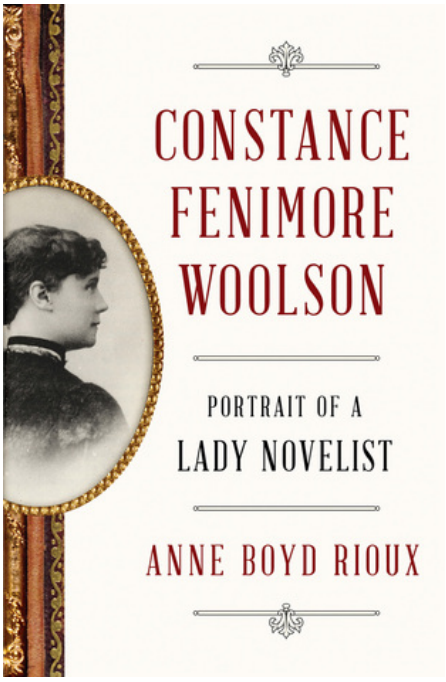

Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist

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Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840–1894), who contributed to Henry James's conception of his heroine Isabelle Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*, was one of the most accomplished American writers of the nineteenth century. Yet today the best-known (and most-misunderstood) facts of her life are her relationship with James and her probable suicide in Venice. This first full-length biography of Woolson provides a fuller picture that reaffirms her literary stature.

Uncovering new sources, Anne Boyd Rioux evokes Woolson's dramatic life. She was a grand-niece of James Fenimore Cooper and was born in New Hampshire, but her family's ill fortunes drove them west to Cleveland. Raised to be a conventional woman, Woolson was nonetheless thrust by her father's death into the role of breadwinner, and yet, as a writer, she reached for critical as much as monetary reward.

Known for her powerfully realistic and empathetic portraits of post Civil–War American life, Woolson created compelling and subtle portrayals of the rural Midwest, Reconstruction-era South, and the formerly Spanish Florida, to which she traveled with her invalid mother. After her mother's death, Woolson, with help from her sister, moved to Europe where expenses were lower, living mostly in England and Italy and spending several months in Egypt. While abroad, she wrote finely crafted foreign-set stories that presage Edith Wharton's work of the next generation.

In this rich biography, Rioux reveals an exceptionally gifted and committed artist who pursued and received serious recognition despite the difficulties faced by female authors of her day. Throughout, Rioux goes deep into Woolson's character, her fight against depression, her sources for writing, and her intimate friendships, including with Henry James, painting an engrossing portrait of a woman and writer who deserves to be more widely known today.

Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist Details

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From Reader Review Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist for online ebook

Ali says

Constance Fenimore Woolson was an American nineteenth century novelist, who seems to have slipped into obscurity. Today it seems she is best known for having had a very close friendship with Henry James and for having taken her own life. The author of this biography, Anne Boyd Rioux is doing a superb job in reigniting interest in her. This biography is a brilliantly researched work, compulsively readable and detailed. However it is the narrative of Constance Fenimore Woolson's life, her family, travels, writing and friendships which make this such an absorbing read. From never having heard of Constance Fenimore Woolson just a couple of months ago – I now feel like I know her very well indeed.

"To begin to understand how Woolson ended up dying alone, in the cold street behind her home in Venice, we have to begin by looking at her life through her eyes instead of James's. When we do we see a life full of heartache, hope, and ambition that started in a conservative era and ended just as the New Woman was being born. We begin to see a powerful writer and conflicted woman who was not simply James's follower but his friend and peer. We also find a woman of great wit and compassion, a woman passionate about art, literature , and love, and a woman at war with herself – in short a woman as beguiling as any of James's heroines." (From the Prologue to Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist)

Constance Fenimore Woolson was born in 1840 in Claremont, New Hampshire, one of a large family of siblings – many of whom did not survive childhood. A grand-niece of James Fenimore Cooper, Constance was to grow up in Cleveland, Ohio – where the family relocated when she was a baby following the deaths of three daughters to scarlet fever. As she grew up Constance had a particularly close to her sister Clara born a couple of years after her. She and Clara were educated at the Cleveland female seminary and later at a boarding school in New York. CFW began publishing her fiction in the 1870's after the death of her father, beginning with short stories. During the 1870's Constance accompanied her mother to St. Augustine in Florida for the winter, during these visits she was able to travel widely in the South, and these travels inspired several of her stories.

