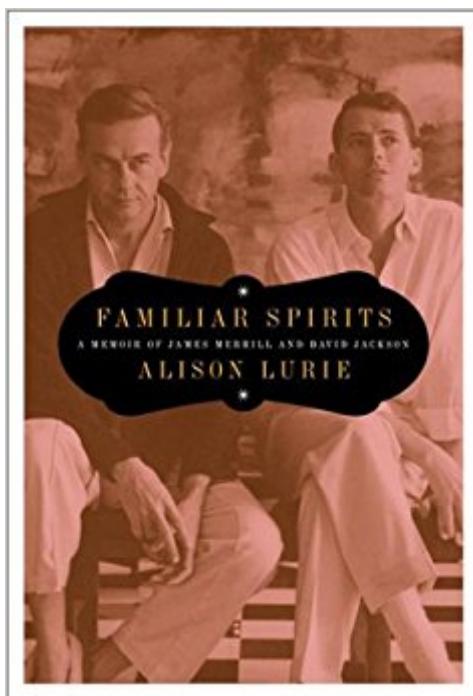


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# Familiar Spirits: A Memoir Of James Merrill And David Jackson



## Synopsis

A leading American novelist's memory of a major contemporary American poet and the spirits that haunted his most celebrated and controversial work, Alison Lurie is known for the sophisticated satire and Pulitzer-winning prose of her novels and stories. In *Familiar Spirits*, she lovingly evokes two true-life intimates who are now lost to her. In her signature mix of comedy and analysis Lurie recalls Merrill and his longtime partner, David Jackson and their lives together in New York, Athens, Stonington, Connecticut, and Key West. *Familiar Spirits* reveals both the worldly and other worldly sources of what Merrill called his "chronicles of love and loss." Merrill was known for the autobiographical element in his work and here, we are introduced to the over thirty years of Ouija board sessions that brought gods and ghosts into his and David Jackson's lives, and also into Merrill's brilliant book length poem, *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Lurie suggests that Jackson's contribution to this work was so great that he might, in a sense, be recognized as Merrill's coauthor. Her account of Merrill and Jackson's long and inspired relationship with the supernatural and its tragic end will not only surprise many readers, but stand as a poignant memorial to her lost friends.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Written with her characteristic grace, novelist Alison Lurie's memoir of her friendship with the poet James Merrill and his companion David Jackson offers more than reminiscences, though these are tender, frank, and perceptive. Lurie also considers the broader subjects of fame's arbitrary nature and its impact on a relationship, as well as the perils and pleasures of dabbling in the occult. When she first became close to the couple in 1954, all three were struggling young writers. But while

Merrill soon became a critically respected poet, and novels like *The War Between the Tates* made Lurie some money as well as a reputation, Jackson remained unpublished and obscure. He was understandably frustrated, and Lurie suggests that the pair's increasing involvement in sessions on their Ouija board were partly an effort to find an outlet for Jackson's creative energies. These sessions formed the basis for Merrill's long poem "The Changing Light at Sandover" (in Lurie's estimation not the best use of his gifts), and she believes they encouraged the men to become dangerously isolated from the real world. Jackson began to drink more heavily, and his casual affairs grew more irritating to Merrill, who launched a serious relationship with a young actor whose uncritical devotion exacerbated tensions between the longtime lovers. Merrill died of AIDS in 1995; the physically and mentally debilitated Jackson, writes Lurie, "is now a ghost in Key West." Her sensitive recollections bring back the time when they were young, beautiful, and in love, with the world before them. Examining the personal and artistic cost of their decades-long engagement with the spirit world, Lurie asks the always relevant, never resolvable questions, "How much should one risk for art? What chances should one take?" --Wendy Smith

Novelist Lurie's brief, disturbing memoir covers her four decades of acquaintance with the important American poet Merrill (1926-1995) and his longtime partner, Jackson. Lurie grew friendly with the talented couple when Merrill taught at Amherst alongside Lurie's husband in 1954-1957. Lurie and Jackson were aspiring novelists, Merrill a little-known poet. Though the group dispersed geographically, they stayed friends; Lurie visited Merrill and Jackson's remarkable house in Connecticut, where she compared their successful domestic life to her own increasingly unhappy marriage. Lurie's career as a novelist, and Merrill's fame as a poet, grew throughout the '60s, while Jackson's promising novels remained unpublished. Merrill and Jackson devoted themselves, first to Greece, where they took other lovers, and then to communication with the afterlife via a Ouija board. The Ouija experience of "JM" and "DJ" became the basis for Merrill's well-known long poem, "The Changing Light at Sandover," which integrates autobiography and lyric with didactic messages from beyond. Lurie believes that Merrill and Jackson used Ouija as an escape from Jackson's creative frustrations and from their troubles as a couple, and that it told them what they wanted to hear: Lurie's saddening analyses draw on her researches for her novel about spiritualism and seances, *Imaginary Friends*. The last third of the memoir follows Merrill and Jackson's life in Key West in the '80s and early '90s: Merrill fell in love with a dangerously clingy younger admirer, while Jackson abandoned himself to one-night stands and then to drink. There is not yet a full biography of Merrill; that means his many fans who want to know more about his personal life have almost

nowhere else to turn but here. (Feb.) Forecast: Lurie's name will guarantee review attention and, if sold alongside Knopf's edition of Merrill's work, *Collected Poems*, due in March, this book should enjoy respectable sales. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Wonderful story - only that, like Merrill & his companion, the author got lost in the Ouija board stuff so I had to skip about 50 pages!

