

The Woman Upstairs

By Tracie Padal

Information for book group leaders

The section of this guide for book group members provides background information, questions to consider, and suggestions for further reading. This section, for book group leaders, provides answers to those questions. Hopefully, this material will help you guide the discussion.

Questions

The following questions and answers will spark discussion of this book, but are not "the" final word" on it. Readers will bring differing viewpoints to the story's characters, its events, and what it all means; sharing those insights is part of what makes book groups so rewarding. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas.

What is Nora's relationship with the Shahids and her own family like?

Collectively, the Shahids provide Nora with the kinship and support that her own family lacks. Nora interacts with the Shahids as a family unit, but comes to love Skandar, Sirena, and Reza as individuals. Each of them exerts a unique influence on Nora's life.

Of her brother, Nora writes: "Matthew and I had so little relation to one another beyond his occasional insult or a quietly hostile tousling of my hair" (p. 45). Her father is similarly distant, eager to avoid unpleasantness even at the expense of forming a close bond with his daughter. When recalling family dinner outings, for example, Nora describes him as "typically mild" and "oblivious to the tension at the table" (p. 45). Nora is closest to her mother, Bella, a "fierce and strange and doomed" woman (p. 16) who encouraged Nora to cultivate independence and individuality. Bella succumbs to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis just two years before Nora meets the Shahid family. To Nora, who was still coming to terms with her mother's death, this timing seems anything but coincidental: "As my wise friend Didi has more than once observed about life's passages," Nora explains, "every departure entails an arrival elsewhere, every arrival implies a departure from afar. My mother left here for an unknown there; and then Reza and Sirena and Skandar came to me" (p. 52). She likewise compares meeting the Shahids to finding a pot of gold "when you'd thought all the gilt was gone from this world forever" (p. 38).

The Shahids spur Nora to acknowledge her own stilted dreams and their origins in her mother. Bella came of age at a time when women's roles in society were in a state of flux:

The first woman in her family to go to college, she'd cared enough to frame her diploma, only then to be embarrassed about having cared... because she felt she hadn't done anything with it.My brother [Matt] was born in '59, when Bella Eldridge was but a tender twenty-three-year-old: he was what she did with her precious education. (pp. 40-41)

Bella, as a housewife, depends upon her husband's income -- a fact that torments her. Although Bella does not outwardly express these regrets, Nora nevertheless senses them: "[M]y mother was suffering.[She

awoke] from the baby dream to find that years had elapsed, and herself pushing forty" (p. 42). When Nora begins to contemplate college, Bella advises her to pursue a career that will bring financial independence (p. 44). At her mother's urging, Nora consequently forsakes art school to earn a degree that would render her "employable at the end" (p. 40); she thus becomes "the woman upstairs," a third grade teacher who makes art in her spare time.

As Nora summarizes, "I'd grown up with my mother's longing and had never found a way to fulfill it" (p. 161). The Shahids help Nora satisfy her own frustrated ambitions by encouraging her to discover and explore her true self:

Skandar, Sirena, Reza.... Each one, 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... leave a trace upon the world. (p. 236)

As this passage suggests, Nora is not simply dazzled by the Shahid family as a collective unit. Rather, her fondness for Reza, Sirena, and Skandar stems from personal interactions with each of them in turn:

I had no way to conceive of them all together -- I have to be clear about this, because otherwise you might think that I was fond of a family, that their family-ness was a pleasure to me . . . I was in love with Reza. I was in love with Sirena. I was in love with Skandar. All these things were true; they were not mutually exclusive, but they also, most important, did not, as far as I could see, pertain to one another. (p. 117)

Although Nora comes to love Skandar, Sirena, and Reza separately and for distinct reasons, all three relationships serve a common purpose: breaking down the barrier between the vibrant person Nora imagines herself to be, and the person she is in the real world. If the Shahids can see Nora's "unvarnished self" as "this precious girl without a mask" -- she reasons --"then I could be an artist... it would be allowed." (p. 236). To Nora, this realization is revelatory and life-changing.