Full review: https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2016/...

Susan Bailey says

John Matteson once stated during a reading from his recently published *Little Women Annotated* that writing biography is an intensely personal experience. Referring to his Pulitzer-prize-winning Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Father, the duo biography of Louisa May Alcott and her father, he noticed amazing parallels between his life and that of Bronson, both teachers and "quixotic" fathers intimately involved in the raising of strong, "verbal" daughters; for one thing, the age difference between himself and his daughter were nearly the same (off by just seventeen days).

That thought of the personal nature of biography sweeps over me as I consider Anne Boyd Rioux's tour de force, Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist. In the course of the reading, it became personal for me too. Lingering over this book for months (typical when I am really into a read), scribbling notes in the margin and highlighting paragraphs, I felt I had a profound encounter with a true artist. Woolson

was a writer who, while producing works to support herself, never grew weary of doing the very best work she could do until her spirit and body literally gave out. Refusing to follow the path of typical female writers (that of writing for children) she constantly pushed the edge of the envelope, often writing from the point of view of a male lead character. She was relentless in her realism while maintaining a strong connection with the emotions and passions of her characters. She was bold and courageous while all the while, lamenting the fact that she fell short as a woman in her own mind. She longed for her own home and family but writing came first.

The suffering that Woolson experienced in the last few months of her life were hard to bear as they so resembled my own mother's suffering at the end of hers. As there was controversy surrounding Woolson's death (was it suicide or an accident). Rioux did a wonderful job of presenting both sides of the issue. I walked away thinking one way but acknowledging that the other way was entirely possible.

Rioux is passionate about bringing Woolson's writing back into academic reading lists. She has released a book known as Miss Grief and Other Stories which I plan on reading next. With what I know now about Woolson, I am eager for this read.

Woolson became for me an important literary friend, one who challenged me to push a little harder in my writing. I am currently immersed in research for a biography that is intensely personal to me (the story of Elizabeth Sewall Alcott upon whom the character of Beth March is based in Little Women*Little Women.*) and reading Rioux's words inspires me to continue to push on even though much of the time the task seems impossible.

Reading Woolson's story inspired me to completely rework my blogs, even physically tearing away my Be as One blog from the marketing of my two books (River of Grace: Creative Passages Through Difficult Times and Louisa May Alcott: Illuminated by the Message) -- I now maintain separate sites, one for the blog, the other for the marketing. I had lost my writing voice on my blog and and am still struggling to regain it. Woolson gave me the courage to do that despite all the technical difficulties of such a move. She has also inspired me to be more open and vulnerable in my writing which I have been trying out in my Spiritual Journal on my website.

If you are a woman writer looking for a such a friend, I highly recommend Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist. If you are looking for proof that biographies are indeed personal (stories that are just as engrossing and powerful as any fiction), try out Anne Boyd Rioux's book (and John Matteson's too). You may too walk away with a new friend.

Katie Murphy says

Woolson

An interesting book about the life of Constance Woolson, her amazing travels, the writing she did and people in her life. Before reading this I did not know of her. The fact that she too was effected by the family's deaf Ness at a certain age didn't stop her writing, traveling and learning.

Rebecca says

Constance Fenimore Woolson (1840–1894) is most often remembered for her connection to male writers; her great-uncle was pioneering American novelist James Fenimore Cooper, and in her later years as an expatriate in Europe she associated with Henry James, fueling rumors of a romance between them. Deserving to be known in her own right, Woolson represents key junctures between realism and regionalism, and between American and European styles. Together with Rioux's new selection of Woolson's shorter fiction, Miss Grief and Other Stories, this book gives a remarkable picture of a bold, bright woman who paved the way for writers such as Edith Wharton, E. M. Forster, and Willa Cather, and who arguably might be hailed in the same breath as Henry James and George Eliot.

