



# Villa Air-Bel

*Rosemary Sullivan*

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## **Villa Air-Bel** Rosemary Sullivan

France, 1940. The once glittering boulevards of Paris teem with spies, collaborators, and the Gestapo now that France has fallen to Hitler's Wermacht. For André Breton, Max Ernst, Victor Serge, Marc Chagall, Consuelo de Saint-Exupéry, Remedios Varo, Benjamin Péret, and scores of other cultural elite denounced as enemies of the Third Reich, fear and uncertainty define daily life. One wrong glance, one misplaced confidence, could mean arrest, deportation, and death. Their only salvation is the Villa Air-Bel, a château outside Marseille where a group of young people will go to extraordinary lengths to keep them alive.

Financed by the Emergency Rescue Committee, a private American relief organization, unlikely heroes—feisty graduate student Miriam Davenport, Harvard-educated classical scholar Varian Fry, beautiful and compelling heiress Mary Jayne Gold, and brilliant young Socialist and survivor of the Battle of Dunkerque Danny Bénédict and his British wife, Theo—cajole, outwit, and use every means possible to stave off the Nazis and newly installed Vichy government officials circling closer with each passing day. The château was a vibrant artistic salon, home to lively debates and clandestine affairs, to Sunday art auctions and subversive surrealist games. Relationships within the house were tense and arguments were common, but the will to survive kept the covert operation under wraps. Beyond the château's luscious façade war raged, yet hope reverberated within its halls. With the aid of their young rescuers, this diverse intelligentsia—intense, brilliant, and utterly terrified—was able to survive one of the darkest chapters of the twentieth century.

*Villa Air-Bel* is a powerfully told, meticulously researched true story. Rosemary Sullivan explores the diaries, memoirs, and letters of the individuals involved while uncovering their private worlds and the web of relationships they developed. Filled with suspense, drama, and intrigue, *Villa Air-Bel* is an excellent work of narrative nonfiction that delves into a fascinating albeit hidden saga in our recent history.

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