



# The Woman Upstairs

*Claire Messud*

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## **The Woman Upstairs** Claire Messud

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.

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.

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.

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 Details**

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Author : Claire Messud

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# From Reader Review The Woman Upstairs for online ebook

## Carol says

37 year-old Nora Eldridge is one strange woman. As a lonely and unsatisfied school teacher with artistic ambitions, she befriends the parents of one of her young students and ends up obsessed with them. While she neglects her elderly father and forgets scheduled commitments at school, she succumbs to the needs of her *so called* new friends whom she now "loves" (*in various ways*) and desperately devotes all her free time; and the ending, well, not a surprise.

I struggled through the better part of this novel without interest. Not for me.

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## Melki says

*At the age of thirty-seven she realized she'd never  
Ride through Paris in a sports car with the warm wind in her hair.  
So she let the phone keep ringing and she sat there softly singing  
Little nursery rhymes she'd memorized in her daddy's easy chair.\**

The woman upstairs is reliable, organized, and never causes any trouble. Even her trash is always tidy.

Nora Eldridge has lived her life as a "woman upstairs." She's a popular third grade teacher. She *gets* children. She has come to realize that her life has **a shape and a horizon**. Her paintings will not be on display in the Louvre. She will never be president or even ride through Paris with the wind in her hair. She will more than likely remain childless.

Her dissatisfaction with her own stalled life leads Nora to become infatuated with the family of one of her students. The Shahids are perfect. The child, utterly charming. His father, an intriguing intellectual. And his mother, a successful, confident artist - essentially everything Nora is not.

She tries to explain to her friend, **"...I think. 'You haven't been here' and 'You haven't seen that,' and I'm suddenly filled with wonder, like the sky opening, you know, to think that all this exists, and hope, because I might someday experience some of it -- the smells, the sounds, what the light is like."** Meeting the Shahids has engendered a feeling of possibility and hope. Hope that maybe, just maybe..."**it isn't all over yet."**

But sometimes, infatuation can take a dark turn into obsession, and Nora is teetering dangerously on the brink.

When she loses touch with the Shahids briefly over the holidays, Nora frets, **"The one thing I didn't want to believe was that they were going about their days in that dingy town house in perfect and consoling uneventfulness, and simply not thinking of me at all. I started to be angry, a little. Who were they to ignore me?"**

It was easy for me to identify with Nora. I'm a frustrated, nonproductive artist. I envy those with drive, ambition and creativity. Messud has created a fascinating character who may stretch the boundaries of decency, but always remains believable and realistic. Listen as Nora discusses her fear of aging:

**I will continue. I will not spill into the lives of others, greedily sucking and wanting and needing. I will not. I will ask nothing of anyone...**

But somehow, she has allowed exactly this fearful vulnerability to happen when it comes to her dealings with the Shahids.

**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.**

Will Nora remain a *Woman Upstairs*, or will she let her freak flag fly and learn to live?

**...the person I am in my head is so far from the person I am in the world...I've learned it's a mistake to reveal her at all.**

No, Nora. It's not. Let her out.

*\* The Ballad of Lucy Jordan by Shel Silverstein*

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## **Tw says**

Lots of women don't like the main character of this book. They see her as pathetic. This is a common view of the "smugly 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.

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## **Debbie says**

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 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 worlds demand. 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 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.

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## Melanie says

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 has ever written? Or Martin Amis? Or Orhan Pamuk? Or Alice

Munro, for that matter? 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?" Nora's outlook isn't "unbearably grim" at all. Nora is telling her story in the immediate wake of an enormous betrayal by a friend she has loved dearly. She is deeply upset and angry. But most of the novel is describing a time in which she felt hope, beauty, elation, joy, wonder, anticipation—these are things these friends gave to her, and this is why they mattered so much. Her rage corresponds to the immensity of what she has lost. It doesn't matter, in a way, whether all those emotions were the result of real interactions or of fantasy, she experienced them fully. And in losing them, has lost happiness."

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 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.

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## Carol says

*The Woman Upstairs* seems truly one of those books that mood dictates its reading as well as its liking. My first start found it wanting so I dropped it for something more fast paced. But like a bur it kept pricking me to pick it up. Then the 2013 awards started rolling in. In addition it seemed to be a favorite of many of my GoodReads friends. So pick it up I did.