For full reviews of this plus *Miss Grief and Other Stories*, see my inaugural *Los Angeles Review of Books* article.

Rachel says

Constance Fenimore Woolson is finally getting her due in Anne Boyd Rioux's biography of an all-but-forgotten best-selling 19th century American author. I so enjoyed learning about this independent woman who was deeply dedicated to her writing in spite of the challenge of being devalued in comparison to male novelists of the time.

She lived a nomadic life, finding temporary residence all over Europe, and traveled beyond. Her travels informed her characters and the settings in her writing, as did her keen ability to observe others and analyze the human character. She faced many trials and loses in her life, including the loss of her hearing. But she also developed abiding friendships with great mutual affection, including with Henry James, which brought her happiness. I read the companion book of short stories by Woolson, "Miss Grief and Other Stories," compiled by Rioux, before reading the biography to first get to know Woolson through her writing, and then learn about the author and her life. This biography is a 21st century imprimatur of Woolson's rightful place in literature. I loved it.

Amy Gentry says

Constance Fenimore Woolson is one of those names that perpetually bobs around the periphery of Victorian studies, one of what Nathaniel Hawthorne infamously called "that damned mob of scribbling women" — 19th-century female novelists whose books outsold their male counterparts' by powers of 10, often attracting the lion's share of critical attention as well. The male critics who shaped the American literary canon in the first half of the 20th century obliged Hawthorne's memory by ignoring these offensively successful women entirely; but even the second-wave feminists who restored Kate Chopin and Sarah Orne Jewett to the canon in the 1970s passed over Woolson.

Yet Woolson once stood apart from even the scribbling mob. Among her contemporaries, Woolson was considered one of the strongest and most ambitious voices in American fiction, on the strength of six novels and two story collections she produced before her presumed suicide at age 53. Thus it's particularly galling that most who remember her name today do so in connection with one of two more famous writers, both men: James Fenimore Cooper, her great-uncle, and Henry James, who, during their 14-year acquaintance,

occupied murky territory somewhere between frenemy and soulmate.

It's the James legacy that Woolson's biographer Anne Boyd Rioux wrestles with most in her new and excellent "Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist." "To begin to understand how Woolson ended up dying alone, in the cold street behind her home in Venice, we have to begin by looking at her life through her eyes instead of James's," writes Rioux, and she has accomplished this reframing in a biography that focuses on Woolson's ambition and complicated relationship to literary status itself [. . .]

Read my full review here:
http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifesty...

Mary says

A wonderful biography of a little known, but once widely acclaimed, author. I read the book in tandem with Woolson's selected work, Miss Grief and Other Stories, edited by Anne Boyd Rioux, and loved dipping into stories as they were mentioned in the biography. I also learned a great deal about Henry James and the roving expatriate community of artists 19th century Europe.

Jeanette says

So sad. This late 19th century life was filled with funerals. And movement to live "other" places for "new starts".

She lived bravely and I have huge empathy for her seeking nature. Not just within her literary efforts at all, but in searching for the elements that were valuable to herself and at the same time possible in the logistics of her world.

So many men and women, not ONLY women either- who were sick or ailing or infected or lacking an essence of active life's abilities- in that particular century. And who also had to say goodbye to so many family members and peers of every sort in their short lives. Consumption, flu, infections and cancers? Not to speak of the American Civil War!

Regardless, she would have fared far better if she had lived about 25 years later than the dates that she did. All the rules "changed" by then and a more feasible to her nature and proclivities along with a healthful living path became a smidgen more possible without moving away from bad air or some other low and painful endemic condition. Mountain tops and "fresh air" the only cures and so few audiences to "hear" her!

It's hard for any human to be raised with one set of values and rules and manners of society and yet have to live their adult lives under completely different ones. It's happened quite a number of times in the last century or two and not only within those who migrate. But no more than in this period or for the one just before WWII. Childhoods then were little prep for the world of their adulthoods, IMHO.

I'm sure it wasn't suicide for the mental state as much as it was for the physical suffering. Ears, breathing etc.- I think she was in vast pain for years. For some reason, I'm not very tempted to read her works. They have to be seated on the edge of morose. So much young death!

