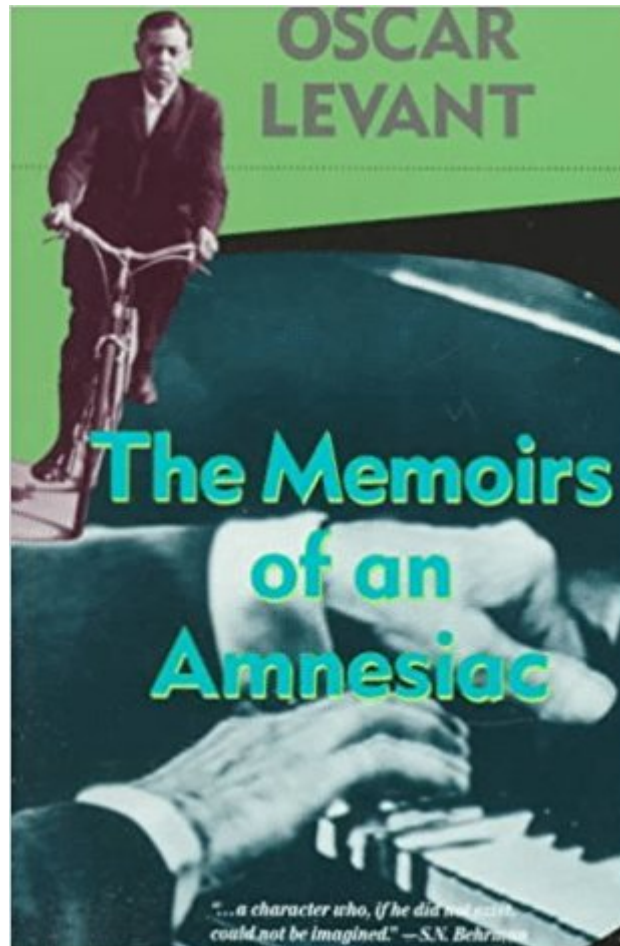




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Memoirs Of An Amnesiac



Synopsis

A world class pianist, composer, television and film personality, Levant seemed to know everyone who was anyone. His career took him from the concert hall to Broadway and Hollywood, to radio and television, to drug addiction and the psychiatric ward of Mr Sinai hospital. Through a collection of anecdotal vignettes, Levant offers the reader a roller-coaster ride through the ups and downs of an often troubled, often brilliant artist and critic of the human condition, let loose on the uneasy ground where art and commerce overlap.

Book Information

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Samuel French; 1st Samuel French ed edition (January 1990)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0573606986

ISBN-13: 978-0573606984

Product Dimensions: 8.5 x 5.5 x 0.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.7 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 28 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #317,698 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #111 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Theatre](#) #812 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Arts & Literature > Television Performers](#) #1306 in [Books > Arts & Photography > History & Criticism > Criticism](#)

Customer Reviews

Oscar Levant

This book is fun to read, and offers an interesting historical review, from Levant's delightfully twisted view. If Kevin Bacon is six degrees from everyone now, Levant was three in his time. His is simply the most fascinating mind I've had the pleasure of looking into. I also recommend "The Unimportance Of Oscar", if you can find it (I got my copy from the used book section on). It's a continuation of the thoughts in this book.

This book was a disappointment although it covers the scope of Oscar Levant's life from Tin Pan Alley to Carnegie Hall to Hollywood to mental hospitals. A major problem with the writing is that it consists of endless name dropping without context. If you aren't familiar with the names (which I

wasn't for the most part) then a good deal of the story is lost. Another feature of the writing is a constant stream of one-liners from Oscar and others. These were undoubtedly funny when they were first said, but in the book they seem forced. For example, "I once said cynically of a politician, 'He'll double-cross that bridge when he comes to it.'" If you enjoy one-liners then this book showcases them throughout. As a fan of Oscar Levant from movies like *Rhythm on the River* and *An American In Paris*, I was pleased that he was up front about many aspects of his life. However, the famous line, "Beneath this flabby exterior is an enormous lack of character" had a lot more truth to it than I had assumed. Oscar really does exhibit rude behavior, selfishness, cheating and drug addiction. And of course neurosis. He is honest to his faults. A better (but far briefer) description of Oscar Levant is in Harpo Marx's book "*Harpo Speaks*". That book also has a lot of name dropping, but the literary style is rich so that it's fascinating even if you are not familiar with the Algonquin Round Table. With Oscar's book, I was satisfied about the scope of the writing, but disappointed in the terse style although it's an easy read.

Very enjoyable. Being 79, I well remember Oscar Levant from his films and television appearances. And, of course, his musical talent which always engaged me. His mordant humor is sprinkled through the book and the various chapters relate to his encounters and opinions of the composers, conductors and symphonic orchestras of his time, his ventures into film where he often created his own dialogue, and the final chapter relates to his chronic depressing years of drug addiction. Early on he describes his childhood which was certainly unique but sad to read of - developing his marvelous skill at the piano and there is a central chapter that relates to his close friendship with George Gershwin and the Gershwin family. The book prompted me to purchase "*A Talent for Genius - The Life and Times of Oscar Levant*" - a well written biography of this talented and tortured man.

When I was in college back in the 1970s, I began listening to my mother's 78s on a tall Victrola that was relegated to a spare bedroom at the back of the house. I was just beginning to learn about Classical music and was always on the lookout for something truly unique among all the artist. Upon hearing Gershwin's Concerto in F, I was immediately fascinated by the pianist, Oscar Levant, who played it far better than anyone I had ever heard before. My mother told me that he was her favorite pianist and that he had written three books. Though they were out of print, I managed to find them at some of the used bookstores in Uptown Whittier. "*Memoirs*" is among the most important biographies in my substantial library of nonfiction books. Levant was an amazing raconteur with

genius in many areas besides music. With a near-photographic memory and an acerbic wit, literally every page is filled with nostalgic anecdotes exceeding the realm of sheer entertainment. Levant's style of writing is laconic, acerbic, insightful, and genuine. He is never boring. The primary fault of "Memoirs" is its lack of organization. It is a hodgepodge of information that seems to have come from Oscar off the top of his head. His first book, "A Smattering of Ignorance," was much more detailed and far better organized. Then again, "Smattering" was written before Oscar had gone off the deep end, mentally; before his series of mental breakdowns. Perhaps, a more accurate title for this book could have been, "A Scattering of Indignants" because of Oscar's cynical view of the world. This is NOT a book of gossip, but it IS riddled with scandalous tidbits of information about some very significant people over four decades of Levant's extraordinary life. It was through this book that I learned about various members of The Algonquin Round Table. "Memoirs" is like the seed of which eventually branched into an entire library of books of its genre. Aside from being entertaining, it is both intellectual and highly educational; a book that I have read again and again and use for reference. If you are truly a lover of nostalgia and a student of seemingly useless knowledge, this book is definitely for you. To those who wish to compare Levant's "Memoirs" to "Harpo Speaks!" please remember that the latter wasn't written by Harpo Marx himself, but by Roland Barber, a professional writer. Harpo, having literally been "dropped" out of the 2nd grade, it would have been impossible for him to write such a book on his own. {"Harpo" happens to be my all-time favorite book, by the way.} Oscar Levant, even though a high school drop-out, would have never used a ghostwriter, and I'm glad he didn't. What you get, for better or worse, is pure Levant.

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