What role does Reza play in Nora's life?

Reza is the first of the Shahids to help Nora find fulfillment. Indeed, the entire story seems to bloom from the moment that Nora and Reza cross paths. As she observes, "It all started with the boy. With Reza" (p. 8). Reza, however, is not just any boy, but "a canonical boy, a child from a fairy tale" (p. 8) who quickly earns the good graces of his classmates and teachers, particularly Nora. He is "Exceptional. Adaptable. Compassionate. Generous. So intelligent. So quick. So sweet. With such a sense of humor" (p. 11). But as Nora goes on to observe, "What did any of our praise mean, but that we'd all fallen in love with him, a bit, and were dazzled?" (p. 11).

As Nora draws closer to Reza and his parents, her feelings toward Reza become increasingly maternal. One January evening, Nora joins the Shahids at their home for dinner, and Reza summons Nora to his bedside to wish her goodnight: "[He] bestowed upon me a luminous and loving smile. I know it sounds silly, but as if he were my own son. As if he actually loved me. I bathed in it. ..." (p. 115).

Nora's affection for Reza proves mutual. Sirena soon asks Nora to babysit Reza in the evenings. This request is, according to Sirena, actually Reza's idea: "[H]e says that it's only bearable, these evenings [when Skandar and I go out], if you come" (p. 121). The arrangement is, in Sirena's words, not a matter of business but "a

family proposal" (p. 121). "In Italy," Sirena explains to Nora, "it's only the closest people that you can ask in this way, as if you were his zia, his auntie" (pp. 121-122). Likewise, Nora's acceptance of this "family proposal" alters the dynamics of her relationship with the Shahids. Once Nora begins babysitting Reza, he is no longer merely a student, and Sirena and Skandar are no longer merely friends; they are, in a sense, family.

The familial quality of Nora's relationship with Reza only grows stronger as she spends more time with him and Sirena. Nora's maternal feelings toward Reza intensify as her feelings for Sirena deepen from friendship to love. As that winter continues, Nora finds herself frequently imagining a life with both Reza and Sirena. "In these fantasies," Nora confesses, "Reza would always call me Mommy." (p. 139). In this way, Nora's desire to be a mother and have a family is quenched by her relationship with Reza.

Why is Nora drawn to Sirena?

Sirena's arduous pursuit of art and life fascinates Nora. Furthermore, Sirena respects Nora as both a friend and a fellow artist. These dynamics gradually deepen, until Nora's feelings of friendship and gratitude for Sirena are transformed into a euphoric, clandestine love.

Their shared passion for art is the key to their relationship. For Sirena, art is a way of life, not merely a pastime. Sirena's vivid aliveness is what makes her irresistible to Nora, who believes that all people secretly long to be as alive as Sirena is:

We all want that, really. It's what attracts us: someone who opens doors to possibility, to the barely imagined. Someone who embraces the colors and textures, the tastes and transformations -- someone who embraces, period. We're all after what's juicy, what breathes. (p. 127)

Their early interactions are thus characterized by a "strange high-voltage thrill" (p. 29) that inspires them both artistically. Working side-by-side in their shared studio, Sirena's charisma and creative energy gradually rub off on Nora. She, too, begins to engage with and embrace life:

[T]hrough November, I greeted each morning as though it were spring, as though . . . we were embarked upon a brilliant new adventure, finding each new day more perfectly illuminated than the last. . . . It was like being eleven, and craving your best friend's company. If I woke up every morning with such zeal, every leaf or cup or child's hand meticulously outlined for me like a wonder of nature . . . it was because in my heart I held each day the possibility of a conversation, of adventure, with Sirena. (p. 61)

In Sirena's eyes, Nora is not only an artist, but also someone with talent who has a right to make art. For Nora, this validation is precious. Sirena's approval gives Nora the courage to live in a way that she never dared to before. As she explains, "[M]y dream in my head of being an artist, and my dream in the world of being an artist, I couldn't -- until Sirena, I couldn't -- connect them" (p. 163).

