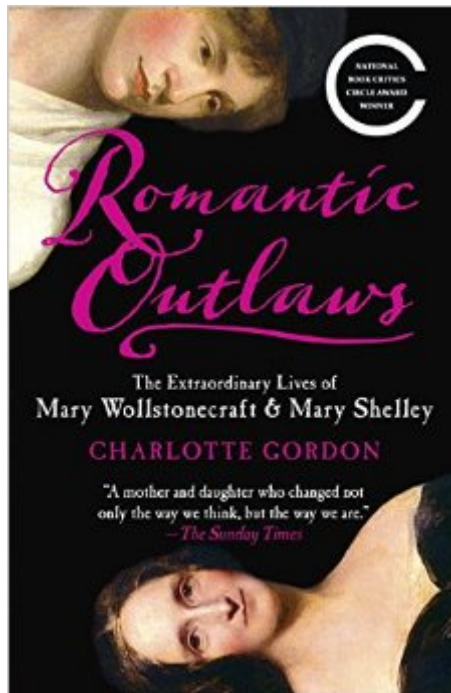


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Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives Of Mary Wollstonecraft & Mary Shelley



Synopsis

NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD WINNER • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE SEATTLE TIMES

This groundbreaking dual biography brings to life a pioneering English feminist and the daughter she never knew. Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley have each been the subject of numerous biographies, yet no one has ever examined their lives in one book—until now. In *Romantic Outlaws*, Charlotte Gordon reunites the trailblazing author who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the Romantic visionary who gave the world *Frankenstein*—two courageous women who should have shared their lives, but instead shared a powerful literary and feminist legacy. In 1797, less than two weeks after giving birth to her second daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft died, and a remarkable life spent pushing against the boundaries of society's expectations for women came to an end. But another was just beginning. Wollstonecraft's daughter Mary was to follow a similarly audacious path. Both women had passionate relationships with several men, bore children out of wedlock, and chose to live in exile outside their native country. Each in her own time fought against the injustices women faced and wrote books that changed literary history. The private lives of both Marys were nothing less than the stuff of great Romantic drama, providing fabulous material for Charlotte Gordon, an accomplished historian and a gifted storyteller. Taking readers on a vivid journey across revolutionary France and Victorian England, she seamlessly interweaves the lives of her two protagonists in alternating chapters, creating a book that reads like a richly textured historical novel. Gordon also paints unforgettable portraits of the men in their lives, including the mercurial genius Percy Shelley, the unbridled libertine Lord Byron, and the brilliant radical William Godwin. "Brave, passionate, and visionary, they broke almost every rule there was to break," Gordon writes of Wollstonecraft and Shelley. A truly revelatory biography, *Romantic Outlaws* reveals the defiant, creative lives of this daring mother-daughter pair who refused to be confined by the rigid conventions of their era.

Praise for *Romantic Outlaws*

"[An] impassioned dual biography . . . Gordon, alternating between the two chapter by chapter, binds their lives into a fascinating whole. She shows, in vivid detail, how mother influenced daughter, and how the daughter's struggles mirrored the mother's." *The Boston Globe*

"Written with the galloping pace of a skilled novel peopled with fascinating characters . . . these women live on in its pages. . . . Thorough and irresistible." *The Seattle Times*

"Gordon unfolds the two stories in tandem, deftly balancing the gossipy aspects of her subjects' lives with their serious intellectual concerns." *The New Yorker*

"[A] thoughtful, intelligent and deeply felt book . . . Gordon has written a book about two women, a mother and her daughter, who changed not only the way we think, but the way we

are.â •â "The Sunday Times (London) Â â œA most welcome deeper take on the women who scandalized Victorian Englandâ "and whose stories continue to resonate today.â •â "Vogue Â â œBy linking these two lives, Ms. Gordonâ™s biography stretches over a fascinating era in history, characterized by great flux in political and cultural thinking and involving some of the main figures in English literary and philosophical history.â •â "The Wall Street JournalFrom the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

Paperback: 672 pages

Publisher: Random House Trade Paperbacks; Reprint edition (February 2, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812980476

