

Reading Group Guide

A Conversation with April Bernard

When did you first become interested in Margaret Fuller, the American feminist and journalist?

I was in college, studying American History and Literature. A wonderful, and often mischievously provocative, professor named Joel Porte was lecturing about the Transcendentalists – Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott – and all of a sudden this name popped up in the list, a woman’s name: “Margaret Fuller.” I had never heard of her, and moreover I was surprised to hear of any woman at all among those worthies, those men I thought of as smothered in whiskers and with probably not a lot to teach me--so my ears pricked up. Professor Porte went on to quote that famous dyspeptic remark of Hawthorne’s, deploring that the 19th century was awash in “a damned mob of scribbling women.” This got an appreciative laugh from the university lecture hall audience that was, thirty years ago, at least three-quarters male students. My inability to laugh, and my confused sense of anger at the laughter around me and at the professor, was the first sign that something was up, that my imagination was fired.

You thank Joel Porte in your “author’s note” however.

Oh, yes, I went on to study with him extensively and to work on my college thesis – on Thoreau, as it happened – with him. He was a brilliant teacher and

encouraged me to read Fuller's important book, *Woman in the 19th Century*—still one of the seminal texts for feminism in this country and, indeed, for Europe. It was translated into many languages when it was first published in 1846—it made a big difference in the history of women's rights.

In this novel some might think you give Thoreau a hard time.

Really? I adore Thoreau! Reading his books always renews my courage. He was not perfect, of course—