



Miss Fuller

April Bernard

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She was the most famous woman in America. And nobody knew who she was.

It is 1850. Margaret Fuller--feminist, journalist, orator, and "the most famous woman in America"--is returning from Europe where she covered the Italian revolution for The New York Tribune. She is bringing home with her an Italian husband, the Count Ossoli, and their two-year-old son. But this is not the gala return of a beloved American heroine. This is a furtive, impoverished return under a cloud of suspicion and controversy. When the ship founders in a hurricane off Long Island and Fuller and her small family drown, her friends back home, Emerson and others of the Transcendentalist Concord circle, send Henry David Thoreau to the wreck in hopes of recovering her last book manuscript. He comes back declaring himself empty-handed--but actually he has found a private and revealing document, a confession in letters, of a strong and beloved woman's life like no other in the 19th century. Her account of the life of the mind and body, of experiences in Rome under siege, of dangerous childbirth and great physical and moral courage--are eventually revealed to her one reader, Thoreau's youngest sister, Anne.

What does one sensitive but ordinary woman makes of a publicly disgraced woman like Fuller, and how do women make use of what they learn from other women? Miss Fuller is a historical novel that also poses timeless questions about how we see and treat the exceptional and dangerous agents of change among us. And it shows the price that any one person might pay, who strives to change the world for the better.

Miss Fuller Details

Date : Published April 3rd 2012 by Steerforth (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9781586421953

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Format : Paperback 192 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Cultural, Italy, Literature, 19th Century, Womens

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From Reader Review Miss Fuller for online ebook

Moira Russell says

This book is one of those that is disappointing only in that it ends - as Jane said, 'if a book is well written, I always find it too short.' But in reality it's beautifully shaped, not too short at all, with the thoughts of Thoreau's fictional sister framing Fuller's apologia. Both voices - Anne's conventional but perceptive, an interior monologue, and Margaret's rhetorically flourishing letter addressed to a friend/diary (so like Wollstonecraft's travel writing) - are done very well. There's also a clear influence of Woolf, not so much in the writing style, but in several techniques (mostly stream-of-consciousness) and references to emblems I won't spoil. This deserves at least as much attention as the awful March by Brooks, which it will probably never get, but that is partly what the book itself is about, too. (It is much, much better than the other, deeply flawed, Fuller novel I also read this year, but that goes without saying.)

(Jesus that portrait of Hawthorne, done obliquely in just one letter and Anne's description of his novel, is really devastating. *Zing.*)

Carol Peters says

fictionalized account of Margaret Fuller's life, the second half written as if the journal of MF recovered from the shipwreck — well done

Lora says

The novel itself wasn't all that compelling, but the real Margaret Fuller was! She was clearly a mover and a shaker, how can I have not heard of her? She:

- was the first full-time American female book reviewer in journalism.
- wrote the first major feminist work in the United States.
- was an inspiration for early feminists like Susan B. Anthony
- was the basis for Nathaniel Hawthorne's characters in "The Scarlet Letter" and "The Blithedale Romance"
- was hired by Horace Greeley and her newspaper columns ran alongside those of Karl Marx
- was a friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson
- was considered the best-read person in all New England (man or woman).

If the book were any longer, I'd say read something else about Margaret Fuller. As it is, it was a nice introduction. I just wished the author had written a note about what was true and what was fiction. The character of Anne (adopted sister of Henry Thoreau) turned out to be entirely fictional, which somehow disappointed me. But Henry Thoreau did in fact comb the shores for Fuller's belongings after she died in a shipwreck.

As for the veracity of the rest of the book, an Amazon reviewer (Corinne H. Smith) wrote the following:

"When Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) died in a shipwreck off Fire Island, she left myriad questions regarding

the last few years of her life. What had she REALLY done in Italy? Why was she attracted to Count Ossoli? Where and when had the couple gotten married, if at all? Why wasn't Margaret forthcoming in her letters and newspaper dispatches with the details and nuances of her personal life? What had happened to her book manuscript? The sketchy circumstances that led to her loss both saddened and confused her friends and family members at the time. Twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars have continued to dig for the definitive answers, but have been left to speculate on some of the salient details as well. Enter writer April Bernard, who has come up with some possibilities that can tie up many of Margaret's loose ends, all presented in the package of a short novel."

