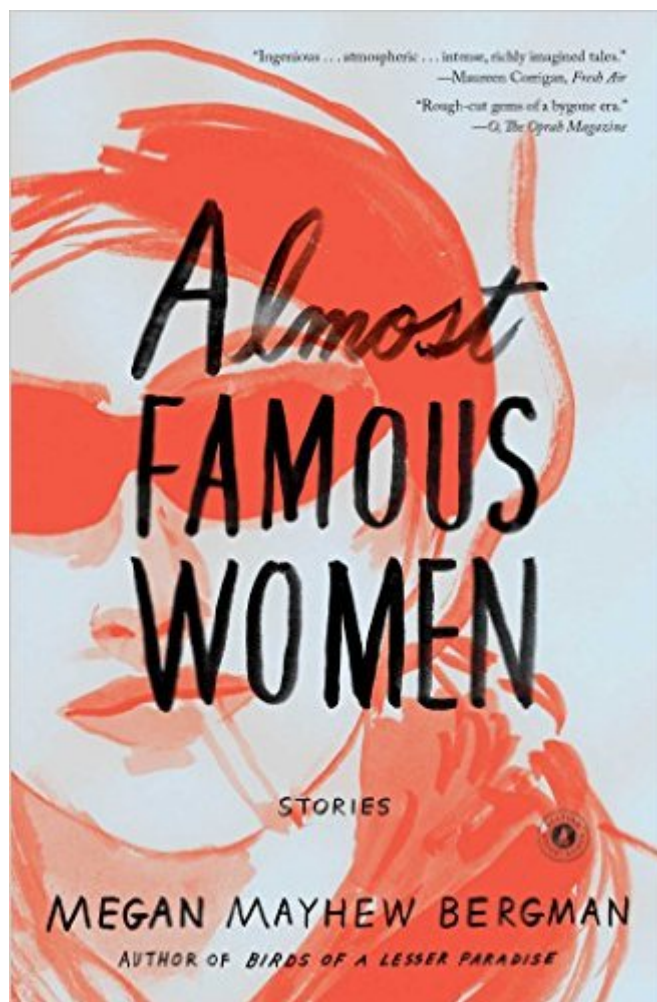


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Almost Famous Women: Stories



Synopsis

From a prizewinning, beloved young author, a provocative collection that explores the lives of colorful, intrepid women in history. "These stories linger in one's memory long after reading them" • (Star Tribune, Minneapolis). The fascinating characters in Megan Mayhew Bergman's "collection of stories as beautiful and strange as the women who inspired them" • (Kirkus Reviews, starred review) are defined by their creative impulses, fierce independence, and sometimes reckless decisions. In "The Siege at Whale Cay," cross-dressing Standard Oil heiress Joe Carstairs seduces Marlene Dietrich. In "A High-Grade Bitch Sits Down for Lunch," aviator and writer Beryl Markham lives alone in Nairobi and engages in a battle of wills with a stallion. In "Hell-Diving Women," the first integrated, all-girl swing band sparks a violent reaction in North Carolina. Other heroines, born in proximity to the spotlight, struggle to distinguish themselves: Lord Byron's illegitimate daughter, Allegra; Oscar Wilde's wild niece, Dolly; Edna St. Vincent Millay's talented sister, Norma; James Joyce's daughter, Lucia. Almost Famous Women offers an elegant and intimate look at artists who desired recognition. "By assiduously depicting their intimacy and power struggles, Bergman allows for a close examination of the multiplicity of women's experiences" • (The New York Times Book Review). The world wasn't always kind to the women who star in these stories, but through Mayhew Bergman's stunning imagination, they receive the attention they deserve. Almost Famous Women is "addictive and tantalizing, each story whetting our appetite for more" • (Atlanta Journal-Constitution).

