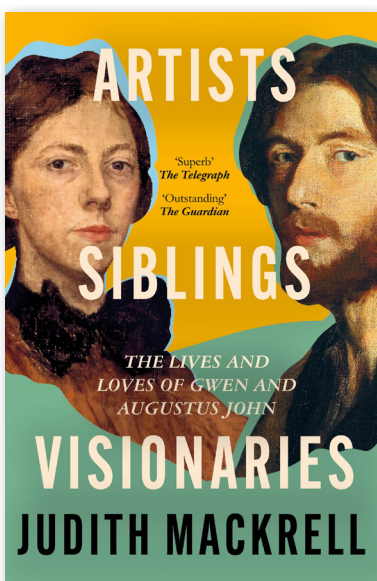


Artists, Siblings, Visionaries

The Lives and Loves of Gwen and Augustus John

by Judith Mackrell



PLOT SUMMARY

In *Artists, Siblings, Visionaries*, acclaimed biographer Judith Mackrell tells the stories of brother and sister artists, Gwen and Augustus John.

August was vivid, volatile and promiscuous. He was a hero among romantics and bohemians; he was celebrated as one of the great British talents of his generation, until his drinking began to undermine his work.

Gwen's place in the art world was much smaller. As a woman it was always going to be harder for her to succeed, yet her private way of working and reserved nature meant that it was many years after her death that her tremendous gifts were fully acknowledged.

Beneath Gwen's quietness though was a temperament as turbulent as her brother's. She formed passionate attachments to men and women, including a long and tempestuous affair with the sculptor Rodin. As this compellingly insightful account reveals, there were other ways in which the two Johns were remarkably similar. They were driven by the same urgent need to escape their drab provincial origins, the same profound dedication to work and the love they felt for each other was complicated by undercurrents of frustration and rage.

Mackrell creates a powerful portrait of a fascinating relationship – brother, sister, prodigiously talented artists and visionaries, whose experiments with form and colour created some of the most memorable work of the early twentieth century.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Mackrell's biography of the Johns is careful not to prioritise either sibling, always concentrating on depicting both Gwen and Gus's lives and art with an even hand, even though we learn by the end of the book that Gwen would become the more successful artist in terms of legacy and renown (despite Gus' greater privilege and advantages as a man at the time).



Shortlist
2026

“Rooted in meticulous research, with surprising and compelling detail, the book reads as beautifully as a novel.”

NINA STIBBE
2026 JUDGE



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Whilst the Johns are famous for their art, and art is discussed confidently alongside the artworks and techniques that would have inspired both Johns, Mackrell also brings them both to life as humans – flawed, imperfect and as full of self-doubt, vice and problems as anyone else.

Gus is a rogue, a bohemian and a clown; Gwen a passionate and intense introvert. Mackrell shows this by capturing key moments of their lives: Gus leading Ida and Dorelia to camp with the children outside for the summer; Gus cracking his head open on a rock; Gwen’s impassioned letters to Rodin and her religious epiphanies.

Mackrell has a way of making her subjects relatable to the reader; we feel empathy for everyone, squashing down the years that have passed in between then and now and making the world of the Johns feel intimate and relatable.

DISCUSSION POINTS

In reading about the women in this memoir, notably Gwen John, Ida Nettleship and Dorothy ‘Dorelia’ McNeill, the reader may be struck by the enduring similarity between their lives and desires (unmet or otherwise) and that of women in the modern day.

Ida reflects to a friend in a letter that ‘marriage was starting to feel like a constant state of compromise, eternally fitting a square peg into a round hole and squeezing up one’s eyes to make it look and feel a better fit.’ She adds that, ‘To live with a girlfriend and have lovers would be almost perfect.’ Again, this is mirrored in the modern world, where many women are eschewing traditional marriage and raising their children in non-traditional family structures – or choosing to be childfree altogether. Ida and Dorelia did in fact achieve this co-living arrangement in Paris, without Gus and with the children, and, while it lasted, it seemed to be more successful than having him around. Indeed, their long-standing polyamorous arrangement would be quite recognisable to many families today.

How much empathy did you have with the women in *Artists, Siblings, Visionaries*? Did you feel that aspects of their lives mirrored modern situations and considerations? How were their lives different to yours, and how were they familiar?

QUESTIONS

Mackrell notes a quote from the *Times Literary Supplement* that says, ‘A married woman could never hope for equality because her true happiness was invested in the well-being of her dependents.’ How much is this true of marriage today?

What did you think of Augustus John as a man? Were you sympathetic with him? Why, or why not?

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

Given that Gwen was so private, such that her letters to Rodin were kept in a safe at the Tate Gallery to keep them ‘away from prying eyes’, how do you think she would feel about this book?

NEXT STEPS

If you can, visit some of either Gwen or Augustus John’s paintings (displayed at the National Gallery in Wales) or look at them online, or in your copy of the book. Choose one you like and write a poem inspired by it. Consider the use of colour, the mood, the texture of the paint and the subject. Does it remind you of anything? Can you connect the painting to any specific events that you read about in the book?

Research the work of one of Gus or Gwen’s contemporary artists – Vanessa Bell, Rodin, etc. Find a piece that speaks to you (perhaps the sculpture that Gwen posed for) and write a short story inspired by it, or where the artwork is the subject of the story in some way. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judith Mackrell’s biography of the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova, *Bloomsbury Ballerina*, was shortlisted for the Costa Biography Award, her group biographies *Flappers* and *Going with the Boys* were critically acclaimed and *The Unfinished Palazzo* was an international bestseller. She was for many years the dance critic of *The Guardian*. She has also appeared on television and radio, as well as writing on dance, co-authoring *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*. She lives in London.



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If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

In *This Dark Country: Women Artists, Still Life and Intimacy in the Early Twentieth Century*, Rebecca Birrell presents a blend of group biography and art criticism featuring the work of Gwen John as well as Vanessa Bell, Ethel Sands and Nina Hamnett. In *Women in the Picture: Women, Art and the Power of Looking*, art historian Catherine McCormack shows us how women artists – from Berthe Morisot to Beyoncé, Judy Chicago to Kara Walker – have offered us new ways of thinking about women’s identity, sexuality, race and power.

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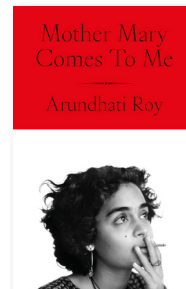
The Finest Hotel in Kabul: A People’s History of Afghanistan
by Lyse Doucet



Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War
by Jane Rogoyska



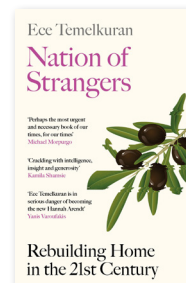
Art Cure: The Science of How the Arts Transform Our Health
by Daisy Fancourt



Mother Mary Comes to Me
by Arundhati Roy



Artists, Siblings, Visionaries: The Lives and Loves of Gwen and Augustus John
by Judith Mackrell



Nation of Strangers: Rebuilding Home in the 21st Century
by Ece Temelkuran

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