Nora's relationship with Sirena is both passionate and intense. She spends more and more time with Sirena in their studio; in her spare time, she even begins to babysit Reza for Sirena. As Nora grows closer to Reza, her affection for Sirena only grows stronger.

Nora is exhilarated by her feelings for Sirena. She has never been in love with another woman before, but as the winter progresses, Nora's feelings for Sirena turn physical. After a busy day spent scavenging for

Wonderland supplies, the two women stop for a cozy dinner during which Nora is consumed by lust for Sirena. Although Nora acknowledges that she has been in love with Sirena for several months prior to this outing, this experience takes that love to a new level:

You might wonder how this was different from all that had come before, from months of being more generally, less specifically, in love. You might think it was essentially the same. But I felt I'd finally awoken, that the world was at last clear to me and that its shapes made sense. (p. 138)

Fully in love with both Sirena and Sirena's lifestyle, Nora finds happiness and hope within her own life at last. Her life and sense of self are transformed for the better: "I woke up earlier, more refreshed. I had more energy; my mind moved more clearly, more quickly. I caught no colds, I had no aches, I was luckier, I got on better with people, I laughed more, I worked more, I slept better. I was awake in my life in a way completely new to me, and I knew that anything -- ah! my art! -- anything! -- was possible" (p. 142). By falling in love with Sirena, Nora, in a sense, falls in love with life itself.

What does Nora gain from her relationship with Skandar?

Skandar ignites both Nora's finds physical and mental passions, and inspires her self-confidence. Nora feels drawn to Skandar from their moment of their first encounter. Skandar is pleasing to look at, with "luxuriant dark wavy hair" (p. 74) and "pleasingly rounded cheeks" (p. 75), and Nora acknowledges that there is a physical component to her attraction. The depth of Nora's desire for Skandar is soon revealed by her own subconscious. Shortly after their initial meeting, Nora has a vivid, sexual dream about Skandar -- "that kind of bright, real dream that stays with you into the day and changes you, as if something... has really happened" (p. 79).

But Nora's attraction to Skandar is not solely physical; she is also captivated by his intellectual passions. Skandar begins to walk Nora home after she babysits for Reza; their silent, single-file formation becomes a side-by-side stroll, filled with increasingly intimate conversation. Spring's more agreeable weather helps to prolong their chats. More often than not, their talk is intellectual rather than personal; "[Skandar] talked about [the Shahid family's] time in America... global politics, and Paris, a bit; but often about Lebanon, its history -- bits of history over centuries, millennia: Phoenician history, Roman history, Ottoman history" (pp. 155-156). These wide-ranging, intellectually stimulating conversations fire Nora's imagination: "[A]s I walked the city streets by night," she recalls, "I was transported out into an actual world, a world of wonders the existence of which caused me to marvel, and to dream" (p. 157). Nora's self-confidence blossoms under his approval: "Skandar was the one who could convince me of my substance, of my genius, of the significance of my thoughts and efforts" (p. 214).

These walks and discussions suggest to Nora that Skandar returns her feelings: "I took it to mean he was attracted to me," Nora frankly admits. "Oh, come on, I took all those walks to mean that he was. Not straight away, not especially. But over time -- the amount of time he gave to me, the attention -- and who was I? -- and that he gave it while his wife and son were at home, and his bed was calling. I took all this to have meaning" (p. 152). Their relationship briefly becomes physical: although they do not have sex, their moment of physical intimacy resonates deeply with Nora. For perhaps the first time in her life, Nora feels that she is accepted for herself -- just as she is: "When his hands moved to rest, warm, even, like hot stones upon my back," Nora explains, "just to be nakedly Nora Eldridge seemed, briefly, as though it could be forgiven; as though it could even be enough" (p. 195).

