



Almost Famous Women: Stories

Megan Mayhew Bergman , Lesa Lockford (Narrator)

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From "a top-notch emerging writer with a crisp and often poetic voice and wily, intelligent humor" (*The Boston Globe*): a collection of stories that explores the lives of talented, gutsy women throughout history.

The fascinating lives of the characters in *Almost Famous Women* have mostly been forgotten, but their stories are burning to be told. Now Megan Mayhew Bergman, author of *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*, resurrects these women, lets them live in the reader's imagination, so we can explore their difficult choices. Nearly every story in this dazzling collection is based on a woman who attained some celebrity—she raced speed boats or was a conjoined twin in show business; a reclusive painter of renown; a member of the first all-female, integrated swing band. We see Lord Byron's illegitimate daughter, Allegra; Oscar Wilde's troubled niece, Dolly; *West With the Night* author Beryl Markham; Edna St. Vincent Millay's sister, Norma. These extraordinary stories travel the world, explore the past (and delve into the future), and portray fiercely independent women defined by their acts of bravery, creative impulses, and sometimes reckless decisions.

The world hasn't always been kind to unusual women, but through Megan Mayhew Bergman's alluring depictions they finally receive the attention they deserve. *Almost Famous Women* is a gorgeous collection from an "accomplished writer of short fiction" (*Booklist*).

Almost Famous Women: Stories Details

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From Reader Review **Almost Famous Women: Stories** for online ebook

Nat says

"You can fill up your life with ideas and still go home lonely."
—Janis Joplin

(The epigraph is epic.)

Nearly every story in this dazzling collection is based on a woman who attained some celebrity—she raced speed boats or was a conjoined twin in show business; a reclusive painter of renown; a member of the first all-female, integrated swing band. We see Lord Byron's illegitimate daughter, Allegra; Oscar Wilde's troubled niece, Dolly; West With the Night author Beryl Markham; Edna St. Vincent Millay's sister, Norma. These extraordinary stories travel the world, explore the past (and delve into the future), and portray fiercely independent women defined by their acts of bravery, creative impulses, and sometimes reckless decisions.

The Pretty, Grown-Together Children: **5/5 stars**

"There were no secrets. Imagine: you could say nothing, do nothing, eat nothing, touch nothing, love nothing without the other knowing."

This tells the story of Daisy and Violet Hilton, a pair of English conjoined twins in show business. And it was truly and honestly unlike anything I've read before in a short story.

I started with one page and then put it down to get something to drink, and the whole time away I couldn't stop thinking about Daisy and Violet.

I hadn't heard about the Hilton twins prior to this, but I sure did my research after finishing.

"Violet and I might be broke and we might be strange but we were not ordinary."

The Siege at Whale Cay: **3.5/5 stars**

M. B. "Joe" Carstairs, the fastest woman on water.

Former star of a carnival swim show in Florida, Georgie, is going steady (for the time-being) with Joe.

"Her God-fearing parents thought she was teaching swimming lessons on a private island. They didn't know she'd spent the last three months shackled up with a forty-year-old womanizing heiress who stalked around her own private island wearing a machete across her chest, chasing shrimp cocktails with magnums of champagne every night. A woman who entered into a sham marriage to secure her inheritance, annulling it shortly thereafter. A woman who raced expensive boats, who kept a cache of weapons and maps from the First World War in her own private museum, a cylindrical tower on the east side of the island."

However, their relationship turns rocky when movie star, Marlene arrives on a yacht with a boatload of beautiful, rich people, actresses and politicians.

The overall story kept my attention, but I don't usually enjoy reading about rivalry in relationships so that

made me lower my rating.

Also, what the hell with Georgie happened towards the end??

“She treaded water, fingers moving against the dark sea, pushing it away to keep herself afloat. There were rocks jutting out from the water, a near miss. There were strange birds nesting in the tall grass, a native woman bleeding on a straw mattress in a hut on the south shore, a stone house strangled by fig trees.”

What? It surely cannot end on that... I need to know what happened.

Norma Millay's Film Noir Period: 3.5/5 stars

Told in four acts, **Norma Millay's Film Noir Period** goes through time and back to describe the sisterhood between Norma and Vincent Millay.

It's a rather short story so not much was expanded, but I liked seeing how they had each other's back till the end of time.

Also, the writing in this is gorgeous.

“When she breathes in, her sister's claret-colored hair falls across her face, and she feels deep love tinged with resentment, like the pure ice leaching red dye from the river.”

I love how specific it is.

Romaine Remains: 2.5/5 stars

“We are what we can be, not what we ought to be.”

—From Romaine Brooks's notebooks

We enter Romaine's later life told entirely from the perspective of her houseboy. Their interactions were always a bit cold and empty, but I never suspected him to behave in such a cruel way.

“I do not care for her, Mario thinks. I do not feel sorry for her. I only want to take some small slice of her life and have it for myself”

I didn't like the way his characterization was handled—the story made him out to be so vengeful, to claim something that wasn't rightfully his, and I did not care for how it was taken care of.

“He can feel the new firm of self-confidence he has acquired peeling back, revealing the well of self-doubt, the sense he has carried with him his entire life that he has been wronged, that he is owed more. He needs her to see who he really is, who he can become. He hates her and he needs her love, and she is never going to give it.”

Also, that ending was confusing as hell.

Hazel Eaton and the Wall of Death: 3.5/5 stars

In this short story Hazel Eaton is lying in a hospital room in Bangor after an accident happened when “her

rear brake locked up as she was circling the motordrome at sixty miles per hour. ”

It was only a few pages, but I loved getting to research her past after finishing it.

