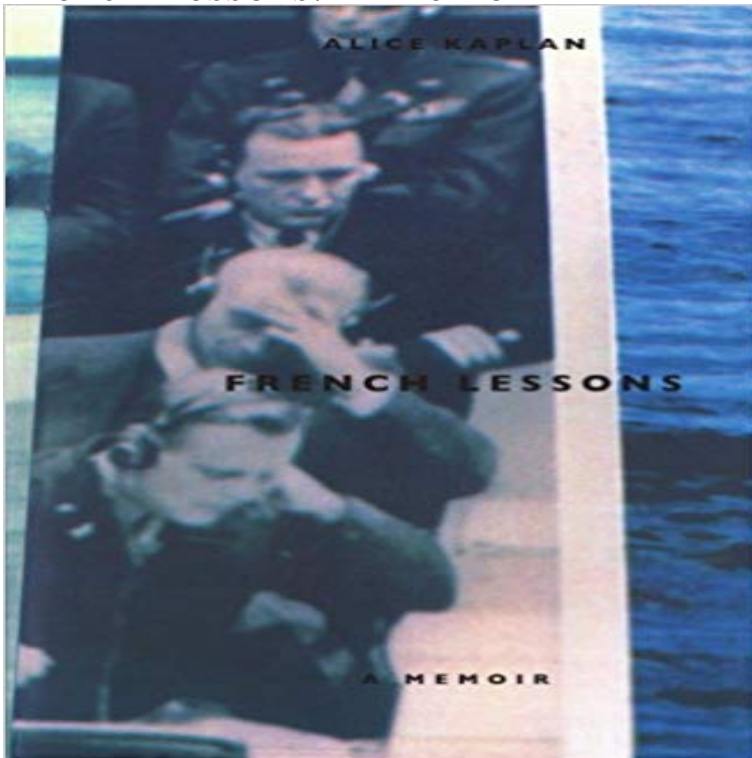


French Lessons: A Memoir



Brilliantly uniting the personal and the critical, *French Lessons* is a powerful autobiographical experiment. It tells the story of an American woman escaping into the French language and of a scholar and teacher coming to grips with her history of learning. Kaplan begins with a distinctly American quest for an imaginary France of the intelligence. But soon her infatuation with all things French comes up against the dark, unimagined recesses of French political and cultural life. The daughter of a Jewish lawyer who prosecuted Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg, Kaplan grew up in the 1960s in the Midwest. After her father's death when she was seven, French became her way of leaving home and finding herself in another language and culture. In spare, midwestern prose, by turns intimate and wry, Kaplan describes how, as a student in a Swiss boarding school and later in a junior year abroad in Bordeaux, she passionately sought the French, attentively honed her accent, and learned the idioms of her French lover. When, as a graduate student, her passion for French culture turned to the elegance and sophistication of its intellectual life, she found herself drawn to the language and style of the novelist Louis-Ferdinand Celine. At the same time she was repulsed by his anti-Semitism. At Yale in the late 70s, during the heyday of deconstruction she chose to transgress its apolitical purity and work on a subject that made history impossible to ignore: French fascist intellectuals. Kaplan's discussion of the de Man affair—the discovery that her brilliant and charismatic Yale professor had written compromising articles for the pro-Nazi Belgian press—and her personal account of the paradoxes of deconstruction are among the most compelling available on this subject. *French Lessons* belongs in the company of Sartre's *Words* and the memoirs of Nathalie Sarraute, Annie Ernaux, and Eva Hoffman. No book so

engrossingly conveys both the excitement of learning and the moral dilemmas of the intellectual life.

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