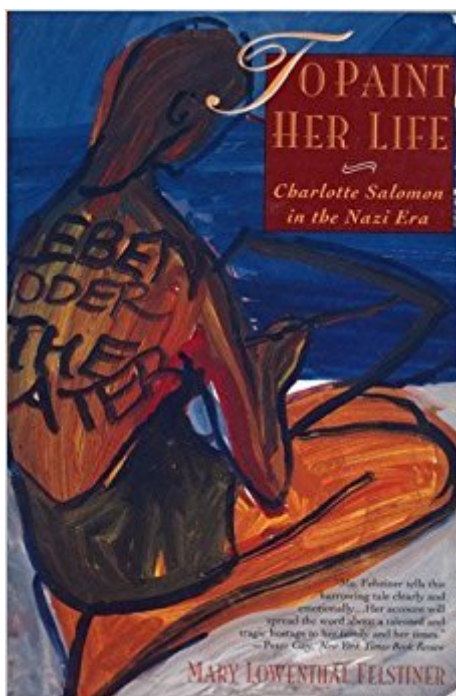


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# To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon In The Nazi Era



## Synopsis

This remarkable biography of Charlotte Salomon, who died in Auschwitz at the age of 26, provides a stunning look at her life as a woman, an artist, and a Jew during the Holocaust. "A fugue of art and history, love and pain, sexuality and politics".--Los Angeles Times. 40 photos. 8-page color insert.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Felstiner (history, San Francisco State Univ.) has written a poignant, tragic biography of Charlotte Salomon, a Jewish artist who grew up in Berlin between the wars. In 1938, Salomon was sent to the south of France to join her grandparents as refugees. Shy and withdrawn, she sought escape from reality in her art and created an autobiography, *Leben oder Theater?*, for which she produced over 700 paintings and drawings. Felstiner bases the biography on this work, as well as on interviews with people who knew Salomon and research in various archives. The story also explicates the plight of Jewish women during the Holocaust. Although Salomon's personality is not clearly delineated, this title is recommended for all libraries. (Illustrations not seen.)-Sharon Firestone, Ross-Blakley Law Lib., Arizona State Univ., Tempe  
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Who was Charlotte Salomon, and why has historian Felstiner devoted 10 years of her life to reconstructing Charlotte's? Lotte Salomon was a German Jew who died in the Holocaust but left behind an incomparable and profoundly moving work of art. *Life? or Theater?* An Operetta consists of more than 700 paintings accompanied by a running narrative and an assortment of lyrics. This

imaginative, deeply affecting, illustrated songplay, which Felstiner characterizes as the most penetrating visual record we have from the Nazi era about a single life, fictionalizes the story of Lotte's death-shadowed childhood and all-too-fleeting experience of love. Felstiner's painstaking research into a past blasted by the diabolically thorough destruction of the Nazis is nothing short of remarkable, as is the survival of Lotte's poignant creation. As Felstiner traces Lotte's path from the heart of Berlin's Jewish community to her intensely productive, if brief, exile in the south of France, she enriches our lives with knowledge of Lotte but also sheds light on little-known aspects of the Jewish massacre, particularly the treatment of women. In fact, Felstiner ended up tracking down a notorious, alive and all-too-well, unpunished, unrepentant SS officer responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews, including Lotte, who died at Auschwitz at age 26, five months pregnant. Lotte painted so that she and her people would be remembered; Felstiner has taken up the banner of truth and beauty to make certain we never forget. Donna Seaman --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is fascinating. It was thoroughly researched, and gives a compelling account of the effects of the rise of the Nazi movement and the slow and excruciating restrictions on the Jews living in Berlin, particularly this one family of the Salomons. Although I studied art history, I had never heard of Charlotte Salomon until a friend told me of an exhibit she'd seen of her work in San Francisco. After learning about her and looking at her very personal paintings, I felt as if I'd discovered the Jewish Frida Kahlo. Like Kahlo, Salomon's work is biographical and very, very personal. Obviously it is not surreal like Kahlo's, but still I felt this artist was driven "to paint her life" and left us with a wonderful gift of her work.