*The Woman Upstairs* hurled me to the floor with its bleakness, wrenched my heart with such despair, yet somehow left me hopeful, hopeful not only for myself but for its narrator. It is exquisite. It is a story for women, perhaps middle-aged but certainly does not leave out those older and yes, even, younger. So many of us will see something of ourselves on these pages.

The simple synopsis - Nora, a middle-aged teacher becomes entangled with a foreign student and his family.

The Shahid's, all three, student, Reza, mother, Sirena, father, Skandar, are in America while Skandar teaches at Harvard. Nora is first enraptured with her student from the first time he walks into her classroom. Then she meets Sirena, an alluring, somewhat mysterious, and glamorous Italian artist. Nora and Sirena strike a friendship that goes beyond the relationship of teacher/parent, a relationship that Nora self questions but one she can't resist. The bond is cemented when they rent and share an art studio where each will explore their creativity. It is here, in this studio that Skandar enters and becomes a subtle but important part of the picture.

The title enthralls me with its imagery. Just think what it means. A woman who like a child is seen and not heard, who doesn't complain, who wants nothing, who makes no waves, a woman who sits in her upper room and watches life go by. This is not say she is not angry. Anger rears its ugly head throughout. In fact the very first line tells you there is something brewing.

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

It will take you some time and maybe some perseverance to find anger's culmination and why.

There are so many beautiful thoughts and passages here but to quote them seems wrong when not taken in context.

I'm not going to over think my thoughts or what I've written. I loved *The Woman Upstairs*. It is an exceptional study of women, art, relationships, friendship, betrayal, love, longing, and where we fit in this world.

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## Greg says

*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, each member of the Shahid family, "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.

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### **Teresa says**

In the beginning I experienced a couple of jolts, first being reminded of Zoe Heller's *What Was She Thinking?* Notes on a Scandal because Nora the narrator is a teacher, and an artist, and obsessed with another woman (along with that woman's child and husband); and then of Siri Hustvedt's *What I Loved*, because of the miniature rooms that Nora makes. The Neil LaBute film *The Shape of Things* also came to mind. All about the nature of art, all about obsession of many kinds.

Maybe because I was reminded of those other stories, I thought I didn't like this book at first, but the further I got into it, the more I did as it has its own voice and its own story to tell. Inside Nora's head, at different times, you feel claustrophobic, recognize yourself, get lost in her long sentences and asides, agree with her or want to tell her to 'get a life' -- well, she wants that too. I thought of the quote from Thoreau: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

At the crucial time, I saw the ending coming, but the revelation was delayed for so long that the tension was heightened anyway.

You sense the many literary references even when you're not sure of them and they're woven seamlessly within Nora's thoughts. And then there's the name Nora, evoking Ibsen's *A Doll's House* for me, as if this Nora is a manipulated doll too, though not in a house, but in one of her own miniature rooms.

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### **Roxane says**

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.

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### **Nadosia Grey says**

This book was totally different from what I imagined it to be. The writing constantly threw me off. This book is the epitome of run on sentences. I think there needs to be smaller sentences with more meaning. Stringing sentences together with semicolons does not emphasize a point better. I thought I could get over this type of writing style—if you'd call it that—but I never really did.

Sadly though, not even a reworking of the writing style could save this book. The story is amazingly bland. Woman meets a family that she falls in love with and spends the rest of the novel ruminating over it. That's all there really is to this story; In between that scenario, there is a dull description of artistic work to fill in loose ends. If you're into art then all the power to you, but for those who aren't, it's a tedious waste of time reading it as it does not advance the plot overall.

The main character confuses me greatly. Instead of letting the character judge for yourself what she represents, she constantly feels the need to explain her actions, why she's thinking the way she is, and to prove how wrong the reader is. She should shut up and let the reader decide. She constantly tries to associate herself with being a woman upstairs, but her actions throughout the book prove to be contradictory—an aspect of the book that I probably liked better than anything else.

Overall, I did not like it. Not the writing, not the plot, and not the character (the other ones were ok). I do thank Goodreads for providing me this book though; it's the first ARC I've ever received.

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### **Julie says**

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 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 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

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## Kelly says

Claire Messud's piece does not end like it begins. Perhaps that's a good thing, for most books. We want to see stories change, characters learn things, events take us from one place to another, and so I did and do with this book. But the first part was deceptive.