“Don’t tell my parents,” Hazel slurs, but the nurse is gone. Her parents will see reports of the crash in the papers anyway, and her mother will write her a letter asking, Why? Why must you put yourself in harm’s way every week? Every day?

What they don’t know: nothing has topped the feeling of standing next to the motordrome, smiling into the din of applause. Nothing has topped the way men shake her hand and look her in the eye, what it’s like to be able to call a man chickenshit to his face and get away with it, to mean it, to feel free and dominant and in control of your life.”

Expression Theory: 3/5 stars

Expression Theory describes Lucia Joyce's thought process. But I have to mention that I didn't understand what I was reading until I googled her. And since the story was really short, it didn't help to comprehend everything that was happening.

Saving Butterfly McQueen: 4/5 stars

We begin following Elizabeth, a student in med school, when she and her classmates are about to slice cadavers open. And just as she's about to cut into the body, her thoughts turn to Butterfly McQueen.

Back in the day, Elizabeth went with her youth group trying to convince people to *“let the light of the Lord into [their] heart.”* And so she thinks back to trying to convince Butterfly McQueen, who was in her eighties, to join the Lord.

But when she actually get to talk to Butterfly McQueen, Elizabeth realises that even she doesn't believe in what she's trying to sell.

“Don’t you worry about what’s going to happen when you die?” I said, suddenly genuinely curious. “I already know what’s going to happen when I pass,” she said. “I’m giving my body to science.”

“This was the first time I’d ever heard of someone not wanting to lie in a grave in their best dress, plastic lilies stuck in the ground next to a granite tombstone. It seemed to me so rational and selfless, one of the greatest gifts you could give: your whole body.”

A truly fascinating take on both religion and science.

Who Killed Dolly Wilde?: 4.5/5 stars

Told from the point of view of a loved one, this story describes Dolly Wilde in her last year.

“For years people who admired Dolly’s wit and entertaining personal letters pleaded with her to write a book, but she never had. She was lazy, but I think she was also stymied by her uncle’s shadow. “How can I be any good if he has used it all up?” she once said to me.”

I wasn't expecting to love this story as much as I did. But damn, this was phenomenal. The characters, the loves, the nights horrors. Everything and so much more made this story so incredible.

I also loved that a lot of the women mentioned in this collection were connected one way or another. It made everything feel that more real.

A High-Grade Bitch Sits Down for Lunch: 2.5/5 stars

“But this girl, who is to my knowledge very unpleasant and we might even say a high-grade bitch, can write rings around all of us.”

—Ernest Hemingway, on Beryl Markham

Fearless Beryl Markham had been riding racehorses since she was eleven and the recent regal stallion she'd gotten for nothing at auction, mystifies her.

“I want to be alone when I turn the stallion out, she thought, looking for his proud head over the stall door. I want him to know me as his master, his alpha and omega.”

I wasn't expecting to read about her cruelty towards the horse, but I was definitely left terrified of her character. I seriously cannot read about animal cruelty, it breaks me apart.

The Internees: 4/5 stars

This short story describes the liberation process from the ghetto concentration camps. It was only a couple of pages but managed to encompass the whole world, for me.

“We were human again. We were women.”

Hell-Diving Women: 4.5/5 stars

Ruby lives on the road with America's first integrated all-girl swing band, gig to gig, and while behind the wheel she starts to think about her friend/ crush, Tiny Davis.

“Ruby is the do-anything girl. It's not the best job in the world, but it's a job that keeps her close to Tiny and close to music. ”

Ruby tries not to show it, but she wishes to be part of the sound that the band produces.

“If only I could be part of that flow, part of that sound.”

There was also talk about race, sexuality, white-privilege, and it tackled each issue with the most honest and sincere truth.

“Hey there, black girl!” a man in a blue suit shouts, huge smile on his face. He holds his drink up to toast Tiny, sloshing small, clear drops of gin onto the floor.

“Hey, fella,” Tiny shouts, looking down and gesturing with her trumpet. “It's not about being black. It's not about being a girl, though I like girls. It's about playing your goddamn music. Blowing your goddamn horn.”

Lastly, I want to mention that I absolutely loved getting to research each and every woman featured in this collection and getting to know them a bit better than before. I truly appreciate any book that makes me come out more educated once I finish, and that it did.

Note: I'm an Amazon Affiliate. If you're interested in buying **Almost Famous Women, just click on the image below to go through my link. I'll make a small commission!**

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Larry H says

Full disclosure: I received an advance copy of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an unbiased review.

"Maybe the world had been bad to its great and unusual women. Maybe there wasn't a worthy place for the female hero to live out her golden years, to be celebrated as the men had been celebrated, to take from that celebration what she needed to survive."

The annals of history—and the literary world—are filled with tales of famous women, those whose names have become common knowledge and in some cases, even household words. But for every famous woman, there are countless women whose fame is fleeting, or even those who remain just out of the spotlight, yet their stories deserve to be told.

In Megan Mayhew Bergman's new short story collection, *Almost Famous Women*, she brings attention to the stories of some women whose names might be vaguely familiar, and many which are not. From a pair of conjoined twins who flirted briefly with show business to a member of the first all-female, integrated swing band in the midst of racial unrest, author Beryl Markham and *Gone with the Wind* actress Butterfly McQueen to Dolly Wilde, Oscar's niece, and poet Edna St. Vincent Millay's sister, Norma, the characters in these stories are vivid and fascinating in many cases, teaching us many things we'd probably never know and getting us to think in ways we might never do.

