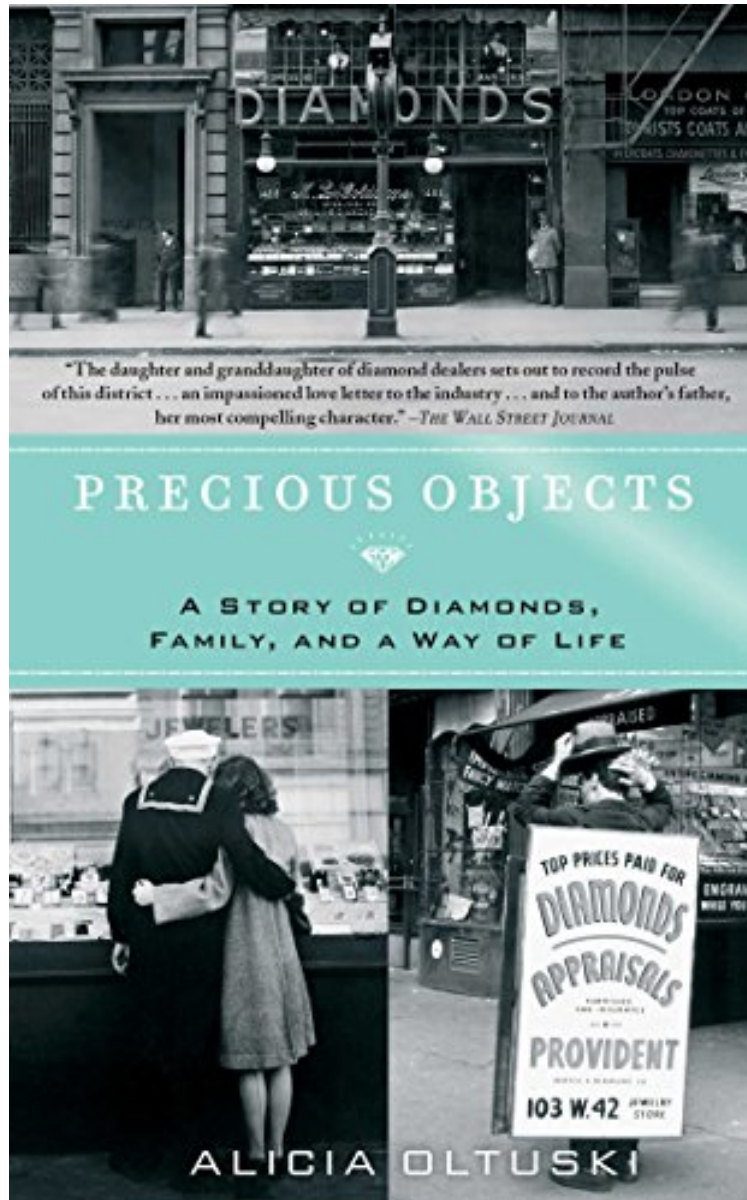


[E-BOOK] Precious Objects: A Story of Diamonds, Family, and a Way of Life

Precious Objects: A Story of Diamonds, Family, and a Way of Life

Alicia Oltuski

ebooks | Download PDF | *ePub | DOC | audiobook



DOWNLOAD



+

READ ONLINE

#779545 in eBooks 2011-07-19 2011-07-19 File Name: B004G8QNIK | File size: 21.Mb

Alicia Oltuski : Precious Objects: A Story of Diamonds, Family, and a Way of Life before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Precious Objects: A Story of Diamonds, Family, and a Way of Life:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Precious Objects: A Story of Diamonds, Family and a Way of Life: Purchased at .comBy depPrecious Objects is written by Alicia Oltuski, a young woman whose father and grandfather

