



The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired

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In the classical world, the muses -- all nine of them -- were daughters of Zeus who inspired poets, musicians, and other creative types to produce works of genius. Today, says Francine Prose, the word has been weakened and is used almost exclusively to refer to the chic women who help fashion designers inform their latest lines. But in her scholarly account, Prose (a National Book Award finalist for her novel *Blue Angel*) presents nine real women who moved men to greatness and who were not mere catalysts but worthy of note on their own, in many cases deserving a share of the credit for the work they helped create.

Each chapter is a mini-biography of a woman's life and the way a male artist figured into it. We see the muse as prompter and creator in her own regard, like memoirist Hester Thrale, whose letters to Samuel Johnson helped form his later works. In Alice Liddell, the inspiration for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the muse is at her most passive, asserting her independence of the child-loving author only by failing to remain seven years old forever. And with Yoko Ono, there is the muse as artist in her own right, who claimed not to have heard of the Beatles before meeting John Lennon, and whose avant-garde tendencies some blamed for his musical downfall.

To hit the mystical nine, Prose stretches a bit. For every Suzanne Farrell collaborating on ballets with George Balanchine, or every Gala Dal? cosigning canvases with spouse Salvador, there are personae only a graduate student would be likely to know. We learn of "serial muse" Lou Andreas-Salom?'s involvement with Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Sigmund Freud, and of how Charis Weston had to vie with a toilet for the attentions of her photographer husband, Edward. But these lesser-knowns help make the book a complete analysis of notable women who motivated men of achievement -- usually at the expense of their own -- and lived with the consequences. iKatherine Hottinger/i

The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired Details

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J.P. says

Interesting but uncomfortable reading. The "muses" depicted here (everyone from the girl who inspired Alice in Wonderland to Yoko Ono) range from the used and abused to those who were users and abusers themselves.

Each chapter tells a fascinating back-story of fine art, philosophy and literature. Lewis Carroll, Man Ray, Samuel Johnson, Salvador Dali and John Lennon are among the supporting players here who are revealed to be extraordinary artists, but extremely human beings. This book focuses on the ladies who enabled these men to practice their art---women who, in many cases, sacrificed their own careers and well-being for the sake of that art. Francine Prose chronicles these lives in a vivid, brutally honest style which frequently made me flinch, but always held my attention.

What moral emerges from these true-life tales? Fine art comes with a high price tag. And its cost is often paid by those who inspire it.

Kate says

This book fell like a bolt from the sky and landed in my lap. I had been thinking for months about what it means to be a muse, or an artist, and what the relationship between muse and artist means for modern men and women, and where gender fits into all of it. I'd been writing and processing and wondering why it was I craved artists--not art, which I love and which is nourishing, but artists, and their creative minds--so constantly.

And then I read *The Lives of the Muses*. Francine Prose dug deep into the emotional and artistic lives of some of the most high-profile muses in artistic history: Alice Liddell (inspiration for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), Lizzie Siddal, Suzanne Farrell, Yoko Ono...all (except for Ono) girls and women I had added to my own bookshelf of art saints and inspiration. It was like ninth grade all over again, when I just *knew* Sarah McLachlan was singing about my problems and relationships, except this time she really was.

In addition to raising some very important questions about the muse-artist relationship (Is it strictly a heterosexual relationship, even when there is no sex involved? Why is the role of muse so intrinsically feminine? Why can't muses succeed as both artists and muses? What's so horrible about being an art wife?), Prose sheds light on some difficult and oft-swept over points in the lives of the muses and their artists. All in all: really good. There are some dry moments, but it is, after all, biography.

As an interesting side note, Prose's "indispensable" assistant just happened to be Kamy Wicoff, author of the pre-nuptial fire-starter (at least for me) *I Do But I Don't*. Small world.

Lana says

This was disappointing, but I think that is mostly b/c I misunderstood what the subject matter would be. I

was hoping for a collection of biographies on the "muses" themselves, but they were secondary to the content on the artists. The background of each woman is only briefly mentioned and they are mostly described only in their relationships to the artists. In almost every case the woman is depicted darkly (bordering on cruelly). There are countless biographies written about famous artists but very little on the women that mainly inspired them, I was hoping to hear about their lives. Also, lately I've developed a fascination with the Dali's relationship and primarily checked out this book to learn more about Gala. But instead it was a few dozen pages devoted to pointing out her worst characteristics, painting her as a pretty scary person. There have been biographies of Stalin that showed more compassion. If you want to hear how mean Yoko Ono corrupted sweet John Lennon, or how Gala felt no emotion, or how sensual Alice Liddell looked in pictures when she was ten, then by all means read this book. If you prefer a less misogynistic depiction of women, try something else. The most surprising part of this book was it was written by a female scholar.