Some of the stories which resonated with me the most were: "Saving Butterfly McQueen," told from the viewpoint of a young missionary determined to convert the atheist actress to Catholicism; "Hell-Diving Women," which followed the aforementioned swing band as it travels through the south and meets controversy because of the band's integration; "Who Killed Dolly Wilde," told by a young woman fascinated by the reckless war heroine; and "The Siege at Whale Cay," which told of M.B. "Joe" Carstairs, a speedboat racer known as the fastest woman on water.

Bergman is tremendously talented (I absolutely loved her first collection, *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*), and she fleshes out her characters with emotion, complexity, and flaws. Not all of the stories were as interesting to me, and some are so brief you have little chance to connect with the characters, let alone understand why they were selected to have their tales told. (I would really have loved to have read more about Beryl Markham in "A High-grade Bitch Sits Down for Lunch," for example.)

If you're a fan of historical fiction, or enjoy particularly strong and/or quirky female characters, definitely pick up *Almost Famous Women*. You'll marvel at Bergman's storytelling ability, and perhaps even learn a thing or two.

See all of my reviews (and other stuff) at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blog...>

Simon says

What a brilliant short story collection. Possibly one of my favourite realist collections (a 4.5/5 if I was allowed) of fictional accounts of women throughout history who have just been on the periphery of fame, shining a light on their wonder, brilliance, quirk and, sometimes unintentionally, daring difference.

Chris Blocker says

First off, Bergman is a wonderful story writer. She has a way of shaping stories from the most basic components and making them very much alive. Her stories are intelligent and expressive. Secondly, I love the concept of this book. Here are women we know little or nothing of, women who were “almost famous” because of the men were in the company of, or “almost famous” because they were notable, but just not quite visible enough in a patriarchal society. Here these women are reimagined, given new life and a chance to tell their stories. Many of these stories felt more to me like the product of Bergman's imagination than based on truths; however, a glance at the author's notes reveals she conducted considerable research.

All that aside, *Almost Famous Women* is a good book with a great concept, but the stories don't quite match the caliber of Bergman's previous effort, *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*. While there are many stellar stories in her first collection, *Almost Famous Women* is full of consistently good stories, almost great stories, but none quite as wonderful as “Housewifely Arts,” “Another Story She Won't Believe,” or “Saving Face.” *Birds of a Lesser Paradise* is worth the time to read because of its best stories. *Almost Famous Women* is worth the time because of the interesting characters it introduces the reader to.

Personal favorite included “The Siege at Whale Cay” and “Saving Butterfly McQueen.”

Shannon says

Most of us have read about Zelda Fitzgerald and Edna St. Vincent Millay, but what about the women just a step away? What about Edna's sister Nancy or Oscar Wilde's niece Dolly? In her new collection of short stories, Megan Mayhew Bergman reconstructs the lives of women who lived on the edge of celebrity by bringing their unique experiences to the forefront for the first time.

Rather than try to crawl into the minds of her chosen women, Bergman imagines may of their lives through the people around them. These fictional narrators allow *Almost Famous Women* to feel intimately close while also giving readers a greater sense of time and space that may have been missed from a first-person perspective. So, instead of seeing Lord Byron through the hopeful eyes of his illegitimate daughter Allegra, “The Autobiography of Allegra Byron” is narrated by the nurse who cared for the 4-year-old in the convent where she was raised. Through her, we are able to see both the sweet, simple life Allegra led and the heartbreaking dismissive attitude of her father.

However, Bergman does take on the voice of her characters in portions of the book, and does so in stories that beg for a personal touch. In both “The Internees”, a story less than two pages long about the liberated women of Bergen-Belsen, and “The Pretty, Grown-Together Children”, which tells the tale of conjoined twin

performers, Bergman takes on the first-person perspective with a collective ease that highlights her broad talent.

Each piece reads like a gorgeously penned slice of a biography, which makes the collection perfect even for readers reluctant to pick up short stories. Courageous, bold and well ahead of their time Bergman's *Almost Famous Women* are more than ready to take the spotlight.

Originally posted at rivercityreading.com

Rebecca Foster says

Twelve of the 13 stories in this collection take up the lives of historical women who are either virtually unknown or only known through association with more famous figures. As Bergman puts it in her author's note, the stories "are born of fascination with real women whose remarkable lives were reduced to footnotes."

Some of our 'almost famous' heroines are Lord Byron's illegitimate daughter, Allegra; Oscar Wilde's niece, Dolly; Edna St. Vincent Millay's acting sister, Norma; and James Joyce's unstable dancer daughter, Lucia. There are also historical figures you may have heard of but likely know little about: painter Romaine Brooks, actress Butterfly McQueen (one of the maids in *Gone With the Wind*), and early aviatrix Beryl Markham. There is such variety in this baker's dozen of stories: they are split almost equally between the past and present tense, and between first- and third-person perspectives, although the latter wins out a bit more often.

Two stories even use the first-person plural, a viewpoint of which I'm particularly fond. "The Internees" is a story in miniature, just one and a half pages, depicting the female residents of Bergen-Belsen in 1945. When liberation comes and they are able to wear lipstick again, it restores their identity: "We were human again. We were women." This perspective also has an intriguing use in the first story, "The Pretty, Grown-Together Children," about conjoined twins Daisy and Violet Hilton. Although Daisy is the chief narrator, she sometimes lapses into first-person plural: "We were somewhere between singular and plural."