Messud sets up this book to be about an angry third-grade school teacher in Cambridge, Massachusetts who started her life meaning to be an artist, and ended up, through the force of her mother's example, financial timidity, and, eventually, through guilt over her chosen sell-out career, becoming a teacher. She has now been an elementary teacher for years upon years and is a very good one, respected and loved by parents as someone who "gets kids". This means that she manifests in the world as patient, giving, kind, curious and fair, and the sort of teacher who creates learning experiences her students can enjoy.

And this book was supposed to be about her resentment of that, about female frustration and containment (even if, in this day and age, it is a partial self-containment). It starts like an angry diary entry that anyone might write on a particularly petulant Wednesday evening or particularly drunk Saturday, or perhaps even one of those anonymous teacher blogs where educators vent their frustration without the fear of being fired. It's petty and vicious and small, filled with the sort of teeny-tiny embittered reflections and persecutions that only upper-middle-class white ladies have the time to dwell on and remember in such precise detail. (The parent who told her she "gets kids" for the first time, her obsessing and reading that as someone not seeing her as fully adult or responsible. The way she perceives herself as a "Woman Upstairs," as a sort of outdated cliché of a repressed, "nice" woman who hardly speaks a word out of turn and rages in quiet desperation on the inside, prickling at every mention of her "art" with resentment.) She was fascinating in the sense that her

inner monologues, resentments and sadnesses read like those of a teenager- that is, someone who spends an awful lot of time concerned with trying to establish their own identity, mostly through worrying about what others perceive about them and projecting it onto themselves. The sort of identity making we do before we trust it to come from inside of us (at least as much as we can.)

It was an incredibly accurate portrayal, in that sense, of that sort of mindset. I expected that we would see this pettiness and sadness and gradually strip away the layers to find the beauty. Or perhaps I expected that after her initial ugly outburst, we would be taken at least with some sort of sympathy through all the things that made her the way that she is and why, perhaps in just as ugly a fashion, but in a way that made her pettiness understandable (perhaps she was hiding from something large?). In any case, I felt confident that Messud was working on a separate plane from our narrator, and she would be able to show us her mind and let us explore while also showing us everything that her character was missing, all the things little and small that made her what she was that she refused to see.

However, as the book went on, I lost that faith. I think Messud did attempt this on one or two occasions, but slowly and surely, I came to the conclusion that she was *siding* with our character in a really unhelpful way that brought down whatever potential she had. Nora becomes less and less complex. For the first part of the novel, I had assumed that Messud was hiding Claire's real pain and sadness and we would get there, but no. It turns out that everything is right on the surface and no deeper than it appears. Clare is exactly the sort of person who never took charge of her own life, who always did what others told her, who made choice after choice out of timidity or an inability to understand the life of the artist beyond the surface- she is a person who absolutely could have changed her own life and possessed all the native talent and drive that she needed to do so. Then she took it and buried it and redirected that drive into her second-choice profession, her anger, and maintaining a simulacra of her dream, so she can convince herself that it is not quite gone. It is the tired dilemma of middle-managers, frustrated housewives and anyone who ever went into the "family business" without much of a second thought. These people chose, or they slid into, or they let themselves be drawn down easy paths and then not only did that but stayed on those paths for more than a decade. I am impatient with that occurring and then turning around and claiming grand tragedy. It is, at most, a subject to be treated with quiet melancholia, wise understanding, and, perhaps, if you feel something is missing in your life, an attempt to find something else to fulfill it. I think this is especially the case when, like Nora, (view spoiler). Nora, by the middle of the book, came off as someone who either had no idea what she wanted, or wanted things that were STILL for outer show, in her late thirties.

And worse, I think that I am supposed to sympathize with Nora and go along with her incredibly cliched and worn-out mid-life crisis. I think I am supposed to see her acting out all these antics, all the ones that she missed out on in high school and college, as sad, as things that draw me to her. And the worst part of that is a) that I don't. and b) that I am the target audience, to a great degree for this book, and I STILL don't. I am a teacher, I am someone who enjoys teaching but also thought she might have a different career, who has felt the sort of repressed rage Nora expressed at the beginning, been in the self-contained cage. But the way that Nora handles it reveals that the character a) either has no depth or no progress beyond those young, heady years where she experienced the artist's lifestyle and gave it up or b) knows she made a wrong choice and is dealing with it in a very juvenile and inappropriate manner, or, worse, c)... the author thinks she is having her deal with it in an understandable and relatable manner that I am supposed to recognize and do not. And I really think that it is C.

