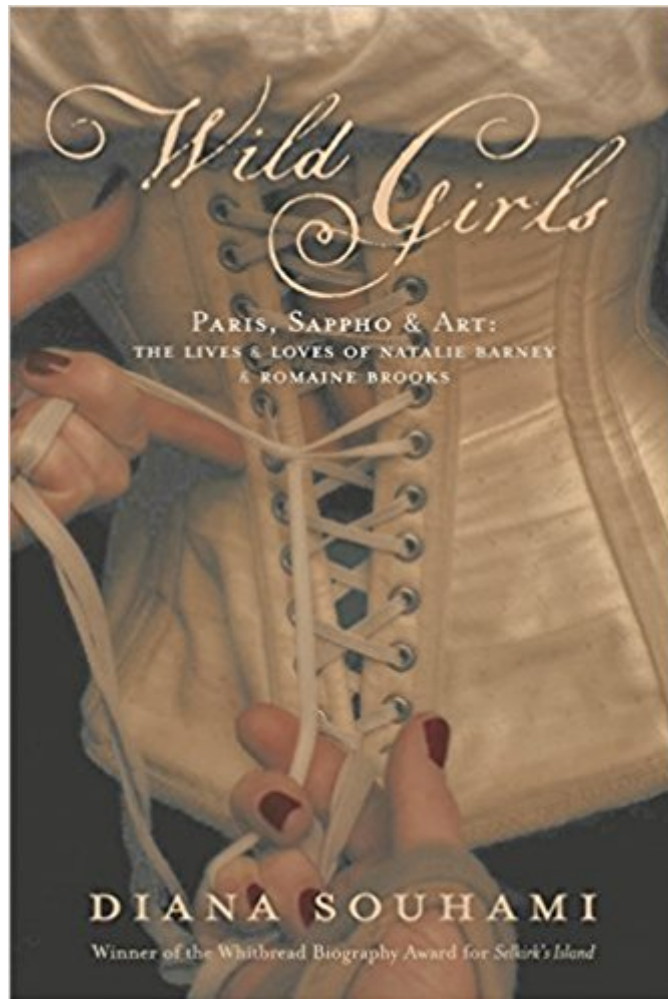


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Wild Girls: Natalie Barney And Romaine Brooks



Synopsis

Natalie and Romaine met in London during World War I and their partnership lasted until Natalie died 52 years later. They were both American expatriates: unconventional, energetic, flamboyant and rich. Natalie was known as 'the wild girl of Cincinnatti'. She had numerous affairs with other women: Renee Vivien who nailed shut the windows of her apartment, wrote about the loveliness of death, drank eau de cologne and died of anorexia aged 30; and Dolly Wilde niece of Oscar, who ran up terrible phone bills and died of a drugs overdose. She wrote books of aphorism, memoirs and poems and her Friday afternoon salons in the cobbled garden of her Parisian house were for 'introductions and culture'. They were frequented by Gertrude Stein, Colette, Radclyffe Hall and Edith Sitwell. Romaine achieved fame in her own lifetime and after as an artist. She painted her lovers including Gabriele d'Annunzio with whom she had a terrible and tortured relationship, and the ballerina Ida Rubinstein. However her relationship with Natalie was constant and in their eventful years together they threw up a liberating spirit of culture, style and candour. Diana Souhami has written a moving portrait of these two enigmatic figures, as well as a fascinating recreation of a forgotten time.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Gray is a difficult colour to master. It is enigmatic, aloof. It can be warm, with tints of peach and pink, or cold, with tints of sapphire and indigo. But no one could ever doubt that American artist Romaine Brooks was a master of gray. From her mysterious, icy portraits of members of the belle Ã©poque

and the jazz age, to her preference for colorless fashions and décor, to the melancholy of her own day to day existence, Brooks was almost the personification of the colour gray itself. It would take great skill to write a biography of such a woman. Therefore I was ecstatic to discover that Diana Souhami had taken on the task of writing a book on the entwined lives of Romaine Brooks and her long-time companion, Paris saloneuse Natalie Clifford Barney. Both American, both wealthy, both artistic, Barney and Brooks still made an odd pair. Barney was the ever-social butterfly, flitting from flower to flower, beautiful and flamboyant. Brooks was her exact opposite, a withdrawn, flighty creature from a background of insanity, who preferred to live in the shadows, alone. This sounds like perfect material for the talents of Souhami, who has already tackled the lives of such challenging individuals as Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein and Greta Garbo. Souhami also wrote the award-winning "Selkirk's Island", untangling the threads of the life of Alexander Selkirk, the inspiration for Defoe's classic, "Robinson Crusoe". Yes, Brooks and Barney seemed in good hands. I cannot express, then, the disappointment that this anticipated book brought. Distressingly short not only for a biography of two distinct souls, but also an examination of the times in which they lived, the book is riddled with factual errors and blunders. Souhami begins her race by stumbling.

"To love is to see through two pairs of eyes." ~ Natalie Barney. If a good book is a book that stimulates more new ideas and responses than any other book you've read in a long time, then "Wild Girls" was an excellent book for me. The book is so good, there are more interesting things about it than can be written in a concise review. However, the attribute I liked least about this book was its title. The book is about lesbian and bisexual women and their lifestyles in late 19th and 20th century Europe and the U.S. I would not generally define these women as being "wild." Rather, they were making lifestyle decisions as mature women with mature responsibilities. Further, they were not girls, and most often, they did not act immature or "girlish." Other titles, such as: "Sapphic Idylls" or "Sappho, Paris, and the Arts" would have been better for me. "Sensuality, wanting a religion, invented love." ~ Natalie Barney. Overview: The book gives biographical commentary and snapshots about the lives and relationships surrounding two American women: Natalie Barney, a wealthy lesbian socialite, and Romaine Brooks, a wealthy painter. The two women had a non-traditional romantic relationship for over 50 years. During that time, they also had relationships with other women. The real value of the book for me was in the author's select choices and opinionated commentary on the lives of the many women involved. Many people may not realize: When you paint a portrait, take a picture, or write a biography of someone, you almost always are involved in portraying that person in a limiting fashion.

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