

The background features a complex network of white nodes connected by thin purple lines, set against a gradient background that transitions from dark purple at the top to a bright pink at the bottom. The nodes are scattered across the frame, with some forming larger, more prominent clusters.

# The Woman Upstairs

Written by Claire Messud

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Published by sanmarco-sf

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The Woman Upstairs

# The Woman Upstairs

By Claire Messud

## The Woman Upstairs Book

From the New York Times best-selling author of *The Emperor's Children*, a brilliant new novel: the riveting confession of a woman awakened, transformed, and betrayed by passion and desire for a world beyond her own.

## The Woman Upstairs Review

Nora Eldridge, a thirty-seven-year-old elementary school teacher in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who long ago abandoned her ambition to be a successful artist, has become the "woman upstairs," a reliable friend and tidy neighbor always on the fringe of others' achievements.

## The Woman Upstairs Musical

Then into her classroom walks Reza Shahid, a child who enchants as if from a fairy tale. He and his parents--dashing Skandar, a Lebanese scholar and professor at the École Normale Supérieure; and Sirena, an effortlessly glamorous Italian artist--have come to Boston for Skandar to take up a fellowship at Harvard. When Reza is attacked by schoolyard bullies who call him a "terrorist," Nora is drawn into the complex world of the Shahid family: she finds herself falling in love with them, separately and together. Nora's happiness explodes her boundaries, until Sirena's careless ambition leads to a shattering betrayal.

## The Woman Upstairs Book Review

Told with urgency, intimacy, and piercing emotion, this story of obsession and artistic fulfillment explores the thrill--and the devastating cost--of giving in to one's passions.

The Woman Upstairs is an occasion to reawaken a literary hot button that I love: the unlikeable character. Plenty of people hated *The Emperor's Children* for the same reason they hated *The Corrections*: couldn't relate to/sympathize with the characters, wouldn't want to be friends with them, etc. In a Publishers Weekly interview, Messud was asked about Nora, her dutiful but rage-filled, 40-something schoolteacher/wannabe artist whose life is reawakened but then betrayed by a charismatic expat and (successful) artist, her charming 8 year old son, and her scholarly husband: "I wouldn't want to be friends with Nora, would you? Her outlook is almost unbearably grim." To which Messud replies:

"What kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Hamlet?...Oedipus? Oscar Wao? Antigone? Raskolnikov?...If you're reading to find friends, you're in deep trouble. We read to find life, in all its possibilities. The relevant question isn't 'is this a potential friend for me?' but 'is this character alive?'"

This resonates in a big way with me. Isn't that why we read, to have complete access to a character's deepest thoughts and feelings in all their messiness, whether via the first person or third? The kind of access we don't get to even our closest friends and relatives in real life? But a very smart Goodreads review of this novel also notes: "I read to find friends, and shame on any fiction writer who tries to embarrass me for that. I can't recall a single thrilling reading experience in my life that wasn't about connecting to the characters."

Which to me just solidifies the act of reading as one of the most creatively subjective pursuits there is; you can't say a person isn't a discerning reader for having an honest reaction to a story's unlikeable characters. But at the same time I don't like to think that *The Woman Upstairs* could be dismissed on this issue alone.

So what of the novel? It's not for everyone. Is Nora unlikeable? Sure. She's also angry, and lonely, and carries the burden of her family's past along with her. But she's not a character without very real humanity. Her furious, all-too-apparent self-consciousness--the way she sometimes bathes, almost luxuriously, in her anger--may be unrelatable and perhaps even repulsive, but it's impossible not to be moved by her desire to ultimately transcend that anger in her quest to live an authentic life. To her,

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each member of the Shahid family, and in my impassioned interior conversations, granted me some aspect of my most dearly held, most fiercely hidden, heart's desires: life, art, motherhood, love and the great seductive promise that I wasn't nothing, that I could be seen for my unvarnished self and that this hidden self, this precious girl without a mask, unseen for decades, could--that she must, indeed--leave a trace upon the world.