I was drawn to this book by a Ouija Board. (Kidding.) Actually, I was fascinated by the story of two writers who decided to contact spirits of dead poets, or whoever came through, by using an overturned teacup instead of the usual planchette and a Ouija Board. Ms. Lurie's memoir drew me in quite quickly and kept my interest throughout the story of these two men with her dry, but engrossing, style as well as an insider's understanding of a pair of friends she loved throughout their lives. It's a small book, a quick read, but stuffed with the kind of trenchant observations I find fascinating when it comes to the writing of biographies. Initially unaware of James Merrill and David Jackson, I was more interested in the dynamics of their relationship as it progressed from the 50s to the 90s. Although the resulting "channeled" poetry wasn't exactly my, um, cup of tea, I still enjoyed the brevity of her style and the quality of her insight.

It is a sort of maxim that a writer, when taking up her subject, should be in sympathy with the topic. You don't want someone who hates fantasy to review the newest Susanna Clarke novel. Or someone who hates Jews and sex to review the newest Philip Roth novel. Unfortunately, Alison Lurie feels important enough or brilliant enough to write about the wonderful poet James Merrill, and she spends much of the book dissecting and belittling and caviling over *The Changing Light at Sandover*. I would ask her, if I could, why bother writing about him if you had so little nice to say? She even admits she only read the whole poem years after it came out, and had skimmed it initially. That makes you not qualified to talk about it! Ok, so please don't think this is just sour grapes because I love him and she is demeaning what he did. The book is also poorly written. A reviewer talked about Lurie showing her "trademark wit." What wit? There is no grace, no charm, no wit, and worst of all, no wisdom. This is almost like a sympathetic, non-poetry loving gossip-monger decided to capitalize on a good but not great friendship with Merrill to make a few bucks and write a short memoir years after he had died. This book is only for those who love James Merrill and will read anything about him; there is nothing else out there. But the first biography or next memoir to come out will definitely replace this superficial, gossipy and unsympathetic memoir.

Lurie writes a very carefully rendered and bittersweet record of a friendship that was fraught with love, frustration, complexity, and disappointment. She's modest and thoughtful -- nothing like the caricature depicted in some of the comments here of a person inserting herself into the lives of others. In fact, while I've taken a more sympathetic (and less intimate) perspective on Merrill and Jackson's use of a Ouija board, Lurie provides an extremely important, up-close narrative. I read this book more than five years ago and still think of some of its passages today. That's quite rare for any memoir and speaks to the book's depths.

In spite of the fact that the author reveals a bit too much of herself in this book (a fact which makes you like and then dislike her sometimes) she does weave an interesting theory about the inner workings of Merrill and Jackson's minds. I didn't feel she presented these men dishonestly, though some fans of Merrill's obviously resented the fact that their god was made to appear as a mere mortal---and a somewhat foolish one at that. Juicy, gossipy, lewd, audacious at times, you had to imagine she was indeed capitalizing somewhat on her friendship with Merrill because she did not wait for her friend David Jackson to die before she began revealing what a mess he had become. Why? If she were afraid SHE would die without having a chance to add her two cents she could have written the book, but not published it until after Jackson's real death. I guess it's hard to quarrel with her motives as I read it in one sitting, lapping up all the strange, weird revelations about these men. My respect for them was not diminished by her lurid details of their intimate life. Nothing in Key West is ever ordinary...What was most fascinating about the book though was the fact that Lurie herself became an equal part of the mystery. Was she obsessed with these men? Secretly in love with Jackson? Jealous of them? Twice she had to say that "they were rich and could buy anything they wanted". Twice! Sadly, Lurie never did manage to do what she wanted---to comprehend these men. This goal never got quite satisfied, so in the end the reader of this book is not quite satisfied. It is an important memoir though because it is the ONLY one right now offering any insight into Merrill, the man and the poet. I think you have to accept the book for exactly what it is, one woman's perspective about two men she was close to---but not close enough to truly understand them. It was an honest attempt on Lurie's part and a courageous one even and it did reveal Lurie's writing talent. For better or worse, she certainly did create a very vivid yet terrifying tale about two utterly amazing lives.

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