I am so, so tired of encountering this middle-aged woman stereotype in literature, and not seeing justice done to her and her experiences. There is still a place for literature about these women, who still exist all over this country and beyond. Men too. It isn't exclusive to women. It's worth engaging with them to see why they do what they do and how it all could have been different.

Was this book an attempt to explain such a stereotype to me? To see the mundane, not brave, everyday person-ness of where it comes from? Perhaps. But it failed to make it compelling. It failed to show me a person worth caring about, who deserved better.

There were two moments of truth later in the book, where I felt that, finally, some truth and commentary was happening that hinted to me that perhaps Messud's editorial position was not the same as her narrator's. Both of them occurred in conversations with her father. Nora is walking with her father, who tells her that he has had a strange phone call from her brother. On the phone call he noticed something odd about him, speculated as to a possible problem between him and his wife based on his evasive answers to his questions. He showed an analytical brain far at odds with Nora's conception of him as a desperate old man who sits around doing nothing but waiting for her next visit. She shuts him down with some platitude, and he goes silent. The second moment occurred when they were discussing her mother. Nora spouted some romanticized claptrap about her mother's gardening, and why the plants that wouldn't grow frustrated her so much- something about how they were the only thing she could control in her life and even they wouldn't do what she told them to. Her father basically laughs in her face, as if he can't believe it, and tells her about just how controlling her mother really was- that she decided everything in their lives, right down to what he wore and what they ate each night, where they lived, how it was decorated, when they went out and who their friends were. Nora can't believe it and dismisses her father's insight- her father goes silent again. Just as he does on the other occasion when he dares to speak his mind to her. These two moments illuminated a great deal about her relationship with her father- why she keeps up the weekly visits (duty, a sense of picking up her mother's role and playing it, taking on her mother's conceptualization of her father), why he likes to see her (her conceptions are just like they were when his beloved wife was alive, she's still in her daughter role), and why he acts the part of a silent, doddering old man for her (because that's how she prefers that he be).

Unfortunately, there was so much less insight offered about the other characters and Nora's interpretation of their actions. The way that the scenes were constructed, we see everything through Nora's paranoid and self-involved eyes. It's problematic that we see everything inside her head. The insights Messud gives her are commonplace, and beyond that... she's a startlingly unappealing character to read about. Her obsession with her artist friend and her husband does not yield poetic insights, her odd fixation on a small boy is odd in a way that the book does not redeem.

After we take this whole journey with her through her year of her obsession, I'm left scratching my head and asking why. I can see why this character considers it important, in the narrative she tells herself, but I don't see it otherwise. I don't see what it did for her. She makes the sort of change a middle-aged woman who once wanted to be an artist might make- a big one, I suppose, but it seems only temporary. And, just like all her other changes, it is outward ONLY. On the inside, she seems just the same as she was at the beginning.

And you know what? It is not impossible to humanize this woman- to make her rise above accusations of First World Problems, of delusional oppression and self-involved and pampered choices. It can, in fact, be heartbreaking. I've seen it done. I've seen it done in literature- my review of the *Awakening* lists several examples of it, in literature written earlier in the century by great women artists.

But you know the one that always gets to me?

Have you guys ever seen *Paris Je T'aime*? I don't love every part of that movie. But I will tell you the part that I do love, that I love so much and I am so affected by that I start crying almost before the segment even starts. I can't even watch it. It's the last film, the one about the middle aged American post-lady who takes a vacation to Paris by herself. The one where she reads about her trip in French to what is clearly her French class back home?

Here it is if you haven't seen it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJG0l...>

Oh god, I can't even deal with it. It was difficult even to look up that moment on youtube without crying. It's like a compulsion. Every time I see it, I feel an immediate connection to this woman. I feel like I see her whole, little, sad, quiet life on her own. I see her struggling to make the best of it, I imagine the conversation she had with herself when she decided to take conversational French and how hard she probably works on it in her spare time, when she can. I see the treats she gives her dogs and how much she loves them. I see her quiet resignation and acceptance of her small place in the universe, and how hard, despite clear, innocently expressed heartbreak, she tries to go on anyway. How she's fixated on France as the thing that will bring her life meaning and give her joy- like so many other writers and artists and great people before her. How even the smallest and quietest person can find the sort of ineffable, beautiful joy that we usually associate only with the great and brilliant. She is pathetic and small and has some bitterness and regret, and she is wonderful in so many ways. My connection to her is visceral, and I feel every small wince and slight she experiences, however insignificant it might seem to others.