Jeanne says

I've never read Prose's fiction, but love this book! Each essay is a biographical sketch of the relationship between a muse and her artist. Prose does a great job examining the problematic nature of muse relationships, especially for women and the different ways women reacted/profited/grew or were destroyed by/from these associations. The most contemporary muse is Yoko Ono, but honestly while I loved the book so many of the critical observations Prose made in each of the essays seemed to repeat themselves and what seemed brilliant at the beginning started to get tired by the last two essays.

Linda Robinson says

The Muses were created 2500 years ago, each of The Nine given a realm in which to inspire: theater, writing, music, dance. Originally 3, they were trebled later. The Romans gave them water nymph duty as well. Shakespeare called upon all; Chaucer, Herodotus, the list is huge.

Prose's nine are modern women, beginning with Alice Liddell, who at 7 began the musedom to Oxford don Charles Dodgson that would result in "Alice's Adventures Under Ground" and later "Through the Looking Glass." The book begins with the elderly Alice Liddell accepting an honorary degree for being a muse. In her acceptance speech, Ms. Liddell, who had not seen the author for decades, spoke of him as though he were still alive and in the room.

As one NY Times reviewer observed, no girl sits on a stoop and dreams of one day becoming a muse. Prose's book reinforces that abstinence. We can hope that a successful muse manages to extricate herself with her physical health intact, and with most of her functioning mental and emotional batteries marginally charged.

There are three who actually nurtured their own art after the artist was either dead or their worshipful gaze removed, and these women make it more comfortable to read about the six whose personal fortunes fared less well.

Prose thinks brilliantly, writes beautifully, and, except for instances where her opinion of the situation is folded into the paragraph, reports cleanly. The concept of The Muses is not one we're familiar with in the 21st century, so her ability to explain, analyze and reveal is a difficult task handled with even-handed skill and aplomb. The selection of pictures to include is exemplary - each tells its own story well.

Lisanne says

I gave up making angry notes in the margins after three chapters. The women are interesting, but Prose decides to focus on their worst parts or the general facts that are known. She contradicts herself ever time - like stating "well generally this and this is written about this woman and that's bad and we should treat her differently" and then continues writing exactly that what she just criticised.

Also I think I just read the umpteenth anecdote of Ruskin's first wedding night, the Elizabeth Siddal in the bath as Ophelia-story, the sexualisation of the early photographs of Alice Liddell and frankly I'm just sick of hearing these tales over and over again when the truth of them is very debatable.

Another side note: why repeatedly mention Beatrice, Camille Claudel and Zelda Fitzgerald if you're not going to write about them anyway?

Lastly: where did the comparison of Dante Gabriel Rossetti with a necrophilia-obsessed teenager come from? WHERE?

Michele Renatta says

Omg I wanted to beat my head in reading this book was doing research on muses was loaned the book to read this book did have a few interesting point but, quite frankly my research online was much more productive then the hours it took me to wade through and force myself to finish this book

Paul says

Interesting, fascinating and most of all thought provoking examination of nine muses who inspired famous artists/writers/performers. Francine Prose does a good job of dissecting the artist/muse relationship. She does not do this in a neutral way though; prose is opinionated and sharp in judgement: punches are not pulled. Sometimes I vehemently disagreed with her opinions, sometimes she opens new lines of thought about old subjects, but dull it never was.

The muses Prose picks are a very diverse bunch; some better known than others. I knew little about Charis Weston, slightly more about Suzanna Farrell and some were more familiar. I knew about Lou Andreas-Salome and her relationship with Nietzsche and Rilke; I was less aware of her relationship with Sigmund Freud and even Anna Freud.

There is lots of inspiration as you would expect, some innocence and experience, plenty of sex, intrigue and betrayal; a great deal of oddity (a good deal of it in the chapter about the Dali's) and even a spot of S and M. A small prize if you knew that was Hester Thrale and Dr Johnson (I didn't). Hester was the dominant one and she saved one of Dr Johnson's padlocks as a keepsake. Prose really doesn't like Yoko Ono, but she does make some perceptive comments about the virulent and racist reaction to her. She doesn't like her art (annoying) and especially dislikes her attempts at music. However she does explore whether a man can be a muse and looks at the Lennon/Ono relationship as one where it can be argued that there were two muses and two artists. She has some fun with the difference between a muse and an art-wife; the humour and pathos are both well done.

I learnt a lot and disagreed with a lot and would certainly recommend this.