Nora is convinced that this tryst must mean as much to Skandar as it does to her, but Skandar's actions reveal otherwise. Following their rendezvous, Skandar avoids Nora. She begins to question the nature of his feelings for her. Shortly before the Shahids depart for Paris, Nora confronts Skandar about their fleeting intimacy: "We shared something precious," he acknowledges (p. 212) -- but "something precious" is not enough to spur Skandar to leave his wife, nor even confess to her. While Skandar does not regret his intimacy with Nora, the fact that they were intimate simply does not mean anything to him emotionally. As he concludes, "[I]t doesn't concern Sirena in the slightest" (p. 212). Nora is most hurt by Skandar's suggestion that leaving his wife never even entered his head: "It wasn't that I'd felt he had to choose me over her -- you wouldn't ask that someone abandon his family -- but I'd thought -- I'd hoped -- to find his choice harder to make. I'd hoped to get the sense that there was even a choice at all" (p. 214).

After discovering Sirena's betrayal, Nora further questions Skandar's motives. Noting that Sirena recorded Nora's "Edie Sedgwick moment" and incorporated the footage into a public exhibit, Nora apprehends that Sirena likely shared the film with Skandar privately as well. "And if he had [seen it]," Nora realizes, "then suddenly his visit to the studio, his supposed seduction, became something completely different. It became something between them, something that had nothing to do with me. Something for which I was the unwitting scapegoat" (p. 251).

Despite the disappointing outcome of her relationship with Skandar, he does influence Nora's life positively. Shortly before his departure to Paris, Skandar asks to meet with Nora; over coffee, he urges Nora to seize all that life offers: "Live, my dear Nora. Satisfy your hunger. There's food all around you, you know.[Y]ou must taste all things, actually to know if you like them" (pp. 224-225).

As artists, Nora and Sirena have very different perspectives and lifestyles. What do the themes and emotions they explore suggest about art's role in society?

Nora's reality-based artwork focuses on the ways that joy and isolation so often characterized the lives of creative women; simultaneously, it provides a constructive outlet for her own rage, disappointment, and loneliness. Sirena makes richly imaginative art, and is not afraid to exploit private moments and relationships in a public exhibit. Nora traces Sirena's artistic success to this philosophical disparity.

During the autumn that she meets the Shahids, Nora begins a series of dioramas that depicts the lives of famous female artists and writers. Entitled *A Room of One's Own?* -- "I thought the question mark was the key" (p. 63), she observes -- this series pays homage to Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Alice Neel, and Edie Sedgwick. Her dioramas focus on recreating reality and pondering "what actually was or had been" (p. 127). The dioramas aspire to authentically recreate real life, each room quietly acknowledging both death and joy by visualizing "the province of women" (p. 63) in the creative world. Three of the dioramas in Nora's series express a sense of "the woman artist so fundamentally isolated" (p. 145), but the fourth diorama -- devoted to model Edie Sedgwick -- departs from this theme. Through Edie's experiences, Nora learns that surrounding one's self with people cannot stave off aloneness, and that being visible within society does not guarantee that one's true self is ever seen: "When, as a woman, you make yourself the work of art, and when you are then what everyone looks at, then whatever else, you aren't alone. Edie was never, on the outside, alone. . . . Never invisible. Arguably, also, never seen; and in that sense, more than alone: annihilated" (p. 145).

Nora's art is also a vehicle for channeling her rage and disappointment. On Christmas night, Nora's frustration and anger at being ignored by the Shahids culminates in a burst of manic activity. When Nora at

last sets her tools aside, she is filled with a lucid sense of knowing: "knowing that I was on fire and where I wanted to be and angry enough, for once, to be my own self." (p. 100).

Nora's dioramas are notably small in size; she makes them purely for her own private delight. Sirena, in contrast, creates art on a grand physical scale and actively shares her installations with the public by exhibiting her work. While Nora's dioramas channel reality and history, Sirena's art incorporates imagination and illusion. Her installations re-purpose everyday objects into otherworldly scenes of remarkable beauty, and are accompanied by videos that capture people interacting with the surreal landscapes she has created. Nora proposes that this key difference influences how others perceive her, Sirena, and their work. "Maybe it's what made her -- what makes her -- a real artist in the eyes of the world," Nora suggests, "whereas I count as a spinster with a hobby, the sort of person about whom appalling words like 'zany' are used" (p. 127).