both dealt in the diamond business, mostly in New York City. I thought this was a wonderful book, very well researched that's for sure. The author goes into all aspects of diamonds, how they are made, how they are obtained, and also explains their history starting in Africa. She explains how the famous De Beers diamond company started and lots of the politics that go with such a large company. There is quite a bit of information to read through in this book, so I skipped around a bit. I really liked parts of the book when the author brought her own family history into the book, both past and present. I am giving the book four stars only because I wished a family or two from Holland or Belgium where they also deal with the diamond trade was represented. It was easier for me to deal with explanations pertaining to diamonds on a family basis. Overall, a great book and a great read. If reading *Precious Objects* doesn't make you feel like buying diamonds (my birthstone) nothing will. Now I also know where their great advertising on television comes from. Say it with diamonds. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Inside the Diamond Trade By B. J. Taylor Alicia Oltuski grew up in one of the diamond dealer families in the Diamond District in NYC. In her delightful book, she tells a bit about the history of diamonds, how diamonds are cut, how the price is determined, etc. She explains the issue of the "blood diamonds", or "conflict diamonds". She also goes into how diamonds are being "grown" in laboratories. Something that really surprised me was the trend now for diamonds "made from your loved one". Using some of the carbon from the deceased a diamond can be ordered and produced so your loved one will always be close to you. Hmmm. It is a fascinating view into the secret world of the Diamond District. 7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. A fascinating peek behind the curtain By J. Margulies My favorite non-fiction books teach me something new on every page while telling a story in an engaging and enjoyable way; Ms. Oltuski's portrait of the jewelry industry easily passes this test. I knew next to nothing about the jewelry industry before, and now that I've finished the book I feel like an insider. Ms. Oltuski found fascinating characters through which to tell her story: a pair of crime-fighting brothers who work to prevent and solve robberies to karmically avenge their own family's jewelry business; the real DeBeers family, who walked away from a fortune because it was ruining their nice farm; a mogul who made his money creating a product that the diamond industry simultaneously hated and found themselves needing to use; and a group of Ms. Oltuski's own family members, both lucky and tragic. Before I read this book I didn't think I had any interest in how jewelry was found, made, and sold. To me, jewelry was an overpriced rip-off, and it was enough to know I just shouldn't spend a lot of money on it. Now, I still think jewelry's a rip-off, but I'm glad it exists: The fact that these products have very little practical use or intrinsic value has created a unique world of fascinating characters and unique behaviors that just aren't necessary in normal markets. It makes me want to go to 47th Street and haggle.

In the middle of New York City lies a neighborhood where all secrets are valuable, all assets are liquid, and all deals are sealed with a blessing rather than a contract. Welcome to the diamond district. Ninety percent of all diamonds that enter America pass through these few blocks, but the inner workings of this mysterious world are known only to the people who inhabit it. In *Precious Objects*, twenty-six-year-old journalist Alicia Oltuski, the daughter and granddaughter of diamond dealers, seamlessly blends family narrative with literary reportage to reveal the fascinating secrets of the diamond industry and its madcap characters: an Elvis-impersonating dealer, a duo of diamond-detective brothers, and her own eccentric father. With insight and drama, Oltuski limns her family's diamond-paved move from communist Siberia to a displaced persons camp in post-World War II Germany to New York's diamond district, exploring the connections among Jews and the industry, the gem and its lore, and the exotic citizens of this secluded world. Entertaining and illuminating, *Precious Objects* offers an insider's look at the history, business, and society behind one of the world's most coveted natural resources, providing an unforgettable backstage pass to an extraordinary and timeless show.

With revealing observations on the centuries-old link between Jews and the diamond industry, and sparkling accounts of her familial ties to the businesshellip;. Oltuski, daughter of a diamond dealer, brings clarity in this study of the industry. ndash; Publishers Weekly "A piercing, intensely readable book. Ms. Oltuski guides us through New York's diamond business, one of the world's most fascinating and hard-to-penetrate communities, with great aplomb." - Gary Shteyngart, author of *Super Sad True Love Story* "Alicia Oltuski is an intrepid journalist able to write with precision and insight about the big issues in the diamond trade and the intimate details of life on Forty-Seventh Street." - Tony Hall, U.S. Representative "Beautiful and thrilling, *Precious Objects*, sparkles with life. Alicia Oltuski tells both the story of her family, as glittering as the gems they sell, and the story of the diamonds that have taken them all over the world and across the generations. A fascinating and gripping read." - Jennifer Gilmore, author of *Something Red* "A warm and detailed tour of a fascinating culture that hides in plain sight. You'll never see a diamond twinkling on a woman's finger without remembering the remarkable characters in Oltuski's book." - Dan Baum, author of *Citizen Coors* "Epic in scope and wonderfully personal, *Precious Objects* is an impassioned, insider's take on a complex industry. What's most dazzling are Ms. Oltuski's characters, who are vivid, outrageous, and never without some glimmers of wisdom." - Beth Raymer, author of *Lay the Favorite* About the Author Alicia Oltuski is the author of *Precious Objects*. Her work has appeared on NPR's *Berlin Stories*, in *W* magazine, *The Penn*, *Peregrine*, and

other publications. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Columbia University, where she received a David Berg Foundation Fellowship, and a BA and MA from the University of Pennsylvania. She lives in the Washington, DC area with her husband. nbsp;Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 1 Our Brightest Blazes