Shivani says

This is one of my favourite books of all time. Made me fall in love with the creative non-fiction format.

Rachel says

This book serves as a fine introduction to the artist/muse concept, but Prose sacrifices a lot of page space to repetition, even though the ideas she explores would benefit from further investigation. Each section recycles ideas from earlier chapters, which would be helpful if she had taken her theories deeper each time, but instead she simply repeats herself... I feel like a strict editor could have been very helpful.

Deborah Ideiosepius says

In this insightful, brilliantly researched, and immensely enjoyable book the author examines the phenomena of the muse, the individual who focuses or inspires her artist to create, who is a pivot of their creativity. This book does it a bit differently from how you would expect however: exceedingly well written, it looks at nine individual muses beginning in 1766 and ending in 2000 and it questions the relationship in quite individual ways.

What is a muse anyway? We first look at the muses as created in Greek mythology, the divine inspiration for all science, history art and music that they represented in antiquity. But in the nine sections we look at real live women and the poets, artists, photographers and writers they associated with in their lifetimes. The effect that artist had on the life of the woman had on the artist is debated with equal weight as the more traditional view, of what the muse gave to the artist.

The other interesting theme that runs through the book is what a muse means to the era in which she lives. I found this notion very arresting; yes, we know that Alice Liddell inspired Charles Dodgson to write Alice's adventures in wonderland, without thinking about it we know that such an association would be unlikely today. We know that without Gala Dali would have been someone completely different, and who knows what his art would have been? But Francine lightly examines the notion of how an era makes a particular type of muse possible, how the association between artist and muse is dependent on when they happened to be.

More strongly, the book examines the lives of the different women, what being a muse did to them, how some went on to have their own careers as artists, how some never wanted to, how some became wives and what that did to the creativity. I found it all exceptionally fascinating and, even if you never pickup this book they are surely very interesting questions to anyone who is interested in art, writing or the creative process in general.

Of the individual sections some I knew of such as Gala Dali, Alice Liddell and Yoko Ono but was delighted at the different view points that were presented (different view points because the focus in most writing is on the artist, usually). Many of the associations were new to me, I had never heard of Lou Andreas-Salome, though I had of course heard of Nietzsche, Freud and Wagner; her story was fascinating. I had heard of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but not of his muse ELizabeth Siddal. I had heard

of Man Ray but not of the amazingly beautiful woman, Less Miller, whom he photographed and who went on to be a photographer herself: Some of her most haunting images, those of the liberation by the Allies of the concentration camps, I have seen all my life and never knew the fascinating story of the woman who took them (and how amazing is it that there was a woman photographer there and then?).

The stories of Suzanne Farrell, Charis Weston, Hester Thrale were all new to me and the stories are told so brilliantly, they could not come more alive if they were fictionary characters created by the author. But no, they were or are all real people that come to life strong and complex under the very skilled writing of Francine Prose.

The sympathy of the author for many of the women she is writing about is immense, conversely the antipathy (or is it exasperation) that she feels for a couple of them is very restrained. Despite this restraint, if you are a passionate fan of Yoko Ono you may want to skip the last section, her influence on Lennon is not couched in particularly flattering terms, I might have been a bit put off if it was not for the fact that my opinion of Ono has always been somewhat similar and it is nice having ones feelings reinforced.

At the end, this was a brilliantly conceived, well researched and very well written book. Enjoyed it thoroughly.

Brian says

Whew! Finally finished it. Most of the book is a tedious long slow slog through the lives of partners of tortured artists. By shifting the focus from the creator to the person ostensibly driving and suffering with the artist, the author has perhaps opposite her intended effect. Other than Alice Liddel and to a much less extent Lee Miller and Yoko Ono, the muses seem tangential to the artists lives.

Prose's choice of subjects is arbitrary and disappointing. She mentions in several places Beatrice (Dante's muse) and Zelda (F. Scott Fitzgerald's muse) but doesn't give us a bio of either one. There was no excuse for teasing us with Zelda in the intro and not giving her a place in the book. At the same time she includes many lesser artists and muses. This is an academic book and not one for pleasure. My advice is to skip any muse or artist and focus only on subjects for research.

In the interest of equal opportunity, it would have been nice for Prose to include a male muse. C'mon, there are a few and the counterpoint would have been informative. First that comes to mind is Alan Campbell, Dorothy Parker's second husband, but that's a poor echo to John & Yoko in that Dorothy was already famous and Alan's work as a writer was questionable. A better one would be Dave Coulier as muse to Alanis Morissette.