If the Hilton twins were beyond the pale because of their physical uniqueness, other heroines are so because of their sexuality. For instance, "The Siege at Whale Cay" is about Marlene Dietrich's visit to lesbian couple Georgie and Joe – M. B. "Joe" Carstairs, a larger-than-life heiress who owned a Caribbean island and held sway over the locals. Dolly Wilde was also a lesbian; in two subtle connections with previous stories, she once shared a lover of Romaine Brooks's, and corresponded with Joe Carstairs (both were ambulance drivers during World War I).

The main characters of the final story, "Hell-Diving Women," are doubly unconventional: black and lesbian, they were members of the first integrated female swing band. Whether they break racial or sexual taboos or (like Romaine) are so old the world no longer remembers them, all of these women are outsiders. Yet they are such vibrant individuals they simply cannot blend into the crowd; "You don't have the luxury of being mediocre," the Millay girls' mother chides them.

Most of the stories are set in the 1910s-40s, but a couple of notable ones break that mold. "The Autobiography of Allegra Byron," narrated by the little girl's nurse at the Italian convent where she lived the last two years of her short life, is set in the 1820s. "The Lottery, Redux" is set in an unspecified near future and has dystopian elements. It's the odd one out in that it does not contain any historical figures. Rather, it is

inspired by Shirley Jackson's most famous short story. A second generation of exiles on the island of Timothy, banished for "environmental crimes," must reduce their population one by one through a ritualized ceremony.

My favorite story of all is "Saving Butterfly McQueen." The narrator, Elizabeth, is about to cut into a cadaver as part of her medical training in Baltimore. Suddenly her mind jumps back to the moment when, as a teen on a door-to-door evangelism mission in Georgia, she met Butterfly McQueen on her doorstep. McQueen was an avowed atheist and told Elizabeth not to waste her time; she was going to be donating her body to science. Especially when Elizabeth's mother became ill with cancer, she came to realize how, for McQueen, dedicating her body to research "was about taking control of the thing that was undeniably hers." Although the framework is fictional, McQueen's story is historical. It reminded me of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, one of my favorite recent books.

Indeed, many of these stories could lead readers directly into longer works. Here are a few of my related recommendations:

If you like "The Siege at Whale Cay," try *Mrs. Hemingway* by Naomi Wood and *The Night Watch* by Sarah Waters.

If you like "Hazel Eaton and the Wall of Death," try *The Flamethrowers* by Rachel Kushner.

If you like "The Autobiography of Allegra Byron," try *Juliet's Nurse* by Lois Leveen.

If you like "A High-Grade Bitch Sits Down for Lunch," try *Circling the Sun* by Paula McLain.

If you like "The Lottery, Redux," try *Shirley* by Susan Scarf Merrell.

This is a rich, wonderful collection. If I have one point of criticism, it is that the shorter stories (several in the range of 3–5 pages) don't add much to the whole. The in-depth character analysis you get in the longer stories is where Bergman shines. I can see this book fulfilling a dual gateway function: inviting those who normally read non-fiction, especially biographies, to attempt some fiction; and luring historical fiction lovers to give both short stories and non-fiction a chance. Bergman's author's note gives her sources and initial inspirations for each of the stories, so readers can follow up on anything of particular interest.

As the narrator of "Who Killed Dolly Wilde?" muses, "Maybe the world had been bad to its great and unusual women. Maybe there wasn't a worthy place for the female hero to live out her golden years, to be celebrated as the men had." That is, until Bergman's terrific book gave these almost famous women the perfect showcase.

With thanks to Maya Lang, and Kara Watson of Scribner, for arranging my free review copy.

(This review originally appeared at Bookkaholic.)

Dana says

This book was so cool and I love the title. I think the idea of paying homage to almost famous women is a

great idea and I really respect the authors efforts in this. I enjoyed all of the stories, although I found that *The Lottery, Redux* story (as great as it was) didn't really fit with the general vibe of the collection.

My favourite story of the bunch was probably the first one *The Pretty, Grown-Together Children*, although I thought that all of the stories were very well done. I really appreciated how unique each of the stories were and am impressed that they are all written by the same author. I would probably read more from Ms. Bergman.

Note: I received this book for free in exchange for an honest review.

Quirkyreader says

This book was a piece of historical fiction about many overlooked women. I have previously read biographies about some of the women featured in this collection. And because of that, the stories were a bit of a treat.

I enjoyed Bergman's writing style. Especially in her homage to Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery". Also, there are a few surprises in this book. Read closely and you will find them.

In the back of the collection the author put a list of resources that I devoured. Many of the books that Bergman listed I have now added to my TBR.

Britany says

I absolutely LOVED this one! I'm usually not a fan of short story collections. For me, they just don't work well together. This book, however, is the exception. I devoured this book, and would've finished it in one sitting if I had the time! Each story represents a fictionalized account of an almost famous woman. I was fascinated, intrigued, and interested in reading about these amazing women. Some more impactful than others, but savored each one for what it was. It would be extremely difficult for me to even choose a favorite. I could sit back and go back through them all over again.

Susie says

I really enjoyed this reading experience. Would love to find other short story collections with this feel.

Orsolya says

Many people error into thinking that short stories are easier to compose than a full-length novel. The opposite is actually true as the author has to throw the reader into a character plot and arc which feels like it

already began before the book opened. Basically, not everyone is cut out for this type of writing. Luckily, Megan Mayhew Bergman, author of the short story collection, “Birds of a Lesser Paradise” (which I loved); *can* procure such writing and therefore returns with a new collection in, “Almost Famous Women”.