Sirena, in contrast, is a "Purveyor of Dreams" (p. 127); although this role brings her artistic success, Nora observes that fame and praise come to Sirena at a price: "[T]he desire to be that, to do that -- to be the fittest at artistic survival -- requires ruthlessness. Maybe that, really, is as good a definition as any of an artist in the world: a ruthless person. Which would explain why I don't seem to make the cut" (p. 127). As Nora learns, Sirena pursues her work relentlessly, creating art that is intended to be viewed and shared with scarce regard for the feelings of those she exploits along the way. Nora, meanwhile, strives to create art that is personally meaningful, if only privately enjoyed. Thus, although both Sirena and Nora are artists, their creative goals (and the way that these goals shape their lives) suggest that talent alone does not guarantee artistic "success." One must be talented, but also willing to make art that is accessible and appealing to the public, and willing to pursue that success at any cost.

How do the Shahids influence Nora's art?

While Nora's interactions with the Shahids engender confusing, often negative feelings, Nora uses them to boost her creative energy.

Anxiety over her relationship with the Shahids fuels Nora's creative frenzy on Christmas night: a few days before Christmas vacation, Reza is hit by a snowball packed with rocks and Nora arranges for Sirena to meet her and Reza at the emergency room. Reza is absent from school in the subsequent days, and the Shahids spend the holidays in France without saying another word to Nora. All the while, Nora waits anxiously for Sirena to telephone:

I kept waiting for Sirena to call -- to tell me how Reza was faring, to report on his state of mind, for God's sake even to ask whether there was any homework he ought to be doing.[I]n the deafening silence, I started to be angry, a little.What sort of manners were these ...didn't you owe your son's teacher a phone call, when she'd rushed him to the hospital and stayed there with you for hours, just to say that he'd be back and when, or wouldn't be... that he was fine, or Christ, that he wasn't... but even then, to say one more time 'thank you' because... when people put themselves out for you it behooves you to express gratitude. (pp. 87-88)

Nora's anger is also flecked with sorrow: "Above all," Nora explains, "in my anger, I was sad. Isn't that always the way, that at the heart of the fire is a frozen kernel of sorrow that the fire is trying -- valiantly, fruitlessly - - to eradicate" (p. 88). She is further distressed by spending Christmas with her ailing father and aging, lonely Aunt Baby. As she tends to their needs, she wonders, "Who would do the same for me, in my dotage?" (p. 99). The realization that she is childless, unmarried, approaching middle age, and -- for all practical purposes

-- alone manifests itself in a restless fury that can only be sated through hours of intense creative labor in the studio.

If the Shahids occasionally make Nora furious, they also bring her inspiration and happiness. Nora eventually learns to channel all of these emotions into her art in a constructive way. Her increasing closeness with each of them inspires her to incorporate joy into her dioramas. "[I]t would have seemed wrong," Nora reflects, "in the new, golden light of love with which I saw the world illuminated, to make [Alice Walker's] room reflect only... her darkest isolation, when she felt forsaken by life and by art and by love" (p. 145).

Skandar, in particular, helps Nora challenge the limitations that she places on her creativity. He challenges Nora to take her art -- and her life -- to a completely new level. Skandar observes that Nora's dioramas are "at the same time truthful, and emotional -- and so small" (p. 194) and encourages her to question why she has chosen to create art on such a minute scale. "Why not a whole room, a life-sized room, for each of these?" Skandar probes. "Why only a little box?" (p. 194). Skandar also points out to her that sadness is the predominant emotion within her dioramas. Although Nora argues that joy is clearly present within each room, Skandar is not satisfied: "Why does Joy not take the whole room?" (p. 194). Nora worries that the small-scale of her art -- with its tiny, token amulets of joy -- suggests that she is exactly the sort of person she never aspired to be: "My art was sad, because my soul was sad. Was this right?" (p. 194). However, Skandar assures her that he does not believe this to be true: "You don't need to worry for a moment about your soul," he remarks. "Rather, you need only to move all of your emotions out of their little boxes, and let them take up the whole room" (p. 195).