There is next to nothing of this in Messud's book, not after the riotously angry beginning. I already know this stereotype. I don't need her to recount and rehash it. And it offers me nothing more beyond it.

I had hoped that this book would give me more reasons to fight for women like Carol, to express well deserved anger and show me why, within the confines of mundane life. But perhaps I expected too much of her. I don't know.

Either way, I am walking away disappointed.

Carol deserved better.

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## **Zoeytron says**

Nora Eldridge, 37, second grade school teacher, is the woman upstairs. 'She's reliable, and organized, and she doesn't cause any trouble.' In reality, she is a frustrated artist, unmarried and unwanted, living a life of quiet desperation. Smiling on the outside, screaming on the inside, Nora struggles to tamp down the rising anger of missing out on what should have been her life.

An incident at school involving one of her young students puts Nora in close touch with the boy's parents. She becomes obsessed with them, insinuating herself into their lives, feeling that she is becoming part of the family. She thinks of them to the exclusion of anything else, concocting plans where she can spend even more time with them. It is inevitable that something will happen to mar this unhealthy mix.

Growing up, I lived in a neighborhood filled with huge old two-story houses. The elderly couple next door rented their upstairs bedrooms to single women. These ladies rarely had visitors, they caught the bus at the end of the block to go to work each day, came home to their rooms, and generally were not seen again until the next day. I was a little kid and didn't think much about it, but the title of this book made me think of them. Looking back, it must have been a lonely life for these women. Or maybe not. I hope not.

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## Bonny says

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 reasonable way than the deluded and angry Nora.

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## Margitte says

When is a book a piece of art, or a literary masterpiece without art as part of the equation, or just a novel?

This book is not really the story of a lonely, 42-year-old single school teacher in Cambridge Massachussets. Nora Eldridge is the protagonist who by sheer coincidence is challenged to start living, work on her ambition to be an artist, and break away from the monotonous routine with which she meandered though life, with an almost emotional sterile reserve against the onslaught of life which resulted in her ending up being totally on her own as *The Women Upstairs*.

That's the storyline, the fragile skeleton that is supporting the structural building blocks of emotions that started out with pure definitions of love, friendship, trust, loyalty, and bonding, and ended up in pure totally justified rage - all consuming, almost uncontrollable destruction of everything she ever accepted in her life as good and pure.

I was really captured by this book, although I initially felt uneasy with the cynism and neediness in Nora's conduct, until I figured out that I did not feel comfortable with this book because I was afraid of becoming her. The feelings of loss and hopelessness flowed beneath her choices up to a point where she no longer could ignore or deny it. And then the rage came, and she finally understood what it took to really live. It took one year of radical changes in her life to kick-start a revolution with the vast energy of a volcanic mental and emotional eruption. It's the only way stars are born in our personal universes.

It was a sad literary read, honestly. But at the same time it was one of the most brilliant books, truly a piece of work art, that I have come across.

That's all I want to say about this book. It is a deeply touching experience. 272 pages. Five stars for that!

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## Dolors says

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.

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## Ron Charles says

Here's a little video I made about this book:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/s...>

For practical advice about how women can thrive and control their destinies, check out "Lean In" by Facebook's ever-gracious COO, Sheryl Sandberg.

But maybe after a hard day of believing in yourself and using "we" words, you just want to luxuriate in a fire of cleansing rage. Go ahead: Push the billionaire's affirmations aside and listen instead to the she-devil in Claire Messud's ferocious new novel. Lean in — she'll singe your eyebrows off.



“The Woman Upstairs” arrives at a curious time in our national conversation about gender roles. Decades after the protests over the Equal Rights Amendment, “angry feminist” is still a slur, as though anger were a ridiculous reaction to persistent social inequality. Worse, the words “bitter” and “shrill” sit in their silos, ready to be launched at any woman who drops her pleasant smile while debating day-care availability, reproductive rights or sexual harassment.

What a slap in the face, then, to be hit by Messud’s opening line: “How angry am I? You don’t want to know.”