While it may not sway some readers, for me this makes Nora's likeability completely irrelevant. I can't read lines like this and not be moved. ...more

## The Woman Upstairs Summary

Hmmm. Lots of thoughts. There is brilliance here, in how Messud takes up anger, hunger, and loneliness. There are many problems here, like, THERE IS NO PLOT. This is the kind of book that makes people hate literary fiction. My biggest issue though, is that so much of the prose is... aimless and not in a compelling way. Also, 37, in Cambridge, is NOT THE END OF THE LINE. That is not middle-aged. In a city like Cambridge, 37 is when many women might think, "Maybe I'll settle down and have some kids." Hmmm. Lots of thoughts. There is brilliance here, in how Messud takes up anger, hunger, and loneliness. There are many problems here, like, THERE IS NO PLOT. This is the kind of book that makes people hate literary fiction. My biggest issue though, is that so much of the prose is... aimless and not in a compelling way. Also, 37, in Cambridge, is NOT THE END OF THE LINE. That is not middle-aged. In a city like Cambridge, 37 is when many women might think, "Maybe I'll settle down and have some kids." This is not universally true, but still. Come on. And maybe I'm just being oversensitive but... I don't feel middle-aged, at all. I don't feel young, I'm not delusional. But I still feel like there's a lot of life yet to live, so I'm probably personalizing this a bit. I just feel like framing Nora as a spinster misses the mark. And also, the very end, is so sharp and so breathtaking and I wish the rest of the book was as good.

Middle-aged my ass.

Also, it's weird how anger is articulated but rarely shown here. Anger seems more like an idea than an actual emotion. ...more

If you're interested in a book with unlikeable, unreliable characters, hints of possible drama, obsession, and betrayal, melancholy and whining, endless run-on narrative from the main character, a plot that bogs down completely, and a rushed ending, then have I got the book for you! I decided to read *The Woman Upstairs* after hearing an interview with Claire Messud on NPR; the book was touted as a "saga of anger and thwarted ambition". While there was plenty of anger, I couldn't find the ambition. If you're interested in a book with unlikeable, unreliable characters, hints of possible drama, obsession, and betrayal, melancholy and whining, endless run-on narrative from the main character, a plot that bogs down completely, and a rushed ending, then have I got the book for you! I decided to read *The Woman Upstairs* after hearing an interview with Claire Messud on NPR; the book was touted as a "saga of anger and thwarted ambition". While there was plenty of anger, I couldn't find the ambition part. Unmarried, childless, elementary school teacher Nora Eldridge thinks, "It was supposed to say 'Great Artist' on my tombstone, but if I died right now it would say 'such a good teacher/daughter/friend' instead." She becomes infatuated with the whole Shahid family, and because of this association she resumes some of her own artistic endeavors, only to let them get crowded out due to her obsession.

There is a possibility that I didn't 'get' this book because I'm not terribly sophisticated and don't understand 'Great Artists', but it seems to me that adjusting our aspirations is something every single one of us has to deal with as we grow older. I hope I'm dealing with it in a more mature, productive, and

The Woman Upstairs

reasonable way than the deluded and angry Nora. ...more

## The Woman Upstairs Messud

This is a rancorous read about lost opportunities.

The narrator is bursting with rage.

Uncomfortable. Corrosive. Urgent.

But the writing.

Oh, the writing.

Masterly and picture-perfect.

And the ending?

Unforeseen.

Damn.

Did I find this book or did this book find me?

Either way, this novel was so powerful and jarring that it jumbled my thoughts and disrupted my sleep. The story is focused on the anger and anxiety — hell, let's just call it a mid-life crisis blended with some good ol' feminist rage — of Nora Eldridge, a single woman who teaches elementary school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and who wishes she had more time to be an artist. One day, she meets a boy named Reza, and she becomes so attached to him and

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Either way, this novel was so powerful and jarring that it jumbled my thoughts and disrupted my sleep. The story is focused on the anger and anxiety — hell, let's just call it a mid-life crisis blended with some good ol' feminist rage — of Nora Eldridge, a single woman who teaches elementary school in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and who wishes she had more time to be an artist. One day, she meets a boy named Reza, and she becomes so attached to him and his parents that she feels like she's falling in love with the family. Sirena, the boy's mother, is also an artist, and the two women share an art studio for the year. Skandar, the boy's father, is a visiting scholar at Harvard, and Nora enjoys long discussions with him. Reza is a charming little boy, and Nora enjoys babysitting him when his parents are busy.

