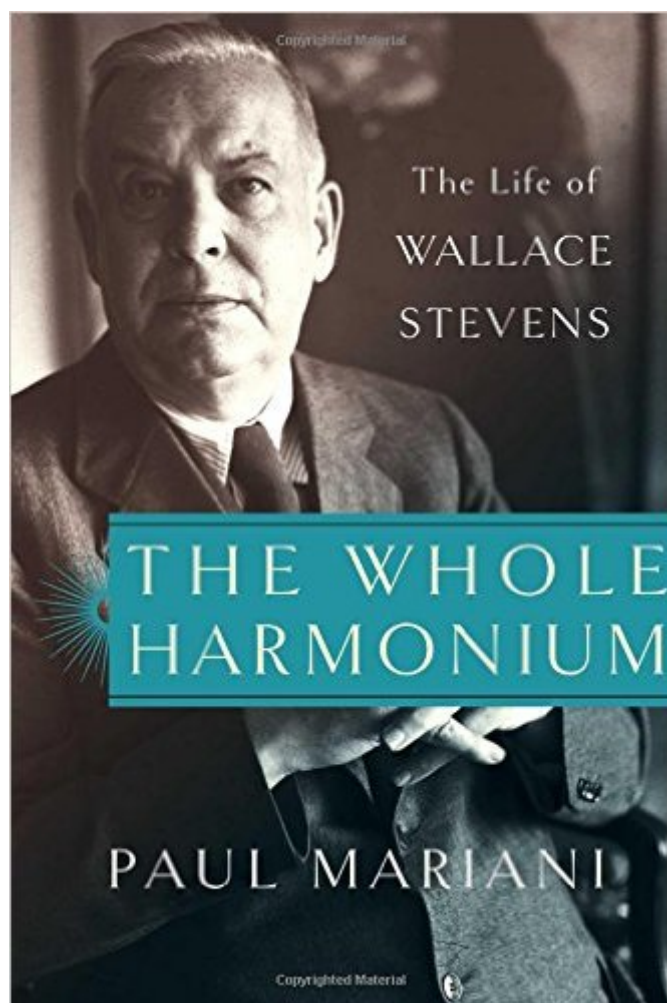


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The Whole Harmonium: The Life Of Wallace Stevens



Synopsis

A perceptive, enlightening biography of one the most important American poets of the twentieth century—Wallace Stevens—as seen through his lifelong quest to find and describe the sublime in the human experience. Wallace Stevens lived a richly imaginative life that found expression in his poetry. His philosophical questioning, spiritual depth, and brilliantly inventive use of language would be profound influences on poets as diverse as William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery. *The Whole Harmonium* presents Stevens within the living context of his times, as well as the creator of a poetry which has had a profound and lasting impact on the modern imagination itself. Stevens established his career as an executive even as he wrote his poetry, becoming a vice president with an insurance company in Hartford, Connecticut. His first and most influential book, *Harmonium*, was not published until he was forty-four years old. In these poems, Stevens drew on his interest in and understanding of modernism. Over time he became acquainted with the most accomplished of his contemporaries, Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams among them, but his personal style remained unique. He endured an increasingly unhappy marriage, losing himself by writing poetry in his study. Yet he had a witty, comic, and Dionysian side to his personality, including long fishing (and drinking) trips to Florida with his pals and a fascination with the sun-drenched tropics. People generally know two things about Wallace Stevens: that he is a poet and that he was an insurance executive for most of his life. Stevens may be challenging to understand, but he is also greatly rewarding to read. Now, sixty years after Stevens's death, biographer and poet Paul Mariani shows how over the course of his life, Stevens sought out the ineffable and spiritual in human existence in his search for the sublime.

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Customer Reviews

Wallace Stevens ranks with the greatest of the 20th century's American poets: William Carlos Williams, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, and Hart Crane. Professor Mariani has written biographies of all these named poets, as well as one on the poet/priest Gerard Manley Hopkins. He is now offering a new one on Wallace Stevens, the first in sixteen years: *The Whole Harmonium, The Life of Wallace Stevens*, published by Simon & Schuster. Not only is Mariani our premier biographer of poets, he is also one of our best critics and close reader of poetry, up there with such critics as Harold Bloom, Helen Vendler and Christian Wiman. He is also a fine poet himself, having published seven volumes of verse, as well as a spiritual memoir. He has also published two books of criticism, *A Usable Past* and *God and the Imagination*. Mariani offers a real portrait of Stevens, by this I mean he deviates from the held portrait of Stevens the aesthete, the poet who was a vice-president of an insurance company, thus able to live an upper class life, with a big home, gardens, and inside on his walls French paintings, and a library of rare books. But there had been a time when Stevens was just one of the guys of Reading Boys High, in Reading, Berks County, Pennsylvania, his birthplace. Like his friends, Stevens played pool, smoked, played poker and was a left end on the school's football team. A regular guy, not yet the effete poet he would become, and I do not use "effete" in a derogatory fashion: to me being somewhat over-refined isn't a negative.

I have returned to the American poet Wallace Stevens (1879 -- 1955) many times in my adult life and was glad to find this new biography, *"The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens"* (2016) by Paul Mariani. The University Professor of English at Boston University, Mariani has published several volumes of poetry together with biographies of the American poets Robert Lowell, William Carlos Williams, John Berryman, Hart Crane, and now Stevens. I read and learned from Mariani's biography of Crane, *"The Broken Tower"* which I reviewed in 2002 on .I have loved Stevens' difficult poetry for its own sake. He has inspired me over the years in his ability to combine artistic achievement with career success as a lawyer and executive for an insurance company. Other 20th century Americans who combined career with art include W.C. Williams and the composer Charles Ives. Williams and Stevens knew each other well, and their friendship is discussed in this biography. Ives and Stevens apparently did not know one another, and the parallels and differences in their lives may be a subject for exploration. I also have loved Stevens for

the strongly philosophical cast of his poetry. He is one of the rare poets who work in the realm of thought as well as in the concreteness of experience. The philosophical tenor of Stevens' poetry owes something to his student years at Harvard where he got to know George Santayana and, to a lesser extent, Josiah Royce. I have been studying the American idealist philosopher Josiah Royce in recent years. In reading Mariani's biography, I saw parallels between his absolute idealism and Stevens' absolute fiction that I hadn't thought about before.

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