ISBN-13: 978-0812980479

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1.4 x 7.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (79 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Author Charlotte Gordon has written an excellent double biography of two very strong women - mother Mary Wollstonecraft and the daughter she died after giving birth to, Mary Shelley. Gordon's book is amazing in that she writes alternating chapters of the two women's lives without being a bit confusing to the reader. Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter were both rebels. But the families they came from were also somewhat out of society's mainstream, so while both, for instance, gave birth to out-of-wedlock children, neither seemed to be as condemned for it. Of course, they were on the fringes of society, both financially and socially. Both women were writers of both fiction and non-fiction and Wollstonecraft, who was raised by a violent father and a sickly mother, left home relatively early to make her way. The last 25 years of the 18th century was a turbulent time in both England and France. In France, the revolution was beginning and in England, the ideas of change were in the air. The English-born Thomas Paine, and other Americans - fresh from our revolution - were in London preaching the virtues of free thought and political activism to Mary Wollstonecraft

and her literary crowd. Her famous work, "A Vindication of the Rights of Women", published in 1792, gave her feminist beliefs a literary credibility. She published many other free-thinking works but her life was cut short by her death after the birth of her second child, Mary Godwin. Mary Wollstonecraft's husband and Mary Godwin Shelley's father was William Godwin, another famous social critic and political philosopher. The second Mary gained prominence through her writing and her relationship with the poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

The present biographer's purpose is to demonstrate how closely Mary Shelley studied her dead mother's writings and how strongly they influenced her own attitude toward the conventions of her day. Once those points were firmly established, the analysis lost my interest, but fortunately there is much, much more to this book. This is a dual biography in which the chapters alternate, first for the mother Mary Wollstonecraft, then for her daughter Mary Shelley. The arrangement works surprisingly well. Both women lived unconventionally, published unconventional books, and were punished by society for transgressions against its rules. Mary Shelley's own life is full of interesting vignettes. How can anyone not be moved when she and Percy see in the distance a Rhineland castle named Frankenstein, whereupon a peasant tells them that long ago an alchemist lived there who experimented with dead bodies to create living ones. A marvelous scene. Within a year or two, Mary, at the age of nineteen, wrote the book for which she will always be remembered. For several years the Shelleys were closely associated with Lord Byron, a man whose friendship never came without an emotional cost to everyone around him. Mary's stepsister, Claire Claremont, became pregnant by him and he spent the rest of his life loathing her and trying to avoid her. Their child, a little girl, was placed by him in a convent where she was treated affectionately but succumbed at the age of four to one of the fevers endemic to Italy. The Shelleys had tried heroically to pry the child from Byron's grip and restore her to her mother, but without success. Claire Claremont, unhinged with grief, became a bitter enemy of Byron and even more unstable than she had always been.

I have to confess that before reading this book, the scope of my "knowledge" about Mary Shelley was limited to a couple days of a course on 19th century literature and the 80s movie Gothic (which I watched way too many times, thanks to my for my crushes on Gabriel Byrne & Julian Sands). And I somehow knew nothing of Mary Wollstonecraft. I also have to confess that I'm usually incapable of reading serious biographies, despite genuine interest, solid writing, and good intentions. But this I found this book compelling and easy to read, and the subject matter incredibly interesting, often infuriating, and more heartbreaking than I expected. I often found myself kept awake at night by the

chapters I'd just finished, out of empathy, curiosity, or frustration--it's sometimes so difficult not to judge some of their choices, even when you know that judging an 18th or 19th century woman with no property, civil, or social rights by modern standards is absolutely absurd. I enjoyed how the chapters alternated between Shelley and Wollstonecraft, and the shift between eras and locations made it a captivating read. Getting a firsthand account of Revolutionary Paris or 19th century tourism or aristocratic habits added a layer of color and drama to the already interesting personal stories. While mother and daughter both destroyed social convention and were brilliant autodidacts, their differences were also striking--particularly the difference in age at which they began romantic affairs and having children. You can't help but wonder if the heartbreaking deaths of Mary's daughters would have been avoided if she, like her mother, had been older (compare Mary W's confidence and authority nursing Fanny through smallpox vs. Mary S's insecurity and helplessness with baby Fanny and Clara).

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