When we meet Nora, she admits she is very angry, but it's not clear what caused it. At first I thought it was being single and childless, being undervalued as a woman in a patriarchal society, being forced to be a school teacher when she really wanted to create art, etc. It is all of those things, but there is more. We don't fully understand the reasons for her anger until the end of the book, which brought a surprising conclusion to the story.

I could relate to Nora's dreams and fears and anxieties and anger, and I saw shades of women I know in her. She was very real, very well-drawn. Nora calls herself the Woman Upstairs because she feels

## The Woman Upstairs

invisible, she feels like a good girl who is overlooked and taken for granted. Nora felt more connected to the world when she was sharing part of her life with Sirena and Reza and Skandar. Early on, we sense the relationship was temporary because she called it "the year with Sirena," so at some point, she is abandoned and alone again.

My only criticisms of the book were the references to real-world events. Most of the story takes place in 2004, and I found those newsy intrusions annoying. Also, Reza was described as so cherubic and sweet that it was unbelievable. In the book, the women were more realized characters than the men and boys, and I never really understood Skandar. But overall, this book is well-written and a compelling story, and I would highly recommend it.

## Update After Book Club

We had a great discussion about this novel during Book Club, and I was relieved that I wasn't the only one who reacted so strongly and personally to Nora's story. Several women said reading this book was like holding up a mirror. I am adding this caveat that Nora's attitude and writing were intense, and one of my friends was so disturbed by the book that she couldn't finish it. So this is my warning that this novel is not a carefree read.

## Amazing Opening Passage

How angry am I? You don't want to know. Nobody wants to know about that.

I'm a good girl, I'm a nice girl, I'm a straight-A, strait-laced, good daughter, good career girl, and I never stole anybody's boyfriend and I never ran out on a girlfriend, and I put up with my parents' shit and my brother's shit, and I'm not a girl anyhow, I'm over forty fucking years old, and I'm good at my job and I'm great with kids and I held my mother's hand when she died, after four years of holding her hand while she was dying, and I speak to my father every day on the telephone -- every day, mind you, and what kind of weather do you have on your side of the river, because here it's pretty gray and a bit muggy too? It was supposed to say "Great Artist" on my tombstone, but if I died right now it would say "such a good teacher/daughter/friend" instead, and what I really want to shout, and want in big letters on that grave, too, is FUCK YOU ALL.

Don't all women feel the same? The only difference is how much we know we feel it, how in touch we are with our fury. We're all furies, except the ones who are too damned foolish, and my worry now is that we're brainwashing them from the cradle, and in the end even the ones who are smart will be too damned foolish. What do I mean? I mean the second-graders at Appleton Elementary, sometimes the first graders even, and by the time they get to my classroom, to the third grade, they're well and truly gone -- they're full of Lady Gaga and Katy Perry and French manicures and cute outfits and they care how their hair looks! In the third grade. They care more about their hair or their shoes than about galaxies or caterpillars or hieroglyphics. How did all that revolutionary talk of the seventies land us in a place where being female means playing dumb and looking good? Even worse on your tombstone than "dutiful daughter" is "looked good"; everyone used to know that. But we're lost in a world of

appearances now.

#### Favorite Quotes:

"I always understood that the great dilemma of my mother's life had been to glimpse freedom too late, at too high a price. She was of the generation for which the rules changed halfway, born into a world of pressed linens and three-course dinners and hairsprayed updos, in which women were educated and then deployed for domestic purposes — rather like using an elaborately embroidered tablecloth on which to serve messy children their breakfast."

"I always thought I'd get farther. I'd like to blame the world for what I've failed to do, but the failure — the failure that sometimes washes over me as anger, makes me so angry I could spit — is all mine, in the end. What made my obstacles insurmountable, what consigned me to mediocrity, is me, just me. I thought for so long, forever, that I was strong enough — or I misunderstood what strength was. I thought I could get to greatness, to my greatness, by plugging on, cleaning up each mess as it came, the way you're taught to eat your greens before you have dessert. But it turns out that's a rule for girls and sissies, because the mountain of greens is of Everest proportions, and the bowl of ice cream at the far end of the table is melting a little more with each passing second. There will be ants on it soon. And then they'll come and clear it away altogether. The hubris of it, thinking I could be a decent human being and a valuable member of family and society, and still create! Absurd. How strong did I think I was?"

"When you're the Woman Upstairs, nobody thinks of you first. Nobody calls you before anyone else, or sends you the first postcard. Once your mother dies, nobody loves you best of all."