My father handed me the chest pack. It was a tan pouch the size of a small outstretched hand. I took off my jacket and slipped the pack over my tank top, on my right shoulder, where the pack rested between my breast and armpit. I slid on my jacket and zipped up. My father checked me for bulges. Inside the pack, I had carefully placed the gold bracelet, a thick Victorian piece decorated with flowers, whose petals were made of sapphires and whose centers, of diamonds. A few of the diamonds were missing. I was to pick up the replacements at a jewelry exchange down the street and carry everything to the setter, who would fit the gems into the bracelet. I was twenty-two, and this was my summer job. My father paid me what I had made teaching English as a Second Language at collegemdash;an amount that, two months earlier, he had dismissed as underpayment. Idquo;If they went anywhere else, they would be paying at least twice as much,rdquo; hersquo;d complained. Now, with the pack secured, I stood next to his safe, a massive silver-gray box that hovered like a crouching giant at forty-two inches high. In addition to two doors and a combination code, there was a key formed from a long rod with an encoded tip that had to be reassembled with each use. Inside the safe lay dozens of black boxes with windowed tops through which the diamonds sparkled. There were black trays filled with gleaming old jewels: a musky cameo brooch, a diamond pin with a hunk of aquamarine, a velvet necklace with a green peridot gem pared into the shape of Medusarsquo;s head, and a flower diamond brooch that shivered when shaken. Once, I even spotted a gold chain with dangling angry-looking warriorsrsquo; faces painted onto blocks of ivory. Most of my fatherrrsquo;s jewelry is old; it suggests a time in which not only taste but also bodies were different. He owns wristwatches so slender they look as if theirsquo;d break if one ever checked the time, and earrings so heavy I could imagine them tugging on the lobes of giants. On top of the safe is a framed picture of his brother, Steve, sitting tranquilly on a boat in the middle of a lake. Near the desk where my mother works when she comes in to assist my father stand six photographs depicting my parents on a night out in Germany, where they grew up and lived before I was born, and a shot of our family at my sistersquo;s bat mitzvah, my mother draped in diamonds. Behind my fatherrrsquo;s table is an old photo in which his business friend Lester sits on his lap while my father wears an exaggerated expression of pain. Though my fatherrrsquo;s appearance is orderlydash;he believes in tidiness, in general, and clean fingernails, in particulardash;his desk is often cluttered with papers, stones in boxes, and trays of jewelry. He sits the farthest possible distance from the door, so that he can keep watch over who enters his office without being within their immediate reach. Next to him is a row of windows through which the masses of foot traffic that flood New Yorkrsquo;s diamond district are visible, or would be if he didnrsquo;t always keep his shades drawn. Cameras displaying the hallway outside hang from the wall, and beneath his desk, always at his fingertips, is a red panic button that summons the police. The office itself is like a safe. To leave that day, I passed through three doors. First, a standard gray lightweight; then a bulky metallic one, containing a bulletproof window with a bank slide for quick and secure exchanges; and finally, the outermost door, wooden and professional-looking, bearing the company name, Oltuski Brothers, though there is only one brother in the business. The wooden door and the metallic one are set up so that when one is opened, the other locks automatically, to slow getaways in the event of a robbery. Having two or three office doors isnrsquo;t unusual in the diamond district, but this labyrinth of security particularly suits my father. This is a man who made his entire family wear surgical masks for weeks after my sistersquo;s birth. He wouldnrsquo;t let me near the playground sprinklers because hersquo;d heard somewhere that they could spread hepatitis. He forbade me from marching in the Israeli Day Parade with my classmates and all the other Jewish school students in the tristate area. Idquo;Too many Jews in one place,rdquo; he said. A perfect target for terrorism. A perfect target was why I couldnrsquo;t go on my high schoolrsquo;s graduation trip to Israel. The fortification of the diamond business seeped into our private lives, and my father hid us from the world just as fiercely as he hid his stones. Because he wanted to keep me safe, he didnrsquo;t dress me in his diamonds. In fact, I wasnrsquo;t allowed to pierce my ears until I was sixteen, because hersquo;d heard somewhere that muggers had torn a womanrsquo;s earrings straight out of her lobes on the streets of New York. Any gem I possessed was kept in my fatherrrsquo;s safe along with my baby teeth. I never minded any of this until once, in synagogue, his friend looked at my arm and said to him, Idquo;What? Not even a little bracelet?rdquo; and I burned with shame. As I left the office, I passed by the framed decorative cards my mother had hung in the corridor to make the white, -fluorescent-lit room less sterile: a cat wearing a diamond tiara; loose diamonds glimmering inside an egg carton; a cartoon diamond that says You Rock; and a Samuel Johnson quote: Idquo;Our brightest blazes are commonly kindled by unexpected sparks!rdquo; She believes that if the office looks nice, people will be inspired to buy. In the lobby of our building I pushed past the turnstiles by the security desk, through two more doors, and then I was on the street with five thousand dollarsrsquo; worth of jewels strapped to my body. I was nervous. Four years as an English major hadnrsquo;t prepared me for diamond deliveries. And neither had my father. He applied silence to as many parts of our life as he could, especially diamonds. He was always hiding things. If a stranger asked what he did for a living, he never said he was a jeweler. Instead, he made up a different profession. Sometimes he sold insurance. Other times he was a product representative. But I didnrsquo;t have an alternate persona to slip into. Instead, I crossed Fifth Avenue from the quieter east side, where my