I have the big full size version which I consider a very great book. A truly inspiring experience to read and meditate on. Many awakening experiences reached through this book.

In the early 1980's, while browsing the discount table at my favorite bookstore of the time (Orr Books in Uptown Minneapolis, RIP), I stumbled on this huge art book from Viking Press simply titled Charlotte, which featured the entirety of German Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon's magnum opus, Life? Or Theater? This autobiographical work consists of 769 unforgettably expressive and powerful gouache paintings with accompanying text, covering in rich detail her childhood in Berlin, dark family secrets of multiple suicides, her education in art school, and her obsessive love affair with her stepmother's brilliant but eccentric voice teacher, all against the backdrop of the growing menace of

the Nazi regime. Salomon, desperate to create meaning out of the chaos and despair of her life and times, worked obsessively from 1941-1943 to complete her story while living in exile in France. Some months after completing the work she was ultimately captured and killed by the Nazis in late 1943. Thankfully, her work was saved. Charlotte and *Life Or Theater* made a huge impact on me and I've kept them close to my heart ever since. Charlotte is still not as well known as she should be, though over the years there have been more and more exhibitions of *Life or Theater* internationally and even a non-fiction film or two covering her life and work. I tell people about her all the time, but the book, being the doorstop that it is, is not an easy lender. Then, in late 1998, while visiting London, I chanced upon a poster in the Tube station advertising an exhibit of *Life? Or Theater?* at the Royal Academy, going on right then, that very month! I dragged my boyfriend of the time there, posthaste. The power of seeing Charlotte's paintings in front of me - something I hadn't ever thought would happen - was indescribable. I left the gallery overcome with emotion, barely able to speak for a time (the BF was very understanding). To this day it's the shining moment of all my years of museum and gallery hopping - the closest I've ever had to experiencing the Stendhal Syndrome. I since have really come to see *Life or Theater* as an early graphic novel; perhaps that is why its inspiration has been so powerful to me. The blending of words and pictures to tell a story, there's nothing else like it. Anyway, this book by Mary Lowenthal Felstiner - the one I'm supposed to be commenting upon here - is a valuable companion to the art book discussed above, filling in many of the biographical blanks that Charlotte's mix of fiction and fact work couldn't possibly have offered, and providing a more detailed portrait of the times in which she lived, worked, and died. Reading about the atrocities of the Nazi regime is always extremely painful and infuriating, but Ms. Felstiner interweaves all this history, biography, and analysis quite artfully, reminding us in the end that Charlotte's art has lived on, triumphantly (*Never Forget*, as we are always reminded). Anyone who has appreciated Salomon's work will undoubtedly find this a necessary read. Five stars.

I found a copy of *To Paint Her Life* quite by chance at Shakespeare and Co. in Paris. I had no previous knowledge of the author or the subject of the book, and I wasn't sure why I was drawn to it. It was the only book I purchased there. I adored it. It is a rich description of Charlotte Salomon's life -- including but not limited to her life as an artist -- under the Nazis, about her remarkable art itself, and about, well, life itself. I relished everything about this book and hated to finish it. I cannot recommend it highly enough. It enriched my life, and it stays with me years later.

You may have read many memoirs, and biographies about people affected by the Holocaust.

However, do not think this is similar to other stories, or be put off by a topic that is upsetting. The journey through this book will be more than rewarding. Mary Felstiner has a deep, historical knowledge of Charlotte Salomon that she relays in a moving, and powerful style. You feel that you intimately know the people she writes about. Salomon's story is not one that is widely known, but it should be. She painted her life story during the Nazi years in the form of an operetta. Her paintings recently on display in the US tell a painful, vivid story of her, her parents, and her lover. This book is about what happened to Charlotte Salomon and her family during the Nazi years, but will also be of great interest to people interested in art, and in the human condition. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

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