Forgot to add; the photos and portraits were numerous and excellent.

Julie Christine says

A well-constructed biography is a dance between feet-on-ground facts and limbs-in-air storytelling. Flesh and soul must be conveyed in the chronology of events, and a case must be created that this one life holds relevance to all readers. A biography is an act of scholarship and illumination.

And so it is with Anne Boyd Rioux's luminous biography of nearly-forgotten 19th century writer Constance Fenimore Woolson. If it weren't for Woolson's connection to Henry James, a relationship which eventually eclipsed her own work, she would likely have faded to little more than a footnote in American literary history. One could argue that her legacy was in fact relegated to a mere curiosity in service to the lauded canon of a male contemporary.

But Woolson was a well-respected and prolific author long before she and James met. Although their intellectual exchange was significant (what can be pieced together, for they agreed to a mutual destruction of their written correspondence—indeed, only four letters have been found) and there is conjecture of a greater intimacy–an emotional regard that transcended a physical affair–this is not the focus of Boyd Rioux's work. The biography encompasses the whole of Woolson's life, exploring the development of a great writer at a time when women artists were just beginning to break out of the margins and into recognized commercial and critical circles.

Constance Fenimore Woolson, a great-niece of the writer James Fenimore Cooper, was born in 1840 and raised principally in Cleveland, where her family moved to seek a new start after illness claimed the lives of her older siblings (Constance was in fact the sixth daughter, but by the age of 13 she was the eldest child alive). Solidly middle-class, the Woolson family prized education and Constance was afforded the opportunity to attend the Cleveland Female Seminary, followed by finishing school in New York. Her intellectual acumen was obvious and her father in particular encouraged her keen life of the mind.

Boyd Rioux explores Woolson's short stories and novels to create this portrait of a writer. Realism, engendered by the Civil War, characterized much of Woolson's writing. This presented a challenge to her reading public, as the expectation of women novelists of the Victorian era was for sweeping epic Romance. Yet Woolson wrote consistently of love, a theme played out in the shadow of her early doomed love affairs. She never married, though it's clear she yearned for affection and intimacy and developed very close relationships with men who supported, respected and challenged her work.

Woolson was also a traveler, shifting as the needs of her mother, to whom she was principal caregiver, changed—moving between Ohio, New York, Florida. After her mother's death, which left her bereft and untethered (her beloved father had died years before), Woolson finally realized the dream of traveling to Europe. She eventually settled there, coming to regard Italy as home for many long years; it is where she met Henry James.

Constance Fenimore Woolson was a tireless writer, churning out a vast collection of stories and novels that had varying degrees of commercial and critical success, yet still beyond the measure of many of her contemporaries, female and male. She had a long-standing publishing contract and her work was featured in the most well-respected literary journals of the day. Her work schedule astonishes this writer: ten, twelve hour work days, emerging in the evening only for supper and breaking away only one day a week to receive

visitors. She ground herself down physically and mentally with her demanding output and suffered periods of profound illness. Prone to depression, Woolson had a very sophisticated and nuanced understanding of mental health and recognized that her fragility was genetic and pervasive. She also dealt with a congenital hearing loss that came on gradually in her late adolescence and left her virtually deaf by the end of her life, isolating her further into the depths of her intellect and imagination.

Whether it was depression that led to suicide or a temporary mental dislocation brought on by laudanum used to treat a severe bought of the flu, Woolson plunged from the second story window of her home in Venice, dying of her injuries soon after her fall. She was fifty-four. Henry James, with whom Woolson had maintained a fourteen year connection, was devastated by her death. Yet even he did not work to ensure her literary legacy and by the early-mid 20th century, when novelists were reinventing themselves to a more modern sensibility, Woolson was relegated to a mere Victorian curiosity.

Thanks to work of scholars like Anne Boyd Rioux, we can blow the dust off the histories of women writers like Woolson and actively participate in lifting their legacies from footnote to forefront.

Fascinating, lucidly and lovingly written, with deft, sparkling prose, *Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist* sits confidently and easily with the gorgeous biographies of literary lives by Colm Toibin and Claire Tomalin. Highly recommended.

