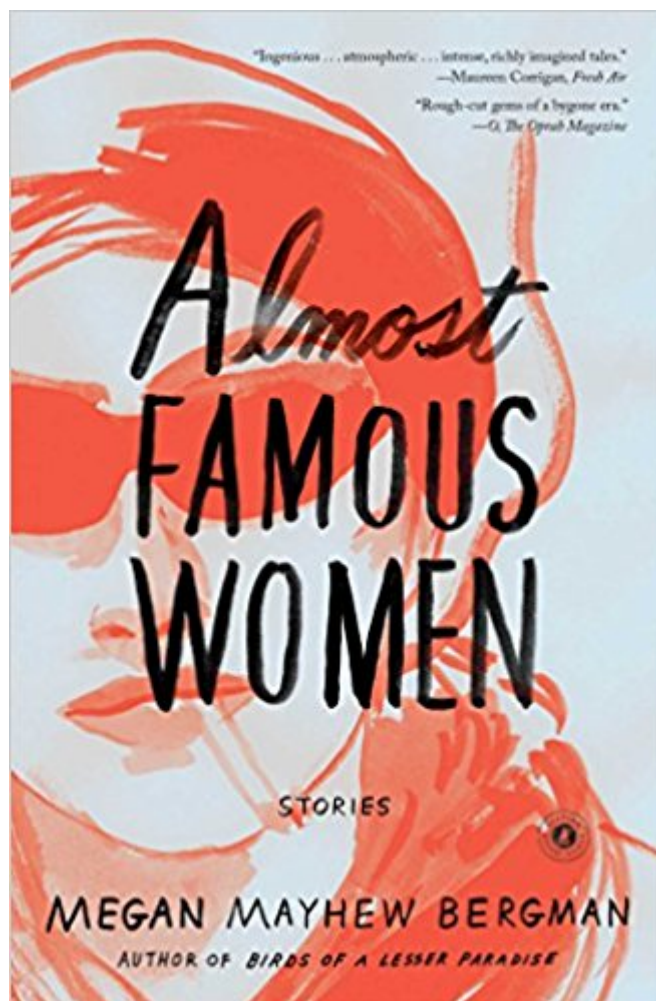


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# Almost Famous Women: Stories



## Synopsis

From a prizewinning, beloved young author, a provocative collection that explores the lives of colorful, intrepid women in history. "These stories linger in one's memory long after reading them" • (Star Tribune, Minneapolis). The fascinating characters in Megan Mayhew Bergman's "collection of stories as beautiful and strange as the women who inspired them" • (Kirkus Reviews, starred review) are defined by their creative impulses, fierce independence, and sometimes reckless decisions. In "The Siege at Whale Cay," cross-dressing Standard Oil heiress Joe Carstairs seduces Marlene Dietrich. In "A High-Grade Bitch Sits Down for Lunch," aviator and writer Beryl Markham lives alone in Nairobi and engages in a battle of wills with a stallion. In "Hell-Diving Women," the first integrated, all-girl swing band sparks a violent reaction in North Carolina. Other heroines, born in proximity to the spotlight, struggle to distinguish themselves: Lord Byron's illegitimate daughter, Allegra; Oscar Wilde's wild niece, Dolly; Edna St. Vincent Millay's talented sister, Norma; James Joyce's daughter, Lucia. *Almost Famous Women* offers an elegant and intimate look at artists who desired recognition. "By assiduously depicting their intimacy and power struggles, Bergman allows for a close examination of the multiplicity of women's experiences" • (The New York Times Book Review). The world wasn't always kind to the women who star in these stories, but through Mayhew Bergman's stunning imagination, they receive the attention they deserve. *Almost Famous Women* is "addictive and tantalizing, each story whetting our appetite for more" • (Atlanta Journal-Constitution).

