

Fall 2004

Review of Wild Heart: A Life. Natalie Clifford Barney's Journey from Victorian America to the Literary Salons of Paris by Suzanne Rodriguez

Tama L. Engelking
Cleveland State University, t.engelking@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clmlang_facpub

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Publisher's Statement

(c) 2004 South Central Review

Recommended Citation

Tama Lea Engelking. (2004). Review of Wild Heart: A Life. Natalie Clifford Barney's Journey from Victorian America to the Literary Salons of Paris by Suzanne Rodriguez. South Central Review, 21(3), 186-188.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

It comes as no surprise that Natalie Clifford Barney, the American heiress, writer, expatriate salon hostess, and notorious lesbian seductress would make a fascinating subject for a biography. After all, she considered her life to be her greatest work of art, and once declared her ambition to live her life as a poem. Suzanne Rodriguez's new biography makes it clear that instead of a poem, Barney lived her life like a racy lesbian romance novel set in both the Victorian America of wealth and privilege and the glittering salons of Paris where wit and literature reigned supreme. Barney, who was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1876, lived to be ninety-six years old. The very scope of her life, which straddled two centuries and played itself out on both sides of the Atlantic, makes her biography a significant slice of cultural history. This may be what attracted Rodriguez, whose previous book, *Found Meals of the Lost Generation*, constitutes an "edible social history" of Americans in Paris during the 1920s. Barney's name kept popping up during her research, prompting Rodriguez to discover what drove Barney to become the most outspoken lesbian of her day, a writer and patroness of the arts who hosted an international salon for nearly sixty years on the left bank of Paris. The result is a well-rounded, well-documented, and highly readable portrait of a complex and compelling personality who dared to be true to her nature.

Rodriguez has gone to great lengths to correct some of the imbalances found in the two previous biographies of Barney, both written by men. *The Amazon*

of *Letters* by George Wickes, and Jean Chalon's *Portrait d'une séductrice*, both appeared following Barney's death in the 1970s. The expectation was that a woman biographer would finally produce a more balanced account of Barney's life that did justice to her feminism, took her more seriously as a writer, and was not so voyeuristically enthralled by the details of her love life. Feminist readers, literary critics, and scholars will not be overly disappointed since Rodriguez makes a point of seriously discussing Barney's feminism and her writing. Rodriguez, however, is just as enthralled by Barney's sexual conquests as the biographers before her, and this gives her book a sensational edge that aims to please a more popular audience.

Rodriguez paints a vivid picture of Barney's life that fills in many of the gaps left by previous biographers. *Wild Heart* opens with a detailed account of Barney's colorful family history that includes the rags to riches stories of her grandfathers and a description of Natalie's precocious childhood where her penchant for women manifested itself at an early age. Like previous biographers, Rodriguez dwells at length on Barney's primary relationships with Renée Vivien, Liane de Pougy, Remy de Goumont, and the artist Romaine Brookes. She includes more information on Barney's little-discussed relationships with her sister Laura, and with her mother, the artist Alice Pike Barney, and counters the impression that Barney had little difficulty living openly as a lesbian with descriptions of the lengths Natalie went to in order to deceive her parents, even becoming engaged to use her fiancé as a cover for her lesbian rendezvous. She documents the considerable hurt Barney's mother experienced when she realized that not only was her daughter sleeping with some of her best friends, but that she had naïvely painted their portraits to illustrate Natalie's first published book of poems, *Quelques portraits-sonnets de femmes* (Some Sonnet-Portraits of Women, 1901).

Rodriguez is also careful to mention Barney's contradictions and flaws, among them her snobbery, which led most of her servants to despise her, and her anti-Semitism, which Rodriguez attributes to a major flaw in Barney's intelligence—glibness. According to Rodriguez,

Natalie had a lightning-quick mind, an ability to instantly perceive the essence of a situation, and a talent for distilling complications, but she resisted plunging deep and long into an idea. . . . For Natalie, a witticism was an end in and of itself; any means could be used to accomplish it. (206)

Considerable space is devoted to Barney's literary salon, highlighting the important role her Fridays played in Parisian letters, "bringing together an eclectic, multinational mix of writers in a setting that stimulated creativity, talk, and friendship" (241). Rodriguez notes that Barney was a generous and devoted friend who was driven by a "sincere desire to help people fulfill themselves" (241). She tries to give readers a sense of Barney's particular charm

that resulted in conquests as diverse as the recluse scholar Remy de Gourmont, who made Barney into his “Amazone” when he published their correspondence, and Liane de Pougy, the most acclaimed courtesan of her day who wrote a novel based on her affair with Barney. Readers unfamiliar with Barney’s circle should visit the book’s companion website that includes an annotated who’s who to help sort out the many players in her life (www.natalie-barney.com).

Rodriguez’s discussion of Barney’s writing deserves special mention. Previous biographers dismissed her as a facile and undisciplined writer whose work is only interesting for what it reveals about her life. Rodriguez provides an overview of the content and contemporary reception of each of Barney’s twelve published books, making it clear that Barney’s writing was more appreciated by readers and critics than previously thought. She also explains the process by which Barney composed her various works, concluding that it was not really laziness but a desire to capture spontaneity that kept her from closely editing her work. This also helps explain why of all the literary forms she practiced, Barney excelled at epigrams.

With so much information to sort through, the majority of it in French, it is inevitable that mistakes occur. Some of the translations are awkward or inaccurate, there is the occasional misspelled name, and the bibliography indicates a preference for translations over the original French. Nevertheless, *Wild Heart* does justice to the long and rich life of the legendary Amazon who has always been better known and appreciated by the French than by her own compatriots. Specialists will appreciate Rodriguez’s attention to detail and her ample documentation, but her new biography is particularly welcome in that it opens the door to readers unfamiliar with Natalie Clifford Barney and invites them to enter.

Tama Lea Engelking
Cleveland State University