Theresa says

A great historical read about a woman who despite many hardships endures in order to pursue a writing career. The publishing business in her days was not exactly friendly with women authors, but Constance Fenimore Woolsey did not let that stop her. I enjoyed this book.

Teresa says

Count me as one of those who'd never heard of Constance Fenimore Woolson until I read Colm Tóibín's The Master several years ago. I was mildly fascinated by her then and, wanting to know more, got on Google and Wikipedia: if I found anything of interest there, I don't remember what it might've been, as it certainly didn't lead me to look up any of her works afterward.

Fast-forward to late 2015. I met Anne Boyd Rioux, the author of this biography, and, because of her passion for her subject, I became fascinated with Woolson all over again; but this time the fascination stuck. Not having read any of Woolson's works, I decided to read this in tandem with the collection Miss Grief and Other Stories, stopping in the biography to read the mentioned short story in the collection before picking up the biographical thread again. Though Woolson was prolific (and in demand) in other genres too--travel writing, essays, novels--this approach worked extremely well for me, giving me a flavor for her writing while reading of her life, which in turn gave me a desire to read even more of her works.

The research put into this biography is obvious, though it never bogs down its story. Near the end, I felt as if I was slowing down only because I hated to see Woolson's life end: I felt that invested in her. The look of the book is pleasing as well. I was surprised, and happy, to see that the illustrations (mostly photographs) are placed at appropriate junctures in the text and are not all clumped together in the middle, as is commonly

found in other nonfiction works.

And that Henry James connection? I'd rather you read of Woolson's life as a whole and not focus on that one aspect. But, since I'm the one who mentioned it, I will say that their close friendship is both more and less than you might think. He was hardly the sole important thing in her life, as those who've come before this biographer have intimated; but he was as important to her as she was to him. There are ways to love that don't fit into neat little boxes, just as Woolson herself and her writings as a whole can't be contained inside any one label.

Karen Jensen says

The biography of Constance Fenimore Woolson portrays an author who, in spite of her critical and commercial success in her time, has largely been neglected and misrepresented. On the one hand, the the book sheds light on how and why Woolson fell out of favor and the canon. On the other hand, it's also the story of Woolson's personal life. Rioux brilliantly paints a complex portrait of her; she devotes time to her depression and the many sad aspects of her life but also shows that Woolson had the capacity for great joy. In the end, one is feeling a great sympathy for Woolson's multifaceted life and a wish that she gradually might be granted the spot she deserves in American literary history.

Kathryn says

I picked this up because I had never heard of Constance Fenimore Woolson - even though I grew up in Michigan and her biggest selling novel is partially set on Mackinac Island. I asked (well-read) friends and they had never heard of her either, even though she wrote for Harper's and the Atlantic, sold thousands of copies of books, and was a good friend of Henry James as well as friends with many other contemporaries in the literary world. Woolson was not a favorite of William Dean Howells, the editor of The Atlantic and Harper's, who was influential in shaping the view of modern American literature. She also died relatively young and before realism had firmly taken hold. Since Woolson continuously pushed herself to explore new settings, characters, and approaches to writing, she likely would have explored that style as well. The descriptions of her works in this biography make a number of them sound pretty Victorian, with a fair amount of devotion to duty and self-sacrifice.

Woolson was a very private person who doesn't entirely come through in the letters and other documents left from her lifetime. She shows through more in autobiographical characters in some of her stories, such as Gertrude from "In Sloane Street" - described by Rioux as "an image of the superfluous, discarded spinster Woolson feared she had become" (p. 276 of the ARC). I found it quite sad that Woolson never rejected the limited view society had of single women and fully celebrated her own talent and the life of exploration that she chose. It's true she was not financially successful but her writing achievements were impressive. Furthermore, wherever she went she was in demand at social events, so she must have been quite personable as well, despite her aversion to social interactions and lifetime struggle with depression.

Soon after I picked this up NPR had a segment on Best-selling 19th C writers you may not have heard of (I had not heard of any of them). It seems too many women have been left behind or excluded from "literary" traditions as defined by men like Howells. This biography is a good start in bringing Woolson more to the fore, and here's hoping we see more on women authors who have, likely unfairly, been mostly forgotten.