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Every one of these stories is as vibrant, as urgent, as surprising as the women therein. What a thrill to listen as they cohere into a chorus of powerful, affecting and often hilarious voices, each unforgettable, together undeniable. Another stunning collection from the brilliant Megan Mayhew Bergman." (--Claire Vaye Watkins, author of *Battleborn*)  
"Almost Famous Women is sharp, compassionate, and strong, just like the women depicted in its pages. Megan Mayhew Bergman writes with such precision that we should all quake in her presence. This book only looks like it's made of paper-- you are holding priceless diamonds in your hand."  
"--Emma Straub, author of *The Vacationers*  
"Megan Mayhew Bergman writes with an astonishing force of empathy, a compassion as bright and illuminating as a klieg light. The reader of *Almost Famous Women* can't help but be seduced by these eccentric, subversive, passionate women who lived their lives with their entire souls and who were furiously unapologetic for doing so."  
"--Lauren Groff, author of *Arcadia*  
"Lovely and heartbreaking."  
"(Anjelica Huston, author of *Watch Me*)  
"Megan Mayhew Bergman breathes life into lives that men and history have cast aside. It is rare that an author is as fearless as her characters. Bergman is, and *Almost Famous Women* is a stunning feat of great daring."  
"(Lily King, author of *Euphoria*)  
"Megan Mayhew Bergman is a tremendous writer -- compassionate and intelligent, generous and funny -- and *Almost Famous Women* is a collection filled with empathy, insight and extraordinary psychological precision. Mayhew Bergman has made the women who inhabit this beautiful book come fully to life -- I won't ever forget them."  
"(Molly Antopol, author of *The UnAmericans*)  
"A collection of stories as beautiful and strange as the women who inspired them."  
"(Kirkus Reviews (starred review))  
"Rough-cut gems of a bygone era."  
"(O, The Oprah Magazine)  
"In these inventive short stories, off-the-radar historical characters -- a motorbike racer, a diva, Oscar Wilde's niece -- enter the limelight at last."  
"(MORE Magazine)  
"Gutsy and expertly written."  
"(Bustle)  
"Fearless stories star[ring] an eccentric cavalcade."  
"(Vanity Fair)  
"Bergman is a spry and meticulous writer, and these stories linger in one's memory long after reading them."  
"(Minneapolis Star Tribune)  
"Stories that are so intriguing you wish they were full-length novels... Bergman revives these often troubled spirits with great compassion."  
"(Connie Ogle Miami Herald)  
"Real women are found at the heart of these tales, women unusual for their times and almost entirely forgotten in ours... Arresting... Sympathetic, never romanticizing often self-destructive behavior, but exploring why these women sought risk taking and the effect of their impulses."  
"(Leanna Bales Kansas City Star)  
"Seek within to find the forgotten. Bergman's

well-written short stories tell the tales of women who almost made it into history books." (Tara Wanda Merrigan GQ)"Thrill-seeking women abound in the collection, chock-full of bravery, defiance and creativity." (Cheryl Crocker McKeon Shelf Awareness)"There's an allure to reading about the historical lives of women who bucked social conventions, even when they come, as they so often do, to a tragic end. We read them with an element of wish-fulfillment, searching for assurances that there were other ways to think and be." (Amy Gentry Chicago Tribune)"Graceful prose charged with knowingness and certitude...burns bright in one's mind well after reading these fine stories." (Boston Globe)"Bergman's scenarios are addictive and tantalizing, each one whetting our appetite for more... stunning depictions of how fame's fire warms with even the slightest contact." (Gina Webb Atlanta Journal-Constitution)"By assiduously depicting their intimacy and power struggles, Bergman allows for a close examination of the multiplicity of women's experiences." (The New York Times Book Review)"By exploring the women who didn't quite make it into history books, Bergman offers thoughtful commentary on the stories we do and don't preserve." (Maddie Crum The Huffington Post)"Ingenious | atmospheric | intense, richly imagined tales." (Maureen Corrigan Fresh Air)"A cleverly constructed, honest, and thoughtful book of stories. Fans of historical fiction and biography will find much to delight and ponder in these pages." (Julie Hakim Azzam Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)"[Bergman] nimbly animates the stories when she approaches them from tangential angles, often from the perspective of another character with something at stake." (John Williams The New York Times)"Fascinating." (People Magazine)"Bergman's 13 gutsy short stories portray women whose lives left them on the fringes of history's conversations... Through Bergman's exquisite writing, we dwell briefly in multiple lives that history was unkindly content to lose—but Bergman wasn't." (Meredith Turits Vanity Fair)

### 10 Best Short Story Collections of 2015 (BookPage)

Megan Mayhew Bergman is the author of *Almost Famous Women* and *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *New Stories from the South*, *McSweeney's*, *Tin House*, and *Oxford American*, among other publications. She lives on a small farm in Vermont with her veterinarian husband, two daughters, and many animals.

