was unexpected in a Hungarian.") This was Andr   Deutsch. The affair did not last long; the friendship, however, did and at the end of the war he asked her to join him in the publishing company he was founding. She was to work as an editor for the next 50 years, all but the last few with Deutsch himself. She says little in this book of her personal life, but she has written of that elsewhere. Stet "the word is a proofreader's instruction, used to cancel a correction" is about Athill's life in publishing. The book is in two pretty much equal parts. The first is a narrative account of her career, mostly with Deutsch. The second recalls her work with a series of writers, the best-known of which are Jean Rhys and V.S. Naipaul; the others "Alfred Chester, Molly Keane, and one or two more" are no longer household names, if they ever were. The first part of the book is a fascinating picture of postwar publishing in all its amateurish glory. When Andr   Deutsch is founded in the 1950s, it works out of a converted house; books are dispatched from a packing bench that is a plank over the bath. This doesn't surprise me; my first job, in 1974, was in publishing, and I sometimes ran the packing bench. It hadn't changed much. But there is nothing amateur about Athill's shrewd insight into book buyers: "There are those who buy because they love books and what they can get from them, and those to whom books are one form of entertainment among several. The first group, which is by far the smaller, will go on reading... The second group has to be courted." In Athill's view, by the 1980s the second group had been seduced away by more visual media, leaving little space for literary publishing. She may have been right "then. But electronic publishing has now made books good value again, at least when sold by independents or small publishers whose

overheads are low. So that second audience is being reclaimed (albeit mainly with genre books). Athill retired in the 1990s but still does the odd article and review, and one wonders what she thinks of this. She says little about technological change in general, although photosetting and on-screen page design arrived in her time. When it comes to editing, though, Athill clearly had rigorous judgement. If a book didn't quite work she didn't want it, whoever had written it, and she rejected one of Philip Roth's "a decision that caused her some pain later, but was surely right at the time. She had felt that he was writing about a different type of character than usual simply to prove that he could; and it did not ring true. This is, in fact, the key to the second half of Stet. Athill has chosen to depict, not the writers with the highest profiles today, but those about whom she feels she has something to say. The result is a series of character sketches that do ring true, and draw you in whether you are interested in the writer or not. V.S. Naipaul is the only modern superstar. Of the others, I had heard of Jean Rhys and Molly Keane, but knew very little about them; I knew nothing of Alfred Chester at all. But I was fascinated. Both these, and the other, sketches suggest that Athill was not just a good editor; she was a generous friend to her writers as well. (And to Deutsch himself, who could clearly be a pain in the arse.) Of these sketches, it is that of Jean Rhys that stands out. "No-one who has read Jean Rhys's first four novels can suppose that she was good at life," writes Athill, "but no-one who never met her could know how very bad at it she was." The later stages of Rhys's life and the mess she had made of it, and her struggle with alcohol, are there "but so is her gift as a writer, and the strange early life that Athill felt explained much about her. The thumbnail sketch of V.S. Naipaul, too, is vivid, with a shrewd insight: that those whose cultural or national background is unclear must define themselves, and the personal resources needed for this can be great. They are not always there. As someone who has spent much of their life in an international milieu (in my case international development), I understand this all too well. I am glad I read this again. Athill is, to be sure, a member of a privileged group " she uses the word caste " with an iron grip on the publishing world; but she knows that. This caste was "the mostly London-dwelling, university-educated, upper-middle-class English people [who] loved books and genuinely tried to understand the differences between good and bad writing; but I suspect... our "good" was good only according to the notions of the caste." She puts this in the past tense but one wonders if that caste and its prejudices have really quite gone yet. However, Athill's judgement as an editor clearly transcends them. So does her empathetic and subtle understanding of those she met. This is a charming book.

What a wonderful book! First comes the story of her editing life, and then come stories of the various writers she met. I found my next book because I was so intrigued by one of them.

I read *Stet*, about Diana Athill's career as an editor, after immensely enjoying her later biography (*Somewhere Towards the End: A Memoir*, written as she approached 90). Athill is a candid, empathetic, and witty observer of herself, her surroundings, and the people (many of them quite driven and some rather loony) with whom she worked as an editor for Andre Deutsch in London for 50 years. In *Stet*, Athill tells their stories. And, as befits a professional editor, she tells them with wonderful clarity and fluidity. As Athill's sublime writing carries us along through her work and travels, we learn about London during and after World War II, about the evolution of the publishing business and relationships between writers and editors, about the lives and idiosyncrasies of writers famous and not so famous, and, surprisingly, about the poor and wildly beautiful island of Dominica. All these stories are leavened with Athill's lucid reflections on work, sexuality, feminism, social mores and peccadilloes, and religion and spirituality.

I admire Ms Athill's approach to life and to writing. This is the third book of hers that I have read and enjoyed. I will say that I was surprised at how distressing much of her life in publishing seems to have been, but maybe I'm misinterpreting.

I like cleverness and Diana is very clever, I actually asked to quote her in my own book. She captures a world of the past, the old publishing world BC (before computer publishing) together with more intimate biography. I got cross with her passivity over money and office space, but all that adds to enjoying a book.

As people age, most slow down, become more rigid and sour. And then every once in a rare while you run into a person like this author and say - "if this is what 80s are like, take me there!" This book has clarity, power, gossip, sex, intelligence and charity. Oh, how I wish Diana Athill had been my editor!

I received this book in great condition. I purchased it after reading quite the relatable interview with the author. A must read for the independent woman.

my favourite word. *Stet*.

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