In “Almost Famous Women”, Bergman pens 13 stories on the theme of real-life women who were ‘almost’ famous or lived as side notes in the lives of other popular figures. Each story is comparable to a mini- HF story which could spell disaster in terms of short story writing style but Bergman manifests it well.

As always, Bergman envelops the reader with depths and nuances that are smooth and unforced making the reader feel as though he/she is engaged in a longer piece of text. Each character and tale stands out on its own with vivid plots and voices. Bergman is a master at making stories come alive and fitting lots of morsels into a small space.

Uniquely, the stories in “Almost Famous Women” vary in narration with some being told in first person per the women described while others are depicted by those surrounding the women which successfully helps the stories not feel repetitive. Of course, some stories are longer than others and better constructed but overall the collection meshes together well.

Sadly, although the stories in “Almost Famous Women” are interesting (especially for HF fans); they fail to evoke the emotional response that Bergman typically stirs up. There is just ‘something’ missing and the stories are not as finessed as “Birds of a Lesser Paradise”. Despite this, the stories are relatable and dramatic in imagery making them visual wonders dancing in the reader’s mind.

Bergman incorporates the “Easter egg” common to many short story collections in which the author mentions a character from a former story in another later on thereby connecting the stories in a novel plot-like way. Bergman doesn’t overdo this, however, and it therefore genuinely adds some spark to the pages.

The concluding stories in “Almost Famous Women” slightly deviate from the theme as “The Internees” is a couple-page tale not about an individual woman (but the most emotion-packed in my opinion) and “The Lottery- Redux” ‘covers’ Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery” which most readers are familiar with (if you are not, then do so read it post-haste). The final story reverts back and wraps up the collection relatively well before Bergman then proceeds to list her inspirations for each story.

“Almost Famous Women” is a strong collection with lovely prose, structure, and detail which Bergman wraps around the reader with ease. The author’s work continues to stand out (and I truly hope Bergman decides to write a novel some day). However, “Almost Famous Women” is simply not as enthralling as was expected based on “Birds of a Lesser Paradise”. Regardless, the collection is recommended for fans of short stories and of female-driven HF.

Dianne says

Extremely well-written and unusual collection of short stories. Each story is based on a different female historical figure who is just outside of the mainstream - Oscar Wilde's niece, Edna St. Vincent Millay's sister, aviatrix Beryl Markham, Standard Oil heiress Joe Carstairs, and so on. The author puts her characters in richly imagined vignettes that have their roots in fact.

I thought this was a very interesting and clever idea. Each of these eccentric heroines will live on in my imagination for some time. I defy you to read this without sneaking off to "google" at least one of these ladies!

?Karen says

I read this one story at a time over several days and weeks. The short stories (not my favorite thing) are about women who have a brush with fame, as the name implies, such as two women known only for being conjoined twins, or a wealthy heiress who had a relationship with Marlena Dietrich, or the sister of Edna St. Vincent Millay, etc. I didn't think these almost famous women were given much background information -- their stories are really just touched upon in these short stories -- and some of the stories didn't even say who the women were or why I should care to know about them. I was compelled to look up every one of them on Wiki and felt the author was making me work too hard.

All were strong-willed, passionate women who take risks in their lives and leave their own marks, big or small. I was glad the book brought them to light, but wish it had given each a bit more substance, more depth. 2 stars for me means It was just OK.

Margitte says

My first reaction to the book was one of an indifferent feeling of *laissez faire*.

The first note-to-self asked : "and what is the point, exactly?"

What was the purpose of the book, was my question after reading the first few essays. Was it a creative writing class assignment at one point in time?

"Write an essay on the life of any historical female icon, in which you capture the essence of her being, as though she appeared in a dream to you. Capture the person in the personality. Use carte blanche to weave tales around the woman, based on their true life stories. Climb into their lives. Become a close friend. Create bytes of some definitive moments and bring these women alive to generations who never knew them. Have fun!"

Or something like that.

Initially the book did not make me pirouette on the coffee table with excitement, nor did I dance with joy. I looked at the number of pages, took a glimpse at the clock and wondered how much time it was going to take, and should it be taken, to venture further into the prose.

But I did the book a favor, thought I would save my own sanity, and ventured off onto the internet, finding profiles of these women.

That's where it happened for me. Suddenly the color rushed into the black-and-white photographs, the glazed-over eyes in the paintings lightened up, forgotten names and short biographies came alive.

I was hooked.

Only then, did the book made me sit up straight. It masterfully captured the spirit, of these women who

- were exclamation points in history;
 - had glamour and bravery;
 - possessed almost savage femininity;
 - often had more panache than money;
 - experienced a flash of greatness;
 - were brave but not imbeciles;
 - possessed heroic femininity
 - did not know the luxury of being mediocre;
 - were able to call a man chickenshit to his face and get away with it;
- (paraphrasing from the book)

The author put the reader inside the skin of each woman, and did so with vivid immediacy.