Nora often refers to herself as "the woman upstairs" and compares life to a Fun House. What do these metaphors suggest about the events in *The Woman Upstairs*?

Each of these metaphors implies a painful disconnect between Nora's inner life and Nora's external reality. This disconnect casts a shadow of irony over Sirena's betrayal.

Nora is unmarried, childless, middle-aged, and believes that she has not accomplished the lofty goals she laid out for herself in adolescence. Likewise, she feels that, in the eyes of the world, she is "the woman upstairs:" a reliable but otherwise unremarkable figure who exists in the background of other people's dreams and accomplishments. In her words:

[Women like us are] always upstairs. We're not the madwomen in the attic We're the quiet woman at the end of the third-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.[N]ot a soul registers that we are furious. We're completely invisible. (pp. 5-6)

Though invisible, the "woman upstairs" is known for keeping herself together and projecting an image of goodness and contentment. When you're the Woman Upstairs, Nora explains, "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 unseemly for you to have.The Woman Upstairs does not aspire in such self-serving ways. She must not appear to have an ugly heart" (p. 235). This façade of simplicity also leaves Nora lonely and frustrated: "When you're the Woman Upstairs," she laments, "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" (p. 214). The Woman Upstairs may be living a life, but to Nora, it isn't a real life: there is nothing authentic,

nothing passionate, nothing worthwhile about merely keeping one's self together and masking one's true feelings.

Nora also compares life to the Fun House she visited each summer as a child, a relentless maze of hallways, illusions, image-distorting mirrors, and false exits designed to entertain wanderers. "Life itself is the Fun House," Nora observes, "All you want is that door marked EXIT, the escape to a place where Real Life will be; and you can never find it" (p.4). During her time with the Shahids, Nora admits that she thought she'd found those doors to salvation, doors that seemed to lead her out of the Fun House and into the Real World. After Nora learns of Sirena's betrayal, she concludes that those doors simply led to illusion, another loathsome trick of the Fun House: "there were doors," Nora recalls, "and I took them and I ... believed... that I'd managed to get out into Reality -- and God, the bliss and terror of that, the intensity of that: it felt so different -- until I suddenly realized that I'd been stuck in the Fun House all along. I'd been tricked. The door marked EXIT hadn't been an exit at all" (p. 5).

Both metaphors -- the Fun House and the Woman Upstairs -- represent the troublesome disparity between who Nora longs to be, and the person that the world sees. They reflect Nora's belief in finding the "right" way out, and her idealistic impulse to please and care for others at the expense of fulfilling her own dreams: "Fun House Nora, the Woman Upstairs, we like her because she's so thoughtful of others. Because she isn't stuck up" (p. 173). But as Nora learns, "Life is about deciding what matters. It's about the fantasy that determines the reality," (p. 6) -- and Nora learns just how hard a task it can be to distinguish the real from the imaginary.

Unfortunately, Nora learns this lesson through Sirena's betrayal. Sirena films Nora's masturbatory experience in Wonderland --later using it in the exhibit itself -- without even acknowledging what had transpired, much less asking Nora's permission or disclosing her decision to use the footage. "Somehow," Nora reflects, "I had been filmed in that most private moment. Somehow, I had been seen; and could then be displayed, an object, like one of the artists in my own dioramas. I could be sacrificed" (p. 251). By filming Nora and displaying the footage, Sirena restricts what the world knows and understands about Nora to a single moment. Sirena displays Nora at her most free, yet she undercuts that freedom by exposing Nora's most private self without getting consent:

There's that room inside your mind where you are most freely and unconcernedly yourself, and then there are the many layers of masquerade by which you protect that skinless core; but there she was, my most unguarded self (a fantasy self!), famous at last, visible but invisible, hanging on a wall in Paris and five times sold. (pp. 251-252)

Sirena essentially gives Nora something that Nora has wanted all her life: she becomes art. Through the lens of Sirena's camera, Nora is no longer invisible or ignorable. Ironically, however, this brand of fame comes at a cost: although Nora may have secretly longed to shed her invisibility, she never intended to have this part of herself publicly "laid bare on Sirena's gallery wall" (p. 252).