"You know those moments, at school or college, when suddenly the cosmos seems like one vast plan after all, patterned in such a way that the novel you're reading at bedtime connects to your astronomy lecture, connects to what you heard on NPR, connects to what your friend discusses in the cafeteria at lunch — and then briefly it's as if the lid has come off the world, as if the world were a dollhouse, and you can glimpse what it would be like to see it whole, from above — a vertiginous magnificence. And then the lid falls and you fall and the reign of the ordinary resumes."

"What does it mean that the first thing every American child knows about Germany is Hitler? What if the first thing you knew was something else? And maybe some people would say that now it's important, after the Second World War, it's ethical and vital that Hitler is the first thing a child knows. But someone else can argue the opposite. And what would it do, how would it change things, if nobody were allowed to know anything about Hitler, about the war, about any of it, until first they learned about Brahms, Beethoven and Bach, about Hegel and Lessing and Fichte, about Schopenhauer, about Rilke ... one of those things you had to know and appreciate because you learned about the Nazis."

"The Woman Upstairs is like that. We keep it together. You don't make a mess and you don't make mistakes and you don't call people weeping at four in the morning. You don't reveal secrets it would be

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unseemly for you to have. You turn forty and you laugh about it, and make jokes about needing martinis and how forty is the new thirty, and you don't say aloud and nobody else says aloud what all of you are thinking, which is 'Well, I guess she's never going to have kids now!'"

...more

## The Woman Upstairs Quotes

Annasue McCleave Wilson from Publishers Weekly:

"I wouldn't want to be friends with Nora, would you? Her outlook is almost unbearably grim."

Claire Messud:

"For heaven's sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Would you want to be friends with Mickey Sabbath? Saleem Sinai? Hamlet? Krapp? Oedipus? Oscar Wao? Antigone? Raskolnikov? Any of the characters in The Corrections? Any of the characters in Infinite Jest? Any of the characters in anything Pynchon

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What is this strange obsession with the "likeability" or "unlikeability" of Nora's character in this stupendous novel?! It seems so stale and entirely besides the point to me that I don't even know where to begin. Thank goodness for my Goodreads friends Gloria, Marianna and Ami who were quick to jump to this woman's defense, underlining how much they actually identified and empathized with her as opposed to feeling appalled by her inner demons.

When have you last heard a female's voice so sharply defined, so feverish, so inhabited, so perceptive, so damn heartbreaking as Nora's? Here is a shimmering, complex and broken character whom Virginia Woolf would have revered. Who has never felt envy towards others? Obsessive friendships? Unrealized and stubborn aspirations that eat at you like a plague? There is no "likeability" or "unlikeability" here, only the furious will to live and hunger for feeling.

I could go on and on but I will leave the last words to Margaret Atwood, taking part in the debate in The

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New Yorker:

"Also, what is 'likeable'? We love to watch bad people do awful things in fictions, though we would not like it if they did those things to us in real life. The energy that drives any fictional plot comes from the darker forces, whether they be external (opponents of the heroine or hero) or internal (components of their selves)."

Think Walter White in "Breaking Bad". Isn't he one of the most riveting, complicated, morally torn and furiously alive character you've ever encountered? Nora Eldridge is cut from the same cloth.

An astounding novel. ...more

I really wanted to read this book as it provoked a stir in the media about the "likability" factor of a character. That, coupled with a friend's urging, led me right up the stairs. This book seems to be one that produces so many different reactions by different readers. For me, I was hooked right away, and couldn't put it down.

It actually disturbs me that the question of whether or not Nora (the main character) is likable or not was even brought up. I found her fascinating, and the thought of whether or not I liked her never occurred to me. This really brings up the question of stereotypes in our society, and just how prevalent they are. I found Messud's writing absolutely brilliant, and was enthralled the entire time.

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While this book does lack a solid plot, there is so much to chew on. It revolves around Nora, a schoolteacher, who is "the woman upstairs." In the beginning Nora talked about her anger, anger that she is trapped in a world that is a sham. One she feels has limited her in every way. Describing the woman upstairs, she says "We're the quiet women at the end of the 3rd floor hallway, whose trash is always tidy, who smiles brightly in the stairwell with a cheerful greeting, and who, from behind closed doors, never makes a sound...we are furious...we're completely invisible..." She also asks a hypothetical question, given the chance, would we rather fly, or be invisible. She states that most choose to fly, but right away I chose to be invisible, which is maybe why I loved this book so much. But then again, I had never considered Nora's type of invisible.