Some of the personas who made it into the book (Thank you Wikipedia):

Marlene Dietrich(December 27, 1901, to May 6, 1992) - famous actress;

Marion Barbara 'Joe' Carstairs (1900 – 18 December 1993)- a wealthy British power boat racer known for her speed and her eccentric lifestyle;

Violet& Daisy Hilton (5 February 1908 – January 1969) - a pair of British conjoined twins or Siamese Twins;

Romaine Brooks, born Beatrice Romaine Goddard (May 1, 1874 – December 7, 1970) - an American painter who worked mostly in Paris and Capri. She specialized in portraiture and used a subdued palette dominated by the color gray;

Tiny Davis Trumpet player for the first racially integrated woman's swinging jazz band, the *International Sweethearts Of Rhythm*

Lucia Anna Joyce (26 July 1907 Trieste - 12 December 1982 Northampton) - the daughter of Irish writer James Joyce and Nora Barnacle. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the Burghölzli psychiatric clinic in Zurich. She was placed in an institution in Ivry-sur-Seine, France, in 1935

Hazel Marion Eaton Watkins (July 4, 1895 – December 22, 1970) - was one of the first "mile-a-minute girls" to ride an Indian motorcycle in a carnival motordrome known as the Wall of Death;

Clara Allegra Byron (12 January 1817 – 20 April 1822), initially named Alba, meaning "dawn," or "white," by her mother, was the illegitimate daughter of the poet George Gordon, Lord Byron and Claire Clairmont, the stepsister of Mary Shelley. (wikipedia info - mmmm did she have two fathers, I wondered)

Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen (January 8, 1911 – December 22, 1995) - an American actress. Originally a dancer, McQueen first appeared as Prissy, Scarlett O'Hara's maid in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*. She donated her body to science.

Dorothy Ierne Wilde, known as Dolly Wilde, (July 11, 1895 – April 10, 1941) niece of Oscar Wilde - an Anglo-Irish socialite, made famous by her family connections and her reputation as a witty conversationalist.

Beryl Markham(26 October 1902 – 3 August 1986) - a British-born Kenyan aviator, adventurer, racehorse trainer and author. During the pioneer days of aviation, she became the first woman to cross the Atlantic Ocean and the first person to make it from London to New York nonstop.

In 1925 Ernest Hemingway, in a letter to California restaurateur George Gutekunst, wrote

"Did you read Beryl Markham's book, West with the Night? ...She has written so well, and marvelously well, that I was completely ashamed of myself as a writer. I felt that I was simply a carpenter with words, picking up whatever was furnished on the job and nailing them together

and sometimes making an okay pig pen. But this girl, who is to my knowledge very unpleasant and we might even say a high-grade bitch, can write rings around all of us who consider ourselves as writers ... it really is a bloody wonderful book."

The tales were not sterile biographical paintings in color. Delving into these women's lives, doing research for the book, brought insight for the author as well.

"Or maybe I knew less. Maybe what I knew was that there was more mystery and hurt than I could have imagined. Maybe the world had been bad to its great and unusual women. Maybe there wasn't a worthy place for the female hero to live out her golden years, to be celebrated as the men had been celebrated, to take from that celebration what she needed to survive."

The prose, undoubtedly, establishes Megan Mayhew Bergman as a promising master of historical fiction. (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

I am not a short story reader, neither spend much time with essays. I love long fictional journeys through the winding roads of history. Therefore I found the collection of moments in these women's lives lacking, extremely well presented though, but way too short. It is brilliantly written. In fact, should the author decide to write historical fictional novels about each of these women, I will read them all. The prose is just that good!

In my opinion the book resort more in the mixed genre category in that each story is a blend of some elements of fiction with elements of nonfiction used in a very deliberate way. Some of them are very short, more like essays, and others are more expanded. The research was excellent as is clear from the text. The selected women deserved the show case - another shot at fame. They also deserved the color that was added back to their pictures in history books. If I did not take the time to read up on these women, I would never have discovered their remarkable place in history, nor appreciated their stories, and not enjoy this book as much as I did in the end.

The book inspired me to spend long hours on the internet, reading about these women, adding fuel to my bibliophylic addiction. I even ordered another book "*Scandalous Women*" by Elizabeth Kerry Mahon.

The author's note at the back of the book explains her inspiration to choose these particular women and provides her sources of research used to write it. I was so involved in the stories that I simply could not believe my eyes when there was nothing more to read at the end. Four stars it is for the entertainment value and brilliant writing.

Note to fellow readers: do your homework before you read each story. Make friends with Google! You won't

regret doing just that and then enjoy the masterful compassionate prose in *Almost Famous*. I simply loved the entire experience. In the end I did THE pirouette and THE dance!

The book is destined for publication Jan 6, 2015. A Simon & Schuster | Scribner publication through NetGalley. My sincere thanks for the opportunity to read this book.

Kristin says

Almost Famous Women is a collection of fictionalized short stories of real women in history “whose remarkable lives have been reduced to footnotes”. I’ll admit, most of these women I hadn’t heard of, but there were a few I had, and almost all I found incredibly fascinating. They were talented, they were strong, and they were independent women who dared to live life the way they wanted to.

Much like Bergman, I am in awe of their stories. So much so that I have looked up a good number and want to know more about them and their real story, or what is known of their real story. Bergman is a talented writer and researcher who has weaved imagination with history so well that it is hard to tell which is fact or fiction.

“I’ve never been comfortable with writing historical fiction, though I love reading it. When forming these stories, I kept with me Henry James’s notion that all novelists need freedom, and I gave myself permission to experiment, and to be honest about my inspiration. . . . I did not want to romanticize these women or dwell in glittering places; I’m more interested in my characters’ difficult choices, or those that were made for them. I’m fascinated by risk taking and the way people orbit fame. I wanted to explore the price paid for living dangerously such as undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder in women who served in WWI.

Suffice it to say, the world has not always been kind to its unusual women though I did not intend for these stories to serve as cautionary tales.”

So to give you a taste, here are my favorites:

Daisy and Violet Hilton, conjoined twins who lived from 1908-1969 and performed in various sideshows and burlesques. These two are probably the most well-known of the bunch and possibly one of the saddest stories. Bergman reflects on their very different personalities and how their abuse formed their view of the world, one embracing the spotlight, one shying away from it. Sadly, they both died of the flu, with Daisy passing a few days before Violet. I can’t even imagine what it must have been like to be physically attached to your dead twin...for days. That poor woman.