father's office building resides, to the west, and tried to act casual. But when you are carrying diamonds, each block is a continent. I was greeted by two colossal diamond-shaped lamps built atop giant metallic stanchions. These columns guard all four corners of Forty-seventh Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues and signal the borders of the district's most important quarter. Crossing was like going from an American suburb to a medieval marketplace. Hired men and women with signs over their chests and flyers in their hands walked the street calling, "We buy gold," "We buy diamonds." Dealers convened in pairs, making verbal contracts, gossiping about who bought the three-carat for fifty thousand, or how much that special art deco necklace sold for. Armored trucks stood parked on the street while couriers sorted diamond deliveries under the scanning eyes of guards with guns, and the civilians of Forty-seventh Street, the customers, pressed their noses against the ground-floor window displays. Inside the windows, earrings hung like fruit from little cushion trees. Necklaces were draped around plastic busts. Gold chains dangled from hooks on suction cups. Diamonds were peppered onto brooches and bracelets like garnishes. Glittering hearts, skulls, starfish—whatever you desire. Deeper into the street, I reached the exchange at 10 West Forty-seventh Street. It felt like a casino. Men and women stood around waiting for their lucky break. Dealers called out numbers—the prices and dimensions of stones. The room was packed so densely, they hardly needed to move to show someone a diamond. I squeezed through the narrow aisles lined by jewel-filled booths. Two men played cards over a showcase. Another sucked on an unlit cigar, and a few uniformed guards milled around aimlessly. Each company in the exchange had a display case and a booth the size of a half bathroom. Dealers sat on stools or folding chairs, or leaned onto their cases. On the cubicle walls hung dollar bills, family pictures, and signs explaining refund policies. Some booths, even those of non-Hasidim, had a picture of the famed white-bearded Lubavitcher rebbe, whom many devotees, undeterred by his death in 1994, believe to be the Messiah. Sometimes I wondered if the pictures were meant to draw business from his followers. The exchange was lit by long white lamps that hung diagonally from the ceiling, and track lights that hovered above the booths, but despite all these efforts at illumination, the room remained somewhat dim. Its floors were dusky, covered in black and yellow shapes that resembled small rocks. The hum of steady conversation filled the hall, frequently punctuated by telephone rings and, every once in a while, the sound of heated bargaining or a steam machine blasting dirt off a jewel. Toward the front of the exchange, in a corner booth, I spotted a black arched plastic sign that simply said Ginsburg, the name of the man who had borrowed my father's stones. His booth was sprawling compared to some of the others. Its three display cases were filled with jewelry in so many different colors and styles—painted brooches, blue and green gemstone rings, butterfly shapes and gilded leaves—that it resembled a high-end carnival prize stand. Behind the showcases was a chain of space-efficient desks covered in paperwork, and above them, gray cabinets. A glaring diamond light was mounted to the wall. A handful of employees, including Ginsburg's wife, negotiated the narrow space. I stood on the outside of the booth, in the aisle. Ginsburg (I promised him I would use a pseudonym) sported an elegant mustache and goatee. His eyes were dark and pointed, like periods. He didn't have all of his hair, but a large part of his head was covered with his black kippah. I told Ginsburg I was from Oltuski. "You're from Oltuski or you are Oltuski?" It isn't hard to see that my father and I are related. I inherited a variation of his downturned eyes, which can make us look sad. We are both on the short side, and have ears that salute at an angle, rather than falling neatly into line with our temples. Ginsburg said to tell my father he was sorry that he had not been able to sell the stones. At any given moment on Forty-seventh Street a dealer may be in possession of hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of another man's diamonds. Usually, he has not paid the owner any collateral, only his word. He receives the diamonds in an envelope with a name on it. Sometimes the owner doesn't even ask for a receipt to prove that the merchandise is his, although my father, not surprisingly, had. In this business, everything works on credit, loan, and trust. Had Ginsburg been successful in selling my father's diamonds, both would have made money. Instead, my father would use the diamonds in the Victorian bracelet I was carrying. I gave Ginsburg the receipt. He handed me the plastic baggie of stones. I tucked them into the pouch as quickly as possible and, afraid to draw attention to myself, resisted looking around to see if anyone was watching me. When I had secured the merchandise as inconspicuously as I could, I left the exchange and made my way down Forty-seventh Street to the setter's office, on the eighth floor of a small, nondescript building. There was no suite number or business name on the outside of the office, so my father had described it to me by its damaged doorbell, which dangled from the post. The setter's workplace was the size of a modest kitchen and smelled of chemicals. A poster of Pope John Paul II hung on the wall above his desk. It was the only place on Forty-seventh Street I'd ever seen a religious item that was not Jewish. Then again, it was one of the few times I'd met a colleague of my father's who was not Jewish. The setter's floor shone slightly from layers of gold dust that had fluttered from his table over many years of work. Jars of cream and gel, and a multiplicity of pliers, adorned his desk like an alchemist's laboratory. Some of his potions seemed sorcerous, like the protective jelly he slathered on a ring before molding it. After glossing the ring with a paintbrush, he would stick it into a flame sprouting from the burner on his desk, and the flame would turn an unnatural shade of fluorescent green. Beneath his table were foot pedals that operated the various drills he used to shave down his customers' precious metals. The drills' cries sounded like animals shrieking underwater. As though to offset his noisy tools, the setter himself spoke in a mellow voice, tinged with a Polish accent. He was a tall, skinny man with slender legs, but his most