The entire story centers on a particular period of time in Nora's life where she felt alive and hopeful again. It happens when a particular couple and their young son enter her life and she becomes madly obsessed with them. She falls in love with them, each in a different and profound way. Her dream has always been to be an artist. She feels life has passed her by at the age of 37. To feel this way at 37? Yet,

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as I look at societies obsession with youth, and, how few women I see over that age, especially in acting, television, and the music industry, it gives me pause. Yet another societal stereotype Messud has cleverly inserted into her story. As Nora's dream was to become an artist, her feelings may not be that far off the mark. Yet, as she is drawn into this families life, she experiences a new passion for her art, and everything she assumed was lost to her. However, these passions only awaken through others. It becomes a scary look into a woman who has no self.

I can't help but look at women who's lives are so bound by what others think of them, how the outside must always look in perfect order, and just how damaging this is. And, where it could lead, through the character of Nora. The ending of this book packs a wallop, and left me wanting to know more. Highly Recommended!

...more

## The Woman Upstairs Movie

Nora Eldridge is a primary school teacher who at forty-two has sacrificed her dream to become an artist to live in the numbing comfort of economic stability and independence, a woman who perfectly fits the role attached to her gender: dutiful daughter, involved professional, reliable friend, model citizen. But she is also the woman upstairs, the person everybody forgets the moment she turns around the corner, the agreeable teacher who dotes on her students because she doesn't have children of her own, the middle-aged woman who is content in her resigned singleness. But deep down, underneath the artificial mask of clownish kindness, she is boiling with anger for her mundane life, humiliated by the way people take her for granted, indignant at the way life has cheated on her. And so when the Sahids enter her suffocating, dull world, she seizes them as a drowning man will clutch a straw and pretends to become a surrogate wife, mother and artist to the oblivious family, crossing the line of the morally dubious, showing her ugly side without subterfuge and baring her dark soul to the reader unashamedly.

I was cheering for Nora and for Messud in the first pages of this psychological roller-coaster, for the subversive undertone that mines Messud's straightforward voice, basking in their protest against the sexist role assigned to women in literature, as in many other aspects of our culture, and was ready to empathize with this unconventional, maybe even despicable heroine.

I respect what Messud was trying to achieve when she gave life to this modern "Miss Brodie". Female protagonists have been simplified or overlooked for years while their male counterparts were more thoroughly delineated, in all their vibrant complexities and inconsistencies, provided with articulated expression to vouch for their unethical actions. Nora was created to break the mold, to expose her selfish needs, her middle-class quandaries, to disgust readers by the way she grovels in self-pity. Nora was supposed to become equal to any other flawed human being regardless of class or gender, to rise above convention and speak for the many women who live trapped in their circumstances.

Leaving style aside, which I think is rather unimpressive in delivery, my main concern is that as I approached the end of Nora's confession, I felt she was measured by the very same standards she was trying to rebel against, restricting her to a limited form of expression that belittled her in the eyes of others. Her rage has no consequence and is born in silence.

Art or no art, dreams or no dreams, I expected greater things from Nora's anger. I expected a grand finale, an outrageous outcome, and I merely got a feeble implosion of a woman realizing she has lived a lie imposed by her inflated delusions of grandeur. No need to go upstairs, women like Nora abound everywhere. ...more

The Woman Upstairs by Claire Messud is a 2013 Knopf publication.

I checked out this book after looking through a [Booklist](#) with listed books centered around betrayal and obsession. I'd never heard of it, but it sounded intriguing.

The story starts off with Nora Eldridge meeting a new student in her class, which puts her in touch with the boy's mother, Sirena. The two women discover they share a passion for art and become very good friends, even renting a studio together.

But, Nora has just lost [The Woman Upstairs by Claire Messud is a 2013 Knopf publication.](#)

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The story starts off with Nora Eldridge meeting a new student in her class, which puts her in touch with the boy's mother, Sirena. The two women discover they share a passion for art and become very good friends, even renting a studio together.

