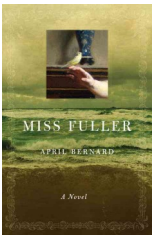


Miss Fuller



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"I am absurdly fearful and various omens have combined to give me a dark feeling ... It seems to me that my future upon earth will soon close ... I have a vague expectation of some crisis--I know not what." Shortly before returning to America from Europe, the famous 19th century feminist Margaret Fuller wrote these words.

This small elegantly designed historical novel is a pleasure to read. Besides the famous activist Fuller, it presents portraits of other famous 19th century literary heroes including Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne. But these are basically side characters; it's really about Margaret Fuller, the activist, writer, and revolutionary who changed the world's thinking about women. It's divided into two sections. The first tells the story of Fuller's shipwreck off Fire Island, New York. This section is told primarily through the viewpoint of Annie Thoreau, the famous naturalist's younger sister and helpmate. What makes Annie's viewpoint interesting is that at the beginning she does not like Margaret. Like many in the politically active town of Concord, Annie felt that by concentrating on the problems of women, Fuller was stealing fire from the anti-slave movement.

The second section of *Miss Fuller* is an autobiographical letter/diary that Margaret hopes to share with her sister. In it, she describes her recent years living, travelling, and speaking in Europe. She was also involved in the Italian fight for democracy.

The usually esteemed reputation of Emerson takes a nosedive in this book. Emerson refused to help Fuller financially even though he could have well-afforded to give her an advance on work that he had commissioned from her. His reasons were not practical as much as judgmental. He did not agree with Fuller's lifestyle, the fact that she married an Italian and that rumors circulated (in most cases falsely) about affairs that she had in New York and in Paris.

At the same time, Emerson and members of his circle demanded that she return home, that it wasn't proper for an American lady to live in Europe even though she had an Italian husband. In fact because of her poor pecuniary state, Fuller chose to bring her family home (husband and baby son) on the cheapest possible ship, a merchant ship ferrying marble and statuary to the States. A hurricane grounded the ship and the heavy marble ripped through the hull only hundreds of yards from the beach.

The characters of Margaret and Annie are incredibly well-drawn. April Bernard, who is also a poet, describes 19th century life so well that you can see the fashions, Thoreau's room, and the shipwreck site that Thoreau explored trying to find papers and other possessions of his friend. Annie disappears after the first half of the book into marriage (for the most part), a detail that reinforces Margaret's belief that after marriage women were almost always shut off from the world and unable to use their talents beyond the domestic sphere. If you are interested in women's history or discovering the Transcendentalists in a more personal light, try this intriguing novel.

And if you want to learn more about the real Fuller's life, try John Matteson's well-reviewed *The Lives of Margaret Fuller*, that also was published this year.

Posted by Dory L. on June 4, 2012

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