Rebecca says

Margaret Fuller was a fascinating, complex character: journalist, educator, philosopher, feminist, reformer, a central member of the Transcendentalist circle, and the first foreign correspondent to work for an American newspaper. Unfortunately, Miss Fuller doesn't begin to do her justice.

The story begins when news of Margaret's death reaches the Thoreau household in Concord. To explain who Fuller was, the author gives Henry Thoreau a fictional sister who once attended Fuller's Conversations for women in Boston. This is just the first ahistorical element in the novel. The fictional sister is never really developed as a character in her own right and isn't particularly essential to the plot, so one wonders why Bernard couldn't have used a real person to fill this minor role.

The focus then shifts to Thoreau, as he travels to New York to investigate the shipwreck in which Fuller died with her husband and child. This part of the story hews closely to historical fact, and is probably the best section of the novel.

Thoreau locates a long letter from Fuller to Sophia Hawthorne (why Sophia? they were not particularly close friends) recounting the three years Fuller spent in Europe. Much of the so-called letter reads like autobiography, and I found it very dry. Here again Bernard makes some odd, ahistorical choices, involving Fuller in an unlikely love affair. In other circumstances I wouldn't quibble with a novelist trying to spice up a subject's life, but Fuller lived through so much real-life drama as a single woman in Europe and witness to the Italian Revolution of 1848 the embellishment just doesn't seem necessary.

There's a bit more pointless story involving what to do with this found manuscript, none of which is particularly interesting. In the end, I think Bernard should have stuck to telling Fuller's story as it actually happened. It would have made for a better book.

Julia says

I would never have read this except for the PopSugar 2018 challenge.

Margaret Fuller was a contemporary of (and companion to) Emerson, Thoreau, and the Alcotts. This book is a fictionalized version of her life, starting with her death and some thoughts on her from Thoreau and Emerson and Thoreau's sister, Anne. Part 2 is a long letter from Miss Fuller to her close friend Sophie

Hawthorne (wife of Nathaniel). Part 3 is the effect the letter had on Anne, who read it over 3 decades after it was written. Some things had changed, others had not.

She and I were cut from the same cloth:

"...Here was the same feeling (Anne) had been surprised by so many years ago, when Miss Fuller had died. Everyone was - relieved. Not actually glad that she was dead, perhaps. But surely relieved, relieved of the burden of this impossible woman. Relieved that they no longer would have to read her exhortations to do good, to send money, to think more broadly, to consider the poor and the powerless, to worry over their place in history, to follow her difficult sentences, to wonder if women after all should be allowed to pester them in this way, and to do such things as Miss Fuller did and imagined. She made everybody angry. Such a terrible talent.

Nancy Freund says

I thought it was great!

Let's see if my review of MISS FULLER over at Necessary Fiction can get linked in here. Hope this works!
<http://necessaryfiction.com/reviews/M...>

Becky says

Why do we not read about Margaret Fuller in our American History textbooks? I had never heard of her before, nor had several other women of different ages that I asked. She was one of the first women to be well educated and well read, and the first woman to gain access to Harvard's library. Miss Fuller lived in the early to mid 1800s and was friends with Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. She was the first journalist to review books and wrote for The Dial and other early newspapers. She was outspoken on the need to educate women. This book is a fictional account of Margaret's life, but seems to be historically accurate. It prompted me to read more about her actual life.

Carl Rollyson says

Before Martha Gellhorn covered the Spanish Civil War with Ernest Hemingway, before Susan Sontag hunkered down during the siege of Sarajevo to direct a production of "Waiting for Godot," Margaret Fuller (1810-50), author of "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" and intrepid reporter for the New York Tribune, drowned in a shipwreck with her husband and their child on her way home to deliver her masterpiece about the revolutions in Italy.