Nora occasionally addresses the reader in *The Woman Upstairs*. How does this affect Nora's story? What does it suggest about Nora's goals as a narrator?

Nora is a self-conscious narrator; she occasionally speaks directly to the reader and uses phrases that suggest she is telling her story to a specific audience and is highly aware of how that audience perceives her. These techniques influence the tone of Nora's story and challenge her reliability as a narrator.

The novel, for example, opens with an abrasive declaration: "How angry am I? You don't want to know" (p. 3). Addressing the audience in this manner enables Nora to pull her readers into the story; we become, to some extent, a part of the narrative itself. But the confrontational nature of this statement also sets a tone for the whole novel: the narrative that Nora draws us into is unapologetically angry.

And yet, while Nora immediately acknowledges that the story she is about to tell is a story that many people would prefer not to hear, she nevertheless is determined to share it -- even when she knows that what she describes isn't going to show her in a flattering light. At the beginning of Chapter 7, for example, Nora confesses that she has omitted a significant detail from the narrative that fills the preceding pages: "There was another strand in this tapestry. What does it signify that I'm loath to tell you, slow to tell you?" (p. 148). The strand that Nora is loath to disclose is the one that exposes her relationship with Skandar. Although Nora is reluctant to reveal these details, the desire to be completely honest ultimately trumps her hesitation. Although Nora does finally confess her feelings for Skandar and alludes to a turn in their relationship towards the physical, she does not do so with the same vividness and detail that propel other parts of the narrative.

While Nora's honesty increases her trustworthiness as a narrator, her perspective is obviously not unbiased. On the one hand, Nora vents her rage and bravely recounts experiences that are personally unflattering -- but she also carefully defends her own character while doing so. Nora, for example, acknowledges her sometimes-unsavory language, but asks the reader to focus on the virtue that underlies it:

Be advised that in spite of my foul mouth, I don't swear in front of the children -- except once or twice when a rogue "Shit!" has emerged, but only sotto voce, and only in extremis. If you're thinking how such an angry person can possibly teach young children, let me assure you that every one of us is capable of rage, and that some of us are prone to it, but that in order to be a good teacher, you must have a modicum of self-control, which I do. I have more than a modicum. (p. 5)

In this way, Nora intentionally tempers hard-to-swallow facts with ingratiating explanations and details that guide the reader's perception.

In addition to using self-aware narrative techniques, Nora also occasionally shifts from singular first-person narration to the plural first-person "we." Early in the novel, she writes: "[W]hat 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." (p. 3). Using "we" allows Nora to align herself with a group. She is no longer merely voicing her personal experiences, but describing a universal experience for all women.

Nora's self-conscious narration and use of "we" elevate her story and her experiences to a new level. Looking back at her life, Nora admits that her reality has not remotely fulfilled the expectations and ambitions of her youth. As a child, Nora envisioned growing up to be a wife and mother -- but above all, an

artist. She openly acknowledges that "I thought I could get to greatness... by plugging on, cleaning up each mess as it came, the way you're taught to eat your greens before you have dessert" (pp. 14-15). By telling her story -- all that she wanted to become and do, all that she thought she was accomplishing; the person she became and the person she failed to become, the things she did and the things she failed to do -- Nora hopes to clarify what motivated her journey:

I'm like the children [in my class]: my motivations and my reasons aren't always clear. But if I can just explain, all will be elucidated; and maybe that elucidation alone will prove my greatness, however small. To tell what I know, and how it feels, if I can. You might see yourself, if I do. (p. 15)

By telling her story, Nora aspires to do something important with her life at last. Although she is neither a mother nor a wife, and although she has not made a name for herself as an artist, Nora believes that sharing her experiences may have a life-changing, positive impact on others.

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