But, Nora has just lost her mother, is caring for her elderly father, is not married and her life hasn't exactly panned out like she had intended. For whatever reason, she begins to latch onto her new friend, Sirena, her husband Skandar and their son, Reza. The attachment quickly escalates into an unhealthy obsession and of course this never ends well. But, this story has an added twist to that theme and it's the anticipation of that development that kept me turning pages, wondering when the other shoe was going to drop.

Well, hum. I'm not sure what to make of this one. Nora is one weird chickadee. I suppose she had dedicated so much time to caring for her mother, going through the normal routine of teaching school, and hanging out with her regular friends, that she was looking for some kind of excitement, something or someone to come along and pull her out of her ordinary routine and add a dash of color to her otherwise dull existence.

But, I didn't understand the depth of that attachment or why she clung to it so ferociously for so long. Without seeming to realize it, she traded her bland routine for another routine, one that still kept her from being fully appreciated or living life outside her comfort zone.

The bombshell is a real stunner, and would certainly account for the roiling anger Nora is expressing at the beginning of the book. It was, of course, the final straw for Nora. You'll have to read the book to see how she responds to this revelation.

This is more a character study than anything, and the story only remains interesting for a while, then soon begins to drag, so that it was almost torturous having to slog through the last quarter of the book

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which was dull and lifeless, just to get to the big reveal.

The story came to a shockingly abrupt end, but the point was made succinctly, so perhaps nothing more need be added.

Overall, this one was slightly off the beaten path for me, but had its merits. It wasn't great, but it was okay.

3 stars

...more

## The Woman Upstairs Plot

The book title is fantastic; just those few words create an image of someone lonely. Who would want to be the woman upstairs? Not me, that's for sure.

Nora, the sad schoolteacher who narrates this story, doesn't want to be the woman upstairs either. But she can't change her M.O. no matter how hard she tries. Nora equates the woman upstairs with mediocrity, and mediocrity implies a lack of adventure, a lack of success, and a lack of passion. She hopes she is finally breaking out of the mold when s

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Nora, the sad schoolteacher who narrates this story, doesn't want to be the woman upstairs either. But she can't change her M.O. no matter how hard she tries. Nora equates the woman upstairs with mediocrity, and mediocrity implies a lack of adventure, a lack of success, and a lack of passion. She hopes she is finally breaking out of the mold when she falls in love with Sirena, a glamorous Italian artist with a beautiful son and husband.

Nora isn't just in love, she is obsessed, and her obsession fills her every waking moment. But Nora never professes her love, and her love affair remains a fantasy. Nora is extremely self-conscious and constantly wonders what Sirena thinks of her. Since the story is told from Nora's point of view, we don't really know what Sirena thinks of her either, until the book ends (and packs a wallop).

Nora, who always wanted to be an artist, is influenced by Sirena, and they rent a studio space together. Nora starts devoting all her free time to art, although she thinks it's a sham. She is creating dollhouses inhabited by famous people, and is merely reenacting history, whereas Sirena is creating original art—big, bizarre multi-media installations. Sirena asks Nora for help with her project, and Nora is thrilled. Mostly, it gives Nora an excuse to be around Sirena, though she likes the art part too.

In some ways, it's easy to relate to Nora. She is full of major regret. She always wanted to be an artist, but like so many of us, she sacrificed art to earn a decent living. Did she sell out? Did we? I identified with her unwillingness to network and kiss up, which the art world demands. Who wants to schmooze? Who wants the competition? And then on top of that, there's the fear of failing. Nora just wants to create art, not struggle with egos and practicalities. She feels like she missed her chance to pursue what she really wanted to do. Or had she just been too scared or lazy to go after her dream? Did she get hung up with money and comfort? These are the things that Nora ponders.

My major complaint is that not much happens. At the beginning of the book, Nora is pissed, very pissed. Her anger is strong and passionate and aggressive, and I was getting revved up with her. I was ready for the rest of the book to be high drama, but the intensity drops off immediately as she flashes back to the events that led up to her being pissed, and it's slow going. The old Nora (who occupies most of the

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book) is super passive and spends most of the time mulling things over. I count about five events; the rest is brilliant internal monologue. Don't get me wrong! I love brilliant internal monologues. But I don't like it when they overpower the book, when I find myself saying, "Hurry up, now. Get to the point. Let's have something HAPPEN!"