The Queen of Whale Cay, Marion Barbara “Joe” Carstiers, lived quite the interesting life, particularly for a woman in the 1930’s.

“She usually dressed as a man, had tattooed arms, and loved machines, adventure and speed. Openly lesbian, she had numerous affairs with women, including Dolly Wilde—Oscar Wilde's niece and a fellow ambulance

driver from Dublin with whom she had lived in Paris—and a string of actresses, most notably Greta Garbo, Tallulah Bankhead and Marlene Dietrich.”

Rumored to be quite the narcissistic womanizer, Bergman provided a snippet of Carstairs story from the vantage point of one of her “girls”. During her stay on Carstairs island in the Bahamas, of Whale Cay, they are visited by Marlene Dietrich. For a short story, you get a true feeling of Joe’s independence, her PTSD, her need to be needed, and her need for fame and power as evidenced by her own private island complete with lighthouse, school, church, and cannery.

Beatrice “Romaine” Brooks was an American painter during the early 1900’s. Bergman’s story focuses on the later portion of her life as a wealthy recluse. As part of the imagined (?) story, Romaine continually receives letters from an old flame, Natalie, that her caretaker takes the advantage of reading. Interestingly, Romaine was indeed involved in a long-term relationship with an American writer by the name of Natalie Barney. Natalie was known to have many affairs, including one with Dolly Wilde, Oscar Wilde’s niece (notice a trend here?). Studying art history (many moons ago), I was surprised to have never heard of Romaine, particularly due to the fact that she was a very talented portraitist who according to Bergman, was once described (quite accurately I think) as a “thief of souls”.

Thelma “Butterfly McQueen was an American actress known most notably for her portrayal of Prissy in *Gone with the Wind*. Now I must admit, I remember snippets of this movie growing up but I have never actually watched it. Something about it always bothered me as a kid. What is interesting about her inclusion is that she was known to be embarrassed by her role in the movie, and was an atheist who donated her body to science. Again, for the times, I find this truly remarkable. If only we could all be as half as strong in our convictions.

Allegra Byron was the illegitimate daughter of Lord Byron and was dumped at a convent in the early 1800’s at the age of 4 and died shortly thereafter of either malaria or typhus. Her story is sad and lonely one and not only drives home Bergman’s point that “we pay for the mistakes our forbearers made” but is also eerily similar to Dolly Wilde’s story.

Dolly Wilde, the niece of Oscar Wilde was a “socialite, made famous by her family connections and her reputation as a witty conversationalist” (Wikipedia). As you can see from many of the stories here, she was tied to various women over the years, most notably with Joe Carstairs and Natalie Barney. She was also a notorious alcoholic and drug addict who suffered from cancer and most likely PTSD from when she served as an ambulance driver with Joe Carstairs during WWI. She passed at the age of 45 due to unidentified circumstances, believed to either be an overdose or cancer related. However, it is also rumored that she was murdered. At some point, I plan to get my hands on *Truly Wilde* as hers was one of the more fascinating

tales.

I leave you with this last one in which I was less related to a specific woman, but to all. I apologize for my jumbled mess of a review but if nothing else, I hope it shows that *Almost Famous Women* provides a special insight into the lives of some fascinating women.

“We were human again. We were women.” – *Almost Famous Women*, Bergman

Bansky, Holocaust Lipstick

“It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for those internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity.” - Extract from the diary of Lieutenant Colonel Mervin Willett Gonin DSO 23 May 1945

I received an arc copy of this book from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review. Thank you NetGalley!

Sandy says

Some books are easy to forget. Close the cover; move to the "read" shelf; star-rate appropriately; don't bother to review; start reading another book. That is what I had intended to do with this one but -- not so fast! -- it has been nagging at me.

This collection includes some very interesting stories - interesting enough, I guarantee, to send you to Wikipedia and beyond a few times. The stories range in length from 2 to 40 pages (in the large-print edition) - so there is one to fit any possible slot of spare time. If you have a few hours - or only a few minutes - to spare and a TBR list that is not long enough, this is the book for you!

This book has left me with mixed feelings. I feel excited, for sure, about its educational value - I have been introduced to people, places, and periods of history about which I know little or nothing, and I always enjoy researching a new topic. I feel annoyed by the sensationalistic treatment of some of the stories with reference to sexual orientation, mental health issues, and addiction. But mostly, I have begun to realize, I feel sad. Why sad? - because if there is one thread which connects this collection of stories, in my opinion it is the word "victim". All of these "almost-famous" women suffered emotional wounds rooted in a variety of experiences

- physical and emotional abuse or abandonment during childhood; horrific experiences on the front lines during the Great War; prejudice and racism - and seem (at least as the author has portrayed them) to have been defeated by these wounds. Thirteen sad stories in one book - maybe that is twelve too many for me.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention that I also feel frustrated by these stories because, as the author clearly states in her Author's Note,

. . . each of these stories is unequivocally a work of fiction.

She continues -

The women at the heart of my stories lived. . . . I have, however, placed them in events and surrounded them with characters of my own creation. . . .

While I would be the first to admit a love of historical fiction (or creative nonfiction, as it is sometimes called), I was surprised by this disclosure, especially by its appearance at the end of the book. Quite simply, I had expected biographical sketches and this information would, I believe, be more appropriately placed at the beginning of the book.