In short, anyone writing about Lewis Carroll would benefit from checking out Prose's analysis in the foreword, chapter on Alice Lidell and afterword. Other than that, there is not much to see here, folks. Move on. The style she attributes to Yoko Ono plays out here. If you get five minutes into it and it doesn't interest you, turn it back in to the library or don't buy it at the bookstore.

Ana says

I'm probably being too kind by giving two stars to this book, but then again i usually reserve one star ratings to books i wasn't able to finish. And i did finish this one. It made me angry pretty much throughout it, but i

did finish it.

Here's the main thing i don't understand. Why did the author write this book? She seems to have felt contempt and/or pity for most if not all of the women featured here. Why would you spend unknown amounts of time researching someone's life if you didn't respect them or at the very least find them interesting?

Everyone comes off badly here - the artists who for the most part were abusive (in one way or another) and the muses who were almost all either shrews or victims. Suzanne Farrell is about the only muse who gets an even deal in here. Perhaps Ms. Prose should've stuck to writing a biography of just her.

Can't recommend this to anyone really; not art aficionados - stick to reading full-fledged bios of the artists featured in this book, and not women's history fans either. Not unless you enjoy being angry for 300+ pages at everyone featured in it, including the writer.

Ramesh Abhiraman says

Now reading. From the innocent Lewis Carroll who sent his child friend a knife suggesting he draw a little blood each birthday, to Man Ray's obsession with his muse, to Rossetti's tempestuous affair with his on and off muse whom he drove to laudanum addiction and a premature death to Yoko Ono, to Salvador Dali's mistress, this book deals with nine muses who inspired at sometime their artist or writer friends. Francine Prose is one of a kind and her books are quite amazing and revealing.

Hayley says

Prose's 'The Lives of the Muses' is a mediocre take on the worlds of nine women who inspired (respectively) authors, poets, musicians, philosophers, and painters. From the titular Alice in Wonderland (and her Lewis Carroll), to the photographer Man Ray's infatuation with Lee Miller, females have inspired male artists since the dawn of art. (Prose herself makes the case for the men inspiring the women, but she does not spend nearly enough time proving this thesis.) Also featured are Yoko Ono, Suzanne Farrell, Charis Wesson, Gala Dali, Lizzy Siddal, and Lou Andreas-Salome.

Prose's technique of devoting a chapter to each muse felt uninspired. I would have much preferred Prose to focus on an aspect of musedom itself- the sexuality, the friendship, the backlash from contemporaries – rather than a somewhat flat interpretation of each woman's life. She barely delves into the art that each muse inspired – rather, assuming that the reader has understood the full complexities of 'Alice in Wonderland' and does not need explanation the oeuvre of Salvador Dali.

By focusing on each muse as a manifestation of the person she inspired and the time period she lived in, Prose allows the women and girls to transcend even musedom. These ladies become the manifestations of the time period that they're entrenched in – Alice Liddel represents the vague pedophilia of the repressive Victorian era. Lizzie Siddal is the Pre-Raphaelite's muse of mystery and defiance. Lou Andreas-Salome, who had her hands full providing banter to Freud, Rilke, and Nietzsche, is particularly interesting. Prose claims "artists rarely create for the muse, to win or keep the muse's love and admiration, but rather for themselves, for the world, and for the more inchoate and unquantifiable imperatives of art itself."

Prose is, as usual, hyper readable. She can weave a fantastic story together while still maintaining an air of mystery. She does each muse justice as characters, if not actual people. This objectification is, perhaps,

where she is the most enjoyable to read. She includes a particularly beautiful metaphor that likens the muses to artistic crock-pots: “the muses are merely the instruments that raise the emotional and erotic temperature high enough, churn up the weather in a way that may speed and facilitate the artist’s labors.” This is where I appreciate her the most as a writer, but is ironic that for the muses to inspire her, she must subvert their erotic power for her own, just as the artists who fed off their contemporary muse. Prose must make them something to inspire her art, and the dry paragraphs where she attempts to paint their full lives fall flat.

Prose goes into depth about what constitutes a muse – is it sex? Infatuation? The right relationship at the right time? For each of the artists and muses, the relationships are fraught with tension. Prose made the choice to focus specifically on each relationship, rather than give a lengthy character biography of her subjects. It is interesting to note that this is where she places the importance of her material. I expected a fuller interpretation of the lives of these women: how did each react to the musedom and idolatry thrust upon her? If Prose is to be believed, and that the relationship between the artist and the muse is fraught with tension, she does not give enough evidence.

Overall, Prose’s style was enjoyable but her content fell flat. And writing talent alone is, in my opinion, not enough. When I write, I must make sure to connect myself to interesting content instead of merely coasting on technique.