Recent biographers have plumbed Fuller's life, teeming with incidents and arresting personalities (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Tribune editor Horace Greeley, revolutionary leader Giuseppe Mazzini), but their endeavors lack the spare elegance of April Bernard's novel. Not only does the intimate side of Fuller's life emerge in her own voice, but so does her precarious status among her prejudiced fellow writers. Henry David Thoreau treated her with studied courtesy, and Nathaniel Hawthorne dismissed her with outright hostility, suspecting her of engaging in an affair with a Jew in New York City and in a bogus marriage to an Italian nobleman.

An uneven stylist, Fuller nevertheless wrote passages of uncommon poetry and passion that Bernard employs with considerable finesse: "Those who till a spot of earth scarcely larger than is wanted for a grave, have deserved that the sun should shine upon its sod til violets answer."

Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

Margaret Fuller might be one of the most famous American women you've never heard of; I really learned of her when I read *The Margaret-Ghost* by Barbara Novak. Since then, I've been pretty hot for her, and so I was over-the-moon to learn about a new novel about her and her life.

April Bernard's novel didn't disappoint, and I don't think one needs to be familiar with Fuller to appreciate and enjoy this story. Set in 1850, the novel opens with Fuller's tragic death -- a shipwreck that claimed her as well as her husband and son -- and Henry David Thoreau combing the beach for their bodies and their effects. His younger sister, Anne, muses on Miss Fuller and her legacy, her thinking, her life. But a good portion of the novel is an unsent letter from Margaret Fuller to Sophia Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne's wife, and it shows us Fuller's real fears, passion, and blind admiration for those in her life.

In some ways, the novel is less about Fuller than about the people around her, the men and women she called friends and loved like family, and the uncomfortably cold way (to me) they dissected Fuller and her life. This is a novel about reputation, too -- at least, that's something I took away. As Melanie Benjamin's *Alice I Have Been* made so clear for me, Fuller has to be accountable to the ludicrous judgments of the men around her. Her wisdom is tied in to her 'purity', and her normal, reasonable, understandable choices become the fodder with which the people she idolizes disparage her.

That the author is also a poet is no surprise, as there's a really lovely sense of language here, neither heavy nor ethereal. I'm reminded of other poetic novelists, like Anne Carson, and master wordsmiths like Ellen Feldmen and A.S. Byatt.

That was the clear end, the major crashing chord, of the essay. Although Miss Fuller threw in a bad poem treacled with high sentiments to close, Anne held the phrase *a complete life of its kind* and knew she would not forget it.

The awkward, herky-jerky force of the essay, rather like an electric eel, twisting, brilliant, sparkling -- that, and the heat-lightening flashing and filling the window-panes -- kept her awake until dawn. (p58)

This is a smart, quiet novel that provoked righteous indignation in me -- and inspired me to look up Bernard's other works. Language lovers, feminists, historical fiction fans, and anyone who enjoys learning about long forgotten historical figures will enjoy this slim novel. (I reread it about a week after finishing -- I couldn't help myself!)

Cynthia Neale says

I would give this novel a three and a half star rating if I could! Although it is rich in depiction of the Transcendentalist period and in the struggle of the early feminists, it is really about Thoreau's sister, Anne, and her experience meeting Margaret Fuller in her youth and later, through the letters found after the shipwreck when Margaret Fuller drowns. Thoreau came to life on the pages, but Anne was such a fascinating character that I wanted the novel to really be about her and not Miss Fuller. I have been intrigued by Margaret Fuller over the years and I wanted her to come alive on the pages in story, but Margaret Fuller was yet a ghost in the novel. As accurate the author is in giving flesh to her through her letters, it tends to read more like a biography than a novel. Nevertheless, it is a satisfying, warm novel to snuggle up with on a winter evening.

