

The Woman Upstairs

by Claire Messud; New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, 272 pages

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This is award-winning author Claire Messud's fifth novel, and my favorite.

The hook comes in the opening line: "How angry am I? You don't want to know." But we immediately *do* want to know, and protagonist Nora tells us in no uncertain terms. I never figured out where Nora's rage comes from. Is it that she, in her late thirties and an elementary school teacher (where she excels), views her career as something beneath her? (She was "supposed" to be a great artist, after all.) Is it that she cared for her dying mother when maybe (just maybe) that was her time to become a great artist? Is it that she perceives herself to be unlovable (even as she claims to not want to be loved)?

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Enter beautiful boy Reza, the eight-year-old in Nora's third grade who cracks something open in Nora. Enter the boy's beautiful, successful Italian artist-mother, Sirena. Enter Sirena's provocative Lebanese academic husband, Skandar. The Sahid family is in Cambridge, Massachusetts, via Paris, for Skandar's one-year placement at Harvard.

Does love conquer all? Does love conquer anger? For, indeed, Nora falls in love—with Sirena, with whom she impetuously shares an artist's studio, where she picks up her once-cherished dream of creating dioramas in miniature while Sirena makes room-sized wonderlands. "In love" isn't quite right, though. Nora wants to *be* Sirena. She falls in love with Reza, becoming his babysitter (at her own expense), where she plays out her fantasy of being his mother. She imagines Sirena, Reza, and herself on a desert island, making a home. Nora also falls in love with Skandar, enjoying

long intellectual conversations with him as he walks her home after babysitting late at night, coming alive with his interest and attention. Ah, love—the ecstasy, the optimism, the confusion. It's all there, times three!

And the eccentric spinster (the "woman upstairs," purposely bringing to mind the madwoman in the attic, but Nora is no madwoman, just mad) descends into herself, puts her anger on hold, begins to dream, and begins to believe. Nora points out to us, the readers (she often interrupts her first-person narrative to speak directly to the reader, intuiting what we are thinking and sardonically correcting us), that the Sahids are her "Black Monk," a reference to a Chekhov story of a ghostly figure who assures an insecure scholar of his worth and brilliance but who turns out to be a figment of the scholar's own imagination.

Nora is not particularly a sympathetic or likeable heroine. But I stayed hooked—more than hooked—drawn into—this disturbing, unapologetic, angry woman's respite that gives her a glimpse of what could have been, ironically eclipsing all that could have been.