The Author's Note is valuable, however, not only for this explanation but also for the details about her factual sources and her passionate approach to this project. If the reader is inspired by the author's enthusiasm for one or all of her subjects, many useful possibilities are suggested for further reading.

Jennifer says

These are thirteen stories about extraordinary women whose “lives were reduced to footnotes.” My two favorites featured Allegra Byron (Lord Byron’s illegitimate daughter) and Butterfly McQueen (an actress who played one of the maids in *Gone with the Wind*). All of the stories offer an unusual combination of grit and sensitivity. Most feature these women when they’re well past their primes, giving the whole collection a melancholy feel that kept me from wanting to read too many stories at once (there’s a lot of sagging flesh, drug addictions, and wasted dreams). But I highly recommend checking this collection out – Bergman is incredibly talented.

TheSkepticalReader says

Review posted on A Skeptical Reader.

Almost Famous Women is a collection of stories that revolve around, as the title puts it, ‘almost famous’ women in history. The collection contains some fantastic, solid stories that rocked my imagination but there were certainly a few duds in the mix that left a lot to imagination. Story reviews as follows:

► **The Pretty, Grown-Together Children** - A good opening to the collection. Tragic story of conjoined twins who spent their lives with unrecognized talent.

- ▶ The Siege at Whale Cay - Characters dealing with PTSD in the backdrop of a love triangle between three women. I felt bad for Georgie throughout but it felt like she knew what was getting into.
- ▶ Norma Millay's Film Noir Period - I liked the final act a lot, especially the beautiful, soft descriptions.
- ▶ Romaine Remains - A look at the final days of Romaine Brooks. This one has an edge of mystery that was curious. I found Romaine fascinating but was not a fan of the fact that her story is told from Mario's perspective. I wanted a more personal look at Romaine, perhaps from Natalie's view?
- ▶ Hazel Eaton and the Wall of Death - I don't care for such *short short* stories and I didn't like this one. I couldn't even remember what it was about the next day.
- ▶ The Autobiography of Allegra Byron - Given the title of the story, I didn't bother to look up Allegra's history and I am both glad and sad that I didn't. I'm glad because it really allowed the story to built up on its own with a lot of anticipation. Sad because *dear God*, that ending. Utterly heartbreaking and yet beautiful.
- ▶ Expression Theory - Again, a really short story that I didn't like.
- ▶ Saving Butterfly McQueen - Examining one of the first African American actresses in Hollywood. I liked it fair enough but I would've liked a historical story here instead—one where we could see McQueen in her filmmaking days.
- ▶ Who Killed Dolly Wilde? - Oscar Wilde's forgotten niece struggling with drugs and poverty, tended to by a woman in love with her. It's another brilliant one, with a lot of dark tones.
- ▶ A High-Grade Bitch Sits Down for Lunch - Another story that didn't work for me.
- ▶ The Internees - This is the shortest amongst all but works extremely well in a broader sense.
- ▶ The Lottery, Redux - I so badly wished I read Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery* to understand this better. It's an ok read, but I know I'm missing something important.
- ▶ Hell-Diving Women - Solid finish! Loved Ruby, Tiny, and Rae Lee's characters. A very lively story about a Black lesbian artist and her 'friend' performing in a mixed race entertainment group across the States.

Overall, this was a good collection worth reading. I've enjoyed Megan Mayhew Bergman's earlier collection, *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*, and I am sure she'll going to continue churning out excellent content.

Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says

This book and I got a bit of a wrong start. I was expecting (looking really forward to) reading about these almost famous women as a nonfiction book. But it turned out to be historical fiction instead. But I prevailed and I actually liked most of the stories since. For instance, we get to know Dolly Wilde, Oscar Wilde's niece, Butterfly McQueen who was in *Gone with the Wind*, author Bery Markham, the painter Romaine Remains etc. Some people in the book had I heard of before, some I hadn't.

But there were things with the book that bemused me like for instance a chapter about Allegra Byron, Lord

Byron's daughter, she was 5 when she died, hardly a famous woman, more like a famous child or, at least, a famous girl. Then we have a chapter called The Interness about the liberation of Bergen-Belsen in 1945. Every other chapter up till then had been about one famous woman; this was about how expired lipstick was given to the women in the concentrations camp. Felt a bit like this story should have been in another book that was more about groups of women, like suffragettes. Last but not least the Lottery, redux, this is a "cover story" of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery". Good story but why put a pure fiction story, a remake of a classic, in a book about almost famous women that have actually lived?

In the end, I liked the book. It was interesting and many of the women did I google to find out more about. Btw that was also a problem, a short biography before every chapter had have been nice. Now it felt that Megan Mayhew Bergman felt that the reader, of course, knows everything about the women that the story is about. (But this is an ARC this could change in the finished book.)

I want to thank the publisher for providing me with a free copy through NetGalley for an honest review!

Diane S ? says

I will admit to spending quite a bit of time looking up many of the people these stories were written about. All exceedingly well written though, but there were two that really resonated with me. The two about the oldest and the youngest. Romaine remains, after a fully decadent life Romaine is now 93 and housebound. The people who are hired to care for her take advantage of her in many ways. Something about being that elderly and becoming a victim after living a life on virtually her own terms just filled me with pity.

The second story was the story of Allegra Byron, which starts when she is three. So incredibly sad, this young lady and her short tragic life. Loved the author for imagining someone who really loved her and tried to care for her, show her a little joy. Found myself hoping such a person actually existed.

Anyway there is something here that would appeal to anyone who loves short stories, although most have a common theme they are all written differently but oh so interestingly.

ARC from publisher.