Kristi says

I applaud Bernard's efforts to introduce Fuller to a popular audience through the vehicle of fiction. The book is well researched and the history - albeit fictionalized - of Fuller's life is rendered in brief. Furthermore, Bernard's attempt to understand Fuller's complexity as a multidimensional and living person is commendable. Yet, I couldn't help being largely disappointed with the overall effect. Unlike other readers, I did not mind the transitions in narrative voice between "Parts" of the novel. I did, however, find the epistolary section disjointed within itself. The middle section of the book was rather difficult to follow, even as someone who knew Fuller's historical story at the start. I also had issue with the representation of some of the historical characters, which seemed given to flat(and misinformed) stereotypes. While I could dismiss some narrative choices - such as the intended recipient of Fuller's lost letter and some the contents therein - as artistic choices or vehicles for the narrative, I had trouble excepting others. The creation of a fictional sister for Henry David Thoreau (who had two sisters in real life)considerably bothered me. It seemed that Bernard may have wanted a wholly fictionalized character to take on her own authorial efforts to understand and come to terms with Fuller. Yet, in the end I could not understand the necessity of creating a fictional addition to a well known historical family - particularly an immediate family member. If the author did not want to impose thoughts and emotions of her own creation on a historical figure -(which she does any way)- why not create a neighbor or another character less obviously fictional? In general, I feel when a historical story has inspired a fictional story, that the history is rich enough not to be changed; build around it, but don't meddle with the facts unless your aim is create an alternative universe. These personal criticisms aside, I sorry to say that did not find the novel overly compelling and at times it rather plodded.

Betsy Robinson says

An absolutely beautiful little book about a woman who scared people because she was completely alive. Two of my favorite quotes from this book:

“... it is astonishing how waiting for another to breathe, listening for the air of life, enforces a kind of love upon us. I loved every soldier I ever nursed in the siege—all but one, who snarled at me like a mad cane until his eyes went flat.”

“‘Madeira’ once meant a magical island where I would be fully understood, a place to sail to in my dreams, where love & safety awaited me. Now I know something else—that it is my labor to understand others, & possibly even myself, that will be the accomplishment of my life—the accomplishment in the act of trying. Not to be understood, but to understand; not even, alas, to

be loved, but to love.”

If you are a person who sometimes makes others uncomfortable or angry, if you are alive in a way that sometimes scares people, this is a book for you. What a gorgeous fictional tribute to a woman, ahead of her time, who simply had to be herself--even if it made others uncomfortable.

Anna says

I read Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in college with interest and was excited to find this fictional account of her life written by a poet. Fuller hopes for life that is "beautiful, powerful, in a word, a complete life of its kind" and the account of her unconventional life is, I think, just that. With some terrific renderings of Henry David Thoreau and his sister, Anne, (and Emerson, Hawthorne).... Engaging!

Jane says

I happened upon Margaret Fuller's headstone in Mt. Auburn cemetery in Cambridge years ago and my curiosity was aroused by the inscription (which I just looked up to quote verbatim):

By birth a child of New England
By adoption of citizen of Rome
By genius belonging to the world

Wow.

So when I saw this novel based on the imagined history of the latter years of Margaret Fuller's life and a possibility of what might have happened to her literary legacy, I had to read it. It reads well and the fictitious Anne Thoreau was an endearing character with an engaging point of view. Fans of Fuller (and Henry Thoreau, for that matter) might find quite a bit to quibble with, but that did not distract me. And I enjoy a voyeuristic peek personal letters and diaries, so the the invented letters of Margaret Fuller were intriguing, if a bit over the top at times. I look forward to more of April Bernard's work - and rekindled my interest in Margaret Fuller.

Stacey Lynne says

Couldn't finish this one. I think it might work for those just beginning their journey into the world of Margaret Fuller and Thoreau, but I couldn't get past Thoreau's fictional sister, much less one as the narrator of the entire book. I guess this is one of those times I should have read the synopsis before picking the book up. There are so few books on Fuller that when one comes up I blindly jump in thinking of course it will have something new to offer. Having done most of my graduate studies on Fuller and Thoreau this was just hard to swallow. However, I'm thankful to see another book on Fuller as she has been largely overlooked until recent years. If I were at the beginning of my interest in the feminist mystery of her life and her writing and her famous Transcendental friends this isn't a bad place to start. And of course it is mostly a work of fiction so I applaud the efforts on that score as well. Just didn't work for me.