I'll share the blame, but I felt duped by *Almost Famous Women*, and /Kindle didn't help. I was under the impression that these were true stories about women of interest and importance that history had bypassed. It put me in mind of the well-done books NPR and ABC correspondent Cokie Roberts wrote about unsung heroines in American history and politics. I'm not sure where I first heard about

the Megan Bergman book, but whatever it was caused me to seek it out on and buy it on Kindle. "From the acclaimed author of *Birds of a Lesser Paradise*, a dazzling new collection that explores the lives of unforgettable women in history," was the lead of the book's description on the Web site. I skimmed a bit of what followed and quickly made the purchase. When I opened the Kindle, the first page was the first page of the first story -- no table of contents and, importantly, no forward. I didn't give it a thought, just started reading. It wasn't long until I was wondering about the veracity of the stories. Beyond that, I was not at all charmed with nor especially interested in the portrayals of these women. Additionally there seemed to be a recurring theme of sexual wandering that tied the women together. I'm not a prude, but that's not the book I that was described. I was thinking about bailing on the book, but in considering all the positive reviews figured I must be missing something, so I read on. Around the halfway mark I decided to give up, but first went back to the page and read some of the negative reviews. They were right in step with me -- both regarding the fictional nature of the book and their disappointment in the depth of their character. Still, in understanding that it is a work of fiction I decided to try again. I'm glad I did. There were a couple of really interesting stories, including one foreshadowing post-traumatic stress disorder that I found very compelling. But here's the thing: promising to tell the stories of worthy-of-note women that history ignored and then presenting a made-up drama that, as far as the reader can discern, may have had little or nothing to do with their actual story, not only gyps us but dishonors the women. Truly, what's the point. There are only cursory facts mixed with an apparent desire to fantasize about the sexual foibles (including the lovemaking acrobatics of co-joined twins) of these ladies along with their encounters with drugs and booze. I don't think the author did them justice. My standard for historical fiction is Michael Shaara's Civil War epic, *Killer Angels*: totally accurate regarding actual events with dialogue based on valid sources to carry the narrative. *Almost Famous Women* doesn't pretend to rise to that level, but it shouldn't masquerade as a provider of insights into the lives of these ladies either. By the way... the table of contents and the forward in the Kindle edition were eventually found after the final chapter. The forward made it clear: the first words were, "This is a work of fiction."

The title *Almost Famous Women* is perfect because I found that I had heard of or at least thought I heard of most of these women. Dolly Wilde, Allegra Byron, Tiny Davies, and the most famous of all of them the great Butterfly McQueen. They aren't the nicest women you'll ever meet and some of the stories were connected by psychological scars won by volunteering as ambulance drivers in World War I. (The best part of books like these is you get so many ideas and so many threads of

things you want to follow-up on that you may not even think about in everyday life. After reading this I totally want to research women in World War I.) Because each woman only gets a chapter nothing ever goes in depth so you are left to chase down anymore information on your own but that's just as fun for me. I'll admit some of the stories suffer from being too little. But overall this book is like an introduction to things I never really thought about before and women I didn't really know and I can't wait to read more.

For a start, Ms. Bergman is a crackerjack writer. When I began her book, I didn't really know what I was reading, that kind of meta-info sometimes being tricky to get at via a Kindle device. As a writer myself, I have long toyed with a notion of doing a series of essays cataloguing distinguished females, and hoped at the time that I was gathering background material on some possible lesser-knowns... in other words, memoirs and brief autobiographies by the women themselves. This book, however, is not that. I was baffled from the getgo by the account of the showbiz career of Daisy Hilton, one of a pair of Siamese twins, asking myself why such an accomplished writer didn't go into a career of wordsmithing, rather than anything so toilsome as vaudeville. It was only as I read on that I noted that the personal accounts were all like that; that it began to dawn on me that I was reading historical fiction, a clever blending of fact and fiction, meant as entertainment, not history. I did knock off a star, betokening my disappointment there, but not because there is anything wrong with the book, if you happen to like historical fiction. Much in its stories, anecdotes drawn from the lives of some thirteen almost-famous females, springs merely from the author's fancy. However, her research into these lives appears to have been meticulous, and the writing is first-rate.

I have had this book on my To-Read list for some time now and finally had an excuse to read it...book club. I don't know why, but I was expecting it to be a little different than it ended up being. I found it to be kind of dark and depressing. I haven't really read any short story collections before and I found this easy to read. The stories had just enough detail without bogging you down. But overall I found the women to be uninspiring and maybe a little pathetic.

Quite unusual stories about women who are quasi-famous from the Siamese twinsturned down for marriage certificate in the South because they couldn't issuetwo to only one man to the bizarre sister of Edna St Vincent Millary who was anactress in local plays but lived at her sister's place until the latter's death. Whoknew the poet was an opium addict? Fiction intermingled with the facts butenough of the latter to inspire readers to research these women for themselves.

This book is very interesting as it highlights women who we may not have heard about before. It also tells the stories from the perspective of a person in the circle surrounding this almost famous woman. I had never heard of "Joe Carstairs" and had to look her up online as well as the conjoined twins Violet and Daisy and quite a number of other less than famous people. For sheer interest, I would recommend this book.

Excellent book about women on the very edge of being someone we should know about. No stars. No Kim Kardashians. Very few women you may have heard about but all women I was really glad to meet.

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