Marita says

Taking my time, I savoured my reading of this excellent biography, learning not only a great deal about author **Constance Fenimore* Woolson** (1840-1894), but also enjoying reading about her close friendship with **Henry James** as well as her friendship with the composer **Francis Boott**.

Where Woolson's stories are discussed in this biography I paused to read those which appear in Miss Grief and Other Stories, and I was blown away by her writing. I shall have to read her novels.

As evidenced by my five-star rating, I loved this very interesting biography. It is well written, well documented and well illustrated. Thank you, Teresa, for introducing me to the writing of Constance Fenimore Woolson, and for your wonderful reviews of this biography** as well as of Woolson's works.

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“But, as she told Boott, she never lied in her fiction. Her highest aim was to tell the truth of women’s lives, to look under the masks of acquiescent, idealized femininity that they wore. While other writers of the period portrayed the selfless love of women, they did not bother to examine the fierceness of a woman’s passion or the self-immolation it could lead to."

""...And as I was greatly struck by the intelligence & dignity of the oriental character, I can’t look down upon them as I used to,—from a superior Anglo-Saxon standpoint. That is the trouble of traveling widely over the world, and living for years in foreign countries; one inevitably loses one’s old standards, and comfortable fixed prejudices and opinions.”"

""“There is no use in our advising other people; for we do not know all the circumstances of their lives; there are always some which they do not (perhaps cannot) tell. Each heart knows its own griefs, or aches, or disappointments, & my own heart knows mine.””

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*Constance was a grand-niece of James Fenimore Cooper

**https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...

Nancy says

A successful novelist and short story writer in her lifetime, she died in fear of the poverty that awaited her golden years. Jilted by her Civil War soldier hero she found consolation in the intellectual intimacy shared with novelist Henry James. She longed for a home and spent her life as an expat wandering Europe and visiting exotic locales. She is the one of most successful and acclaimed female American novelists that you have never heard of: Constance Fenimore Woolson.

I was 'granted my wish' for Constance Fenimore Woolson: Portrait of a Lady Novelist by Anne Boyd Rioux

through NetGalley. I had never heard of Woolson (1840-1894) before.

Born in Cooperstown, NY, which was founded by her grandfather, Woolson's great-uncle was the famed novelist James Fenimore Cooper. After the death of Woolson's three sisters the family went west to start over in Cleveland, OH. The family vacationed on Michigan's Mackinac Island, which became the setting for her first novel, Anne. It is also where she met the man she would love and lose, Zeph Spalding.

Although she wrote as a girl it was not until the death of her father, and the resulting fiscal necessity, that she began to write and publish. As a 'surplus woman' after the loss of so many men during the Civil War Woolson needed to find a way to support herself and her widowed mother. There were enough teachers and governesses.

It was a time when female writers faced a huge wall of prejudice; it was commonly believed that women did not have the necessary intellectual abilities to write. And when they did write they were expected to offer moral tales to educate the young.

Her middle name "Fenimore" drew attention and Harper and Row agreed to publish her stories. Seeking inspiration in the world brought Woolson to New York City, Florida, Charleston, Asheville, and finally to Europe.

Woolson faced hearing loss (as did her mother) and suffered from depression (as had her father and brother). She developed pain and loss of feeling in her arm from writing. She would not leave Harper & Row for better money but could not save enough money to buy a permanent home. She rarely allowed her loneliness, fears, or pain to show. She wrote, "In my fiction I never say anything which is not absolutely true (it is only in real life that I resort to fiction)."

Woolson is most known for her deep and private relationship with Henry James. Yet even James was shielded from her inner despair. Her last days were spent in deep pain, taking enough morphine to dull it but also robbing her of sleep. Woolson fell, or jumped, from her balcony and died at age 54.

Rioux's compelling presentation of Woolson's complicated personality brings the author to life.
Now I can not wait to read the companion book of Woolson's short works, Miss Grief and Other Stories edited by Rioux, author of this biography.

I received a free ARC in exchange through NetGalley for a fair and unbiased review.
