



Not at All What One Is Used To: The Life and Times of Isabella Gardner

Marian Janssen

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Born in 1915 to one of New England's elite wealthy families, Isabella Gardner was expected to follow a certain path in life—one that would take her from marriageable debutante to proper society lady. But that plan was derailed when at age eighteen, Isabella caused a drunk-driving accident. Her family, to shield her from disgrace, sent her to Europe for acting studies, not foreseeing how life abroad would fan the romantic longings and artistic impulses that would define the rest of Isabella's years. In *Not at All What One Is Used To*, author Marian Janssen tells the story of this passionate, troubled woman, whose career as a poet was in constant compromise with her wayward love life and her impulsive and reckless character.

Life took Gardner from the theater world of the 1930s and '40s to the poetry scene of the '50s and '60s to the wild, bohemian art life of New York's Hotel Chelsea in the '70s. She often followed where romance, rather than career, led her. At nineteen, she had an affair with a future president of Ireland, then married and divorced three famous American husbands in succession. Turning from acting to poetry, Gardner became associate editor of Chicago's *Poetry* magazine and earned success with her best-received collection, *Birthdays from the Ocean*, in 1955. Soon after, her life took a turn when she met the southern poet Allen Tate. He was married to Caroline Gordon but left her to wed Gardner, who moved to Minneapolis and gave up writing to please him, but after a few short years, Tate fell for a young nun and abandoned her.

In the liveliest of places at the right times, Gardner associated with many of the most significant cultural figures of her age, including her cousin Robert Lowell, T.S. Eliot, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Virgil Thomson, Tennessee Williams, and Robert Penn Warren. But famous connections could never save Isabella from herself. Having abandoned her work, she suffered through alcoholism, endured more failed relationships, and watched the lives of her children unravel fatally. Toward the end of her life, though, she took her pen back up for the poems in her final volume. Redeemed by her writing, Gardner died alone in 1981, just after being named the first poet laureate of New York State.

Through interviews with many Gardner intimates and extensive archival research, author Marian Janssen delves deep into the life of a woman whose poetry, according to one friend, "probably saved her sanity." Much more than a biography, *Not at All What One Is Used To* is the story of a woman whose tumultuous life was emblematic of the cultural unrest at the height of the twentieth century.



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