Okay, I know, picky, picky. But indeed I have some other complaints:

It's all in the ending: Or is it? The ending, though super clever and astounding, left me wanting a little more closure. So what happened THEN? (At least it was WAY better than the ending in "The Other Typist," which was ambiguous and REALLY frustrating.)

Those damn dashes: The writer went a little dash crazy, especially toward the end of the book. Overusing dashes, like overusing parentheses, makes the writing sloppy; every fragment seems like an afterthought or a bit of stream of consciousness.

Art smarts: Way too many detailed descriptions of art pieces! A little is okay, but a lot means I have to work too hard. My head hurts. I want dialogue, I want relationships. I don't want descriptive text. Granted, the art pieces were super edgy and weird and 3-D, but still...

Fuck: Saying fuck is fine, but please use it like you mean it. Nora speaks pretty formally, so I didn't buy it when she said fuck, and it was made worse by the fact that she used it very sparingly. In my experience, you either say fuck a lot or you don't say it at all. It jarred me every time. (I hope I'm not accused of the same thing. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. So there.)

Really, how old is she?: Is Nora just 37? Huh? There's a disconnect between the way Nora acts and her supposed age. I didn't buy it that she's so set in her ways at 37. She thinks she missed the boat, that her life is almost over, that it's too late to pursue art. What? She's still a baby! Her habits and even her thoughts seem like those of someone who's 50, or 60, or even 70. I'm 64 and I felt like she was my peer! She needs a lot more pep in her step for me to believe she's in her mid-30s.

It's strange that this book resembles "The Other Typist" so much: both books have a female narrator who is sad and solitary and who becomes obsessed with a charismatic woman. And both have tons of internal monologues. Nora is definitely more likable and endearing than Rose in "The Other Typist," which made me like "The Woman Upstairs" better.

What's the final verdict? It's one of those books that I liked more after I finished reading it. And it's one of those books where I highlighted a lot, which always ups the rating. It's a good story with great insight into a complex character, and the ending is priceless. The book just gets bogged down in Nora's thoughts, at the expense of dialogue and action. I do recommend it; I don't think others will be so annoyed by the lack of action. It's a good read. It gets a 4.0 despite my complaint board.

...more

Lots of women don't like the main character of this book. They see her as pathetic. This is a common view of the "œsmugly married." It's easy to look down your nose at the main character if you have all the adornments of female success, the most important of which is that someone has found you sexually desirable enough to marry you. And once you have children, the deal is sealed. You are woman, hear you roar!

Nora is a 37-year-old school teacher whose mother who truly loved her is dead and whose a Lots of women don't like the main character of this book. They see her as pathetic. This is a common view of the "œsmugly married." It's easy to look down your nose at the main character if you have all the adornments of female success, the most important of which is that someone has found you sexually desirable enough to marry you. And once you have children, the deal is sealed. You are woman, hear you roar!

Nora is a 37-year-old school teacher whose mother who truly loved her is dead and whose aging father needs her. Nora is the utility person. Life's bat boy. The filler of water bottles and cleaner of equipment but never gets to play the game. The center of no one's life but the agent of many lives. A person of talent unpracticed which time will turn to mediocrity because it was simply never developed. A person so inconsequential that those she thinks are closest to her will humiliate her if it serves their own ends. And she's angry because now she knows all this with certainty.

Naturally, she has lied to herself about this truth. It's called coping. And this is where the writer I think advances beyond a lot of readers. We all lie to ourselves about some critical truth in our lives. Unless you have caught yourself in some lie on which your identity stands, and then have had some unexpected circumstance bring you right up against that lie so powerfully that it can literally knock you to your knees, you may simply lack the experience to fully appreciate this book. A lot of people don't like the book I think because most of us just keep whistling right to the grave.

Lots of young reviewers have complained that 37 is not old in hip Cambridge. But biology is biology. I wonder to the extent this current generation is whistling away--thinking life goes on and on with the same endless options as fleeting youth. That 37 is still young for a woman and children and family always a future option. That 70 is not really THAT old and dependence some far off and not inevitable future. Good luck with that view. Life is a bell curve, with a beginning and, yes an end. With options declining as you go and the peak coming much sooner than today's young seem to want to face. I think this too irritates a lot of people about this book. Nora at the book's end has dropped these self-deceptions because only by viewing painful realities as they are can she really live life. ...more