



The Lives of the Muses

By Francine Prose
ISBN: 9780060555252

Introduction

Tracing the paths of nine women who became counterparts to some of the world's most intriguing creative geniuses, National Book Award finalist Francine Prose has crafted a unique work of biography, history, cultural commentary, romance, literary criticism, and wry humor. The profiles presented in *The Lives of the Muses* inspire lively conversation: the bittersweet affection between Alice Liddell and *Alice in Wonderland* author Lewis Carroll; the impact of progressive novelist and essayist Lou Andreas-Salomé on Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud; soul mates Suzanne Farrell and choreographer George Balanchine, whose unconsummated affair could only manifest itself through ballet; Yoko Ono, the impetus behind John Lennon's musical and emotional liberation.

Each of Francine Prose's subjects dispels the stereotype of muse as passive beauty. Ranging from ethereal to pragmatic, but always charismatic and gifted, the women featured in *The Lives of the Muses* are all singular geniuses in their own right, challenging all who read about them to reconsider the qualities required for celebrity, and the conventional definitions of talent.

Discussion Questions

1. In her introduction to *The Lives of the Muses*, Francine Prose discusses the complex Greek mythology surrounding the original muses. Do these narratives from Classicism, which weave deities, mortals, noble causes, and emotional melodrama, have any role in shaping contemporary creativity? How does twenty-first-century society explain the mystery of intellect and artistic inspiration?
2. Describing the photograph of Lou von Salomé with philosophers Paul Reé and Friedrich Nietzsche that appears in chapter four, Francine Prose refers to Salomé's "ability to make others see the world as she does and maintain the faith that this vision is a dream that they have always shared, and are inventing, minute by minute." Does this definition of musedom lend itself to vocations not traditionally associated with philosophy, such as politics or technology? Who assumes this role in your professional and social circles?
3. Discuss the spectrum of sexual intensity reflected by the collaborations in *The Lives of the Muses*. To what extent were love and eroticism distinct from the creative process? In which cases were they indistinguishable from it?
4. In terms of attention, proximity, and affection, Hester Thrale was never completely available to Samuel Johnson. Was this inaccessibility an aspect of their mutual influence over one another, or do you believe that their literary careers would have been better served by a bona fide partnership between them?
5. The young age at which Alice Liddell exerted her influence sets her apart from the other muses in the book. In what ways did youth make her an ideal muse? In what ways did her youth hinder her? Are there any parallels in the substantial age difference between Alice Liddell and Charles Dodgson and that of Suzanne Farrell and George Balanchine? How might age have affected Lou Andreas-Salomé's influence over Rainer Maria Rilke, who was twelve years younger than his muse?
6. What does Elizabeth Siddal's experience indicate about the role of social rank and status in the balance of power between muse and artist? In what ways does she embody many of the contradictions of Victorian society?
7. The many men with whom Lou Andreas-Salomé formed liaisons include philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (early in her life), linguist Friedrich Carl Andreas (whom she married), poet Rainer Maria Rilke (whom she re-named), and Sigmund Freud (whose daughter Anna found a kind of surrogate mother in Lou). What do these relationships reflect about the various stages of Lou's life?
8. What do you consider to be the nature of Gala Dalí's power over Salvador? What did you discover about the realities versus the myths of their marriage? Was the relationship steeped in the dynamics of their art, or vice versa?
9. Did Lee Miller and Man Ray use the medium of photography to achieve opposite ends? To what extent were her experiences in World War II the embodiment of Surrealism? What might have revitalized her journalism career?
10. With the publication of *Through Another Lens* in 1998, Charis Weston captured the stages of a muse's role in an artist's life, including the dissolution of the arrangement. Discuss Charis's journey from muse (and model) to "art wife" and eventually memoirist for Edward Weston. What seem to be the determining factors in the longevity of a muse, ranging from Alice Liddell's incomparable summer with Charles Dodgson to Gala and Salvador Dalí's decades of marriage?
11. Suzanne Farrell became not only George Balanchine's muse, but also his protégé and successor. There is also the only medium in the book that calls for physical motion. In what way did ballet itself become an active "participant" in their relationship?
12. Yoko Ono's participation in John Lennon's medium was not matched by his hand in her art, though his presence in her life has likely left vicarious imprints on her work. Does the presence of Yoko's voice on recordings with John elevate her to a level other than muse or wife? What distinguishes muse from artist? Did Yoko's approach set a new standard that might have improved the lives of muses existing in less enlightened times?
13. Is it possible to construct a composite muse from the nine women presented by Francine Prose? Do certain media require particular skills in their muses (visual art versus poetry, or philosophy versus dance and music)? Why might ancient Greeks have

imagined all nine muses as female?

14. With which muse could you most easily identify? Which one would you prefer to have as your muse? What aspects of your life would most benefit from the presence of a muse?

About the Author

Francine Prose is the author of several highly acclaimed works of fiction, including *Bigfoot Dreams*, *Household Saints*, *Hunters and Gatherers*, *Primitive People*, *Guided Tours of Hell*, and the National Book Award Finalist *Blue Angel*. Her work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *GQ*, *Harper's Magazine*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and the *Paris Review*. The recipient of numerous grants and awards, including Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships, Francine Prose was a Director's Fellow at the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. She Lives in New York City.