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Scribner; Reprint edition (July 14, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1476788812

ISBN-13: 978-1476788814

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (82 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #53,468 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #8 in [Books > Literature & Fiction >](#)

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Customer Reviews

Full disclosure: I received an advance copy of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an unbiased review. "Maybe the world had been bad to its great and unusual women. Maybe there wasn't a worthy place for the female hero to live out her golden years, to be celebrated as the men had been celebrated, to take from that celebration what she needed to survive." The annals of history and the literary world are filled with tales of famous women, those whose names have become common knowledge and in some cases, even household words. But for every famous woman, there are countless women whose fame is fleeting, or even those who remain just out of the spotlight, yet their stories deserve to be told. In Megan Mayhew Bergman's new short story collection, *Almost Famous Women*, she brings attention to the stories of some women whose names might be vaguely familiar, and many which are not. From a pair of conjoined twins who flirted briefly with show business to a member of the first all-female, integrated swing band in the midst of racial unrest, author Beryl Markham and *Gone with the Wind* actress Butterfly McQueen to Dolly Wilde, Oscar's niece, and poet Edna St. Vincent Millay's sister, Norma, the characters in these stories are vivid and fascinating in many cases, teaching us many things we'd probably never know and getting us to think in ways we might never do. Some of the stories which resonated with me the most were: "Saving Butterfly McQueen," told from the viewpoint of a young missionary determined to convert the atheist actress to Catholicism; "Hell-Diving Women," which followed the aforementioned swing band as it travels through the south and meets controversy because of the band's integration; "Who Killed Dolly Wilde," told by a young woman fascinated by the reckless war heroine; and "The Siege at Whale Cay," which told of M.B. "Joe" Carstairs, a speedboat racer known as the fastest woman on water. Bergman is tremendously talented (I absolutely loved her first collection, *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*), and she fleshes out her characters with emotion, complexity, and flaws. Not all of the stories were as interesting to me, and some are so brief you have little chance to connect with the characters, let alone understand why they were selected to have their tales told. (I would really have loved to have read more about Beryl Markham in "A High-grade Bitch Sits Down for Lunch," for example.) If you're a fan of historical fiction, or enjoy particularly strong and/or quirky female characters, definitely pick up *Almost Famous Women*. You'll marvel at Bergman's storytelling ability, and perhaps even learn a thing or two.

As the saying goes, every character is the hero of their own story. Conjoined sisters,

Byron's illegitimate daughter, and Oscar Wilde's niece"these are just some of the powerful stories that Megan Mayhew writes about in *Almost Famous Women*. This is a collection of short stories not just detailing the lives of women who are basking in the faded glory of a limelight that could have been their own, but also the other minor characters in their lives. The masterful aspect of this collection was how the stories illuminated the minor characters close to the leading ladies"these were men and women in the background, in the shadows, looming in the distance like ghosts. In some of these stories, these minor characters became my favorite story tellers. My favorite stories were *The Pretty, Grown-together Children*, *The Autobiography of Allegra Byron*, *Saving Butterfly McQueen* and *Who Killed Dolly Wilde*. In *The Autobiography of Allegra Byron* the story is less about Byron's illegitimate daughter and more about her nameless caretaker in the Convent she is sent to live in. Her caretaker had just lost her infant daughter and finds herself attached to Allegra's bright personality and spirit. Similarly in *Saving Butterfly McQueen*, the protagonist is studying to become a doctor and while inspecting her first dead body she thinks back to when she was a younger girl and met Butterfly McQueen, an atheist. The story becomes a commentary on the protagonist shedding her religious background for science. Each of the stories are economic with their words and some very short, but with vivid details and descriptions the places come alive, the characters leap from the page. It is nothing less than magic with what occurs"as the author notes in the book, "the stories in this collection are born of fascination with real women whose remarkable lives were reduced to footnotes." If you are looking for a historical biography on these women you will be disappointed, as Mayhew's collection simply illuminates these women in very brief chapters. It is meant to be read as though it were fiction, and not a character profile of women who were almost famous. Though this book could easily be read in one day, it is not meant to be devoured but savored. Originally posted on Contemporary-Books.com

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