

## Reviews



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Carmela Ciuraru, *Lives of the Wives: Five Literary Marriages*. New York: HarperCollins, 2023. 336 pages. Paperback. \$21.99. ISBN: 9780062356925, ISBN 10: 0062356925.

A very useful piece of advice any parent might offer a daughter is “don’t marry a writer.” It wouldn’t hurt to warn a son in the same way. Writers can be monstrous and those closest to them often pay the price of their monstrousness.

This is not news. The difficulty of literary marriages was explored almost forty years ago in Phyllis Rose’s *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages*, which focused on the Thomas Carlyles, the John Ruskins, the Charles Dickens, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor, and George Eliot and George Henry Lewes. It made for melancholy reading, and the best “marriage” was no marriage at all, Eliot and Lewes’s long unsanctified partnership. Another revelatory book was Eileen Simpson’s *Poets in Their Youth* (1982). Simpson knew about bad literary marriages, having been married to the famously fouled-up John Berryman.

Carmela Ciuraru has now turned to the twentieth century, again with five marriages under the microscope. Laudably, she has passed over such already well-known bad, or needy, husbands as Leo Tolstoy, Robert Lowell, Ernest Hemingway, or Saul Bellow, or Norman Mailer, who stabbed one of his wives, or William Burroughs who shot his wife dead in front of their child.

The book begins with an introduction, called “What’s a wife to do?,” that sets out her thesis in starker terms than some of the chapters justify. She quotes American novelist Ann Patchett: “How exhausting it is, as a woman, to always be the one who has to make the food and change the beds” (13). But most of her subjects were well-off and supplied with servants or, in some cases, neither husband nor wife took on the domestic duties. The sufferings of the wives were more often psychological.

The five marriages Ciuraru writes about are those of Una Troubridge and Radclyffe Hall; Elsa Morante and Alberto Moravia; Elaine Dundy and Kenneth Tynan; Elizabeth Jane Howard and Kingsley Amis; Patricia Neal and Roald Dahl. She has chosen them at least in part because (unlike Catherine Dickens or Sonia Tolstoy) the wives were themselves creative artists. Neal was an award-winning actress; Morante, Dundy (initially an actress), and Howard novelists; Troubridge a promising visual artist, later an accomplished memoirist. Without doubt marriage suppressed Dundy and Howard and, most of all Troubridge, who was willing to give up everything to adopt a traditional wifely, Angel in the House, role in her love for Hall.

The worst “husbands” in terms of demanding wifely self-sacrifice, then, were Radclyffe Hall, Kenneth Tynan, and Kingsley Amis, and the latter two were nevertheless actually – if only sometimes, and perhaps half-heartedly – supportive of their wives’ writing. Amis is the least defensible. He seems never to have learned to make himself a cup of tea or accomplish any household chore at all; he could not drive but refused to take public transportation, so often demanded to be chauffeured by his wife; moreover, he could not stand to be alone and was afraid of the dark. He justified his own regular, uninterrupted hours of daily writing, while Jane Howard was left to try to fit her own writing around maintaining the household and being an involved stepmother to his children, by the fact that he made more money.

Roald Dahl was a dreadful man in many ways. When Patricia Neal almost died of a stroke, he took on the role of therapist, brutally forcing her to learn to talk and walk and eventually act again. He had a theory, but it coincided neatly with his apparent sadism. Though this regimen must have been terrible to undergo, and observers were horrified, Neal credited him with saving her life.

The marriage between Alberto Moravia and Elsa Morante fits oddly in this study of how marriage undermines women’s lives. She never loved him; he was supportive of her writing and, as Ciuraru writes, Morante was “the least self-sacrificing and nurturing [in fact, often vicious and emasculating]. She was nonetheless a woman overshadowed by her more famous and prolific husband, and one who struggled with creative ambition in ways that he did not” (15). Moravia wrote more easily and more successfully but not, on this showing, at the expense of Morante.

The author's account of the marriage of Elaine Dundy and Kenneth Tynan is a whirl of high public visibility, nightlong parties with celebrity friends, wretched excess of every kind, and considerable indifference on both their parts to their offspring. I was reminded of the comment by the late Victorian author Samuel Butler on the Carlyles: "It was very good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle marry one another and so make only two people miserable instead of four."

Looking back over this excellent book provokes several reflections. One minor one is that it would be hard to find ten people in the middle of the last century who smoked more cigarettes than these men and women, with very heavy drinking a feature of several lives (Amis, for instance). Another is that careers made several of these people, women and men, really inadequate parents.

The most bothersome thought grows from the comments several of the women made. Elizabeth Jane Howard commented, "It's true to say that writers are selfish people. All artists are, really. But it's not quite enough of an excuse" (208). Ciuraru declares: "We can no longer indulge or swat away misconduct because the offender crafts beautiful sentences. We must continue to interrogate the use of virtuosic literary achievement to justify monstrous behavior" (17). This is obviously and powerfully correct. Vladimir Nabokov's literary brilliance can never justify his dependence on wife Vera for such help as cutting up his food for him, nor can great writing excuse the terrible violence and humiliating treatment to which Nobel Prizewinner V. S. Naipaul subjected his wife. *But at least there is the writing.*

How many wives have been and are being mistreated in ways just as dreadful by husbands who are not geniuses at all, who cannot in fact craft beautiful sentences, but make the same sorts of demands as those who can? We will never know. Their biographies will remain forever unwritten, but it is distressing to realize that an untold number of "literary marriages," many of them predictably unequal and manipulative, some of them violent, never produce any literature. These wives, even more than the Elaine Dundys and Elsa Morantes, are the genuinely unheard victims of the destructive literary marriage.

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