

The Woman Upstairs

By Tracie Padal

Summary

Spoiler Alert: The following summary and discussion questions reveal plot elements that the reader may prefer to encounter as surprises.

In *The Woman Upstairs*, Nora Eldridge, a middle-aged elementary school teacher, confesses her profound rage in a three-part story. The novel opens with Nora's descriptions of her family and childhood, interspersed with memories of first meeting the Shahid family. Nora gradually develops complex and intense relationships with each member of the Shahid family; eventually, the Shahids return to Europe, leaving Nora bereft. For years after their departure, Nora attempts to overcome her loss. She briefly connects again with the Shahids in Paris -- but what she learns there only deepens her feelings of betrayal.

Nora is teaching third grade in Cambridge, Massachusetts when she meets the Shahids. While beloved by both her students and colleagues, Nora envisioned a very different life for herself. If not exactly dissatisfied with her life, Nora resents the fact that, to many people, she has become "the Woman Upstairs": a reliable but otherwise unremarkable figure from which great things are not expected.

Everything changes when the Shahids arrive. Eight-year-old Reza Shahid is one of Nora's students, but Nora's relationship with him and his parents soon extends far beyond the classroom. Reza's mother, Sirena, is an up-and-coming artist. Upon learning that Nora is also an artist, Sirena invites her to share studio space. Sirena works on "Wonderland," a mixed-media installation. When Nora's 3rd grade class visits Wonderland in their studio, Sirena films the children's reactions and incorporates the video into the show.

Nora realizes that the Shahids will soon return to Europe. Alone in the studio, a heartbroken Nora practices being free and careless: she imagines herself as Edie Sedgwick, a model and actress immortalized by artist Andy Warhol, and spends the evening drinking wine, dancing through, and masturbating in Sirena's Wonderland. Five years later, Nora travels to Europe and has dinner with the Shahids. The next morning she visits an exhibit of videos from Sirena's Wonderland project and discovers that Sirena filmed her masturbatory excursion. Nora feels deeply betrayed, but vows to transform her rage into energy that will enable her to live a full life.

Questions to Consider

- What is Nora's relationship with the Shahids and her own family like?
- What role does Reza play in Nora's life?
- Why is Nora drawn to Sirena?
- What does Nora gain from her relationship with Skandar?
- What do the themes and emotions Nora and Sirena explore suggest about art's role in society?
- How do the Shahids influence Nora's art?
- 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*?
- 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?

About the Author

Claire Messud was born in Greenwich, Connecticut in 1966 to a Canadian mother and French father. She spent her youth in the United States, Australia, and Canada and completed her education at Yale University and at Cambridge, in the UK.

Messud garnered early critical acclaim with her debut novel, *When the World Was Steady* (1995), and a subsequent book of novellas (*The Hunters*, 2001); both were finalists for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Her second novel, *The Last Life* (1999), was named to the New York Times annual Notable Books list. The American Academy of Arts and Letters honored her as a young artist of great promise, later awarding her the Mildred and Harold Strauss Living Award, which offered a five-year stipend in support of her writing career. Messud's 2006 novel, *The Emperor's Children*, was longlisted for the prestigious Man Booker Prize. *The Woman Upstairs* earned starred reviews from BookList and Kirkus Reviews upon its publication in 2013.

Her works are often driven by psychology; she deftly plumbs the inner lives of her characters, exploring complex family dynamics, social isolation, and gender issues in the process. Many of Messud's novels prominently feature creative women and explore the plights of female artists. Central figures in *The Emperor's Children*, for example, include a female author and a female TV documentary maker. A rebellious female sculptor inhabits the pages of *When the World Was Steady* -- and *The Woman Upstairs* examines the triumphs and struggles of two female visual artists.

With *The Woman Upstairs*, Messud set out to probe anger and thwarted ambition. She intentionally created a female narrator for this story, and deliberately allows her narrator's rage to manifest itself in the form of a rant. As she explains in an interview with Terry Gross of NPR's *Fresh Air*, "I have read and loved a number of ranting narrators, and it struck me eventually that they were all men and that I didn't know of a book in which a woman expressed her anger and I thought perhaps I should write one" (<http://www.npr.org/2013/05/09/180875256/the-woman-upstairs-a-saga-of-anger-and-thwarted-ambition>).

In addition to being a novelist, Messud has taught creative writing at various institutions including Kenyon College, University of Maryland, Amherst College, Johns Hopkins University, and CUNY Hunter College. She has also served on the editorial board of *The Common*, a literary magazine published by Amherst College.

Further Reading

Fiction

Chloe Aridjis, *Asunder* (2013)

Marie's job as a guard at the National Gallery in London grants her the luxuries of contemplation and invisibility. But nine years on the job has left Marie restless. While visiting Paris, a chance encounter in a ramshackle chateau challenges Marie to do the unexpected. Like Nora, Marie struggles with loneliness and has difficulty taking her own life by the reins.

Don DeLillo, *The Body Artist* (2001)

Following her husband's suicide, Lauren Hatke -- an artist who manipulates reality through the canvas of her own body -- explores the nature of time, creativity, and identity while processing her grief with the help of an enigmatic stranger. Thoughtful readers who enjoyed *The Woman Upstairs* as a psychological study will find much to ponder in this spare and deceptively succinct novel.

Zoë Heller, *What Was She Thinking? Notes on a Scandal* (2003)

In 1990s London, Barbara, a lonely history teacher, strikes up a friendship with Sheba, the intriguing new art instructor. But when the media learns that Sheba has engaged in a passionate affair with an underage male student, Barbara loyally defends her friend by writing her own account of the scandal --an account that ultimately reveals as much about Barbara as it does about Sheba. A humorous touch makes this novel a good choice for readers captivated by the themes of *The Woman Upstairs* but ready for a less edgy tone.

Francine Prose, *Blue Angel* (2000)

Ted Swenson is a middle-aged and happily married creative writing professor at a New England college. Angela Argo is a promising student who aspires to become a novelist. Sensing Angela's talent, Ted decides to mentor her -- but their relationship soon compromises both his marriage and his career. This novel probes the nature of life, art, academia, social conventions, and manipulative relationships in a way that will resonate with fans of *The Woman Upstairs*.

Nonfiction

Phoebe Hoban, *Alice Neel: the Art of Not Sitting Pretty* (2010)

Moving and candid, this sweeping biography describes the passion, struggles, and triumphs of 20th century painter Alice Neel. In *The Woman Upstairs*, Nora's fascination with Neel's plight inspires a diorama. Readers interested in learning more about Neel will appreciate these insights into her emotional nadirs, zeniths, and efforts to balance feminine roles, maternal duties, and professional ambition.

Ruth Reichl, *Not Becoming My Mother: and Other Things She Taught Me Along the Way* (2009)

Reichl, a well-known culinary writer and former editor of *Gourmet* magazine, draws upon memories and diaries as she reflects upon her relationship with her mother. Like Bella Eldridge, Reichl's mother sacrificed her own career to become a full-time mother and homemaker. While this memoir is much more tender and heartwarming in tone than *The Woman Upstairs*, keen readers will discover rich parallels within the mother-daughter relationships at the heart of these stories.

Tracie Padal is a readers' advisory librarian in the Popular Materials Department of the Palatine Public Library.