This is Nora Eldridge: 42, single, childless, a respected teacher at Appleton Elementary in Cambridge, Mass. “Don’t all women feel the same?” she insists. “The only difference is how much we know we feel it, how in touch we are with our fury. . . . I’ll set the world on fire. I just might.”

Think Medea as a third-grade teacher.

Even the title of this novel is marinated in bile. Like someone scratching an infected wound, Nora returns to the phrase “the woman upstairs” again and again: “We’re not the madwomen in the attic — they get lots of play, one way or another,” she says. “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. In our lives of quiet desperation, the woman upstairs is who we are, without a goddamn tabby or a pesky lolloping Labrador, and not a soul registers that we are furious. We’re completely invisible.”

This may be rage, but it’s fantastically smart rage — anger that never distorts, even in the upper registers. When Nora complains about women like herself who dutifully tuck themselves away, she ricochets from Charlotte Bronte to Jean Rhys to Henry David Thoreau to Ralph Ellison. Wherever she digs, she hits rich veins of indignation.

Messud’s previous novel, the wonderful “Emperor’s Children,” sprawled out over more than 400 witty pages to skewer Manhattan’s young cultural elite. Her new book is an entirely different creature: a tightly wound monologue with the intensity of a novella that reads more like a curse.

What exactly has ruffled the antique doily covering Nora’s dull, respectable life — “a world in which the day’s great excitement is the arrival of the Garnet Hill catalog”? What stirred her wrath just as she was settling down to the arthritic realization that “your life has a shape and a horizon, and that you’ll probably never be president, or a millionaire, and that if you’re a childless woman, you will quite possibly remain that way”?

It starts with an 8-year-old boy. Reza Shahid is an adorable student from France who joins her third-grade class for a year. One day, after some bullies beat him up, Nora calls Reza’s mother, Sirena, with the bad news. An Italian married to a Lebanese academic, Sirena is an up-and-coming installation artist. She’s glamorous and irresistible, the sort of magnetic personality who manipulates with delectable flattery. The two women immediately become friends. Nora vibrates in a state of “joyful panic,” her own long-dormant artistic ambitions suddenly bloom, and she dares to unpack her “lifelong secret certainty of specialness.”

Anger provides the heat, but the novel’s real energy comes from its intellectual fuel, its all-consuming analytical drive. Nora and Sirena rent a studio together, and soon they’re spending weekends and evenings on their art: Sirena’s piece is a vast, surreal re-creation of Wonderland, while Nora constructs a tiny replica of Emily Dickinson’s bedroom (“I’m nobody! Who are you?”). Those disparate art projects suggest what

separates these two very different women. Between the heavens of storm, Nora can be an engaging commentator on everything from aesthetics to international relations to aging.

Indeed, awakened by Sirena's encouragement from years of narrowly constrained duty, Nora feels aroused and delighted. All should be lovely, but Messud keeps this friendship tightly sealed in Nora's obsessive, ruminative voice. There's something clammy and claustrophobic about her affection. Soon she's babysitting Reza and fantasizing about Sirena's husband. You can catch the faint scent of some toxic mold from "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" or "Notes on a Scandal" or even "The Talented Mr. Ripley." Yet Nora claims, "If you'd told me my own story about someone else, I would have assured you that this person was completely unhinged" — demonstrating exactly the kind of self-knowledge that keeps the reader off-balance.

Even as that psychological drama races toward a dark climax, Nora seduces us with her piercing assessment of the way young women are acculturated, the way older women are trapped. "When you're a girl, you never let on that you are proud, or that you know you're better at history, or biology, or French, than the girl who sits beside you," she says. "It doesn't occur to you, as you fashion your mask so carefully, that it will grow into your skin and graft itself, come to seem irremovable." If Nora is a monster, she's also a sympathetic and perceptive victim. But of what? Bad luck? Self-pity? A chauvinistic society?

A more polemic, far less enjoyable novel would hand us the answer. But Messud isn't writing an op-ed, and her story's feminist critique of America rubs raw against her deconstruction of sisterhood. What eventually rises above these gender issues is Nora's pained howl. It doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman: It's hard not to feel your own shameful anxieties and fragile hopes being flayed by these braided strands of confession and blame.

Lean in. I dare you.

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## **Diane says**

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 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 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 stay "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 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!'"

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## Debbie "DJ" says

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 friends urging, lead 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.

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, who's 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, 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!

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## **Elizabeth says**

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.