striking features were the knuckles of his thumbs and index fingers, which protruded orblike, as if marbles had been placed beneath his skin. Over decades of jewelry setting, his hands had evolved for efficiency. His thumbs were spaced unusually far from his other fingers, the skin between them stretched thin as a web. The tendons on the undersides of his forearms braced themselves so markedly, they resembled the prongs of a fork. The setter didn't have much to say as he accepted the plastic baggie and bracelet. I repeated the instructions my father had given me, pointing to the holes in the bracelet's flowers where the diamonds belonged, just in case. The setter indulged me, smiling politely while he said yes, but, of course, he already knew all of this. Other than the floor, his office didn't sparkle or shine, though he must have been in possession of dozens of jewels. Most likely none of them belonged to him. Setters don't own the pieces they mend. Like foster parents, they receive the gems, hold on to them for a while, tend to them, and then let them go. Though they hold vast riches in their hands, they themselves can be poor. The competitive ones keep their commissions down to only two percent. Sometimes they're nicknamed "diamond-studded paupers." A safe full of jewels does not necessarily make a wealthy man. When the setter finished the job, my father would pay him and try to sell the bracelet. No one would be able to tell from looking that it was this setter who had worked on the bracelet, just as no one would know that it was my father who chose the diamonds for it. After a stone is set into jewelry, it is almost impossible to decipher who harvested the gem from the river shore, who carried it from the wilderness to the market, who cut it, who polished it, and who made the match between the stone and its setting. Once a diamond becomes a piece of jewelry, the fingerprints of all these people disappear. My errand done, I returned to the quiet of my father's office and worked on organizing the records of his retirement accounts. The papers sat next to his diamond scale, under colorful pictures of gemstones my mother had put up, and dated back to the early nineties, when my father's daily pursuits were still secrets to me. Even then, I'd known that I wouldn't go into the business. He had never encouraged me to. He wanted a different life for me, one in which my next paycheck would not be dependent on the whims of some dealer or rich woman. But here I was, working in his office, because I needed to understand the street, the stones, and the people that occupied his life. That evening, as on every other, my father put his jewels into his safe, punched the code to his alarm, and turned off the lights in the vestibule between his outermost doors, standing for a moment in the darkness. Before locking up manually, he kissed the mezuzah, that small rectangular box on the doorpost containing the holiest of Jewish prayers—one of the many rituals he performed daily to protect himself, his possessions, and the people he loved. Then he started walking very slowly down the hall, as though inching away from a crime scene, so that he could simultaneously make progress toward the elevator and hear the sirens from behind his door that indicated his office had been secured. In the narrow corridor, his eyes automatically scanned the two circular mirrors mounted on the wall that showed if anyone was lingering around the bend. By the time he left, he was almost always the last one on his floor. In the lobby, he bade the guard on night shift good-bye. Then he stepped outside into Manhattan's heavy August air, and left behind the fluorescent glow of the diamond columns, the storefront signs coaxing pedestrians in with We Buy Gold and Diamonds, the unmade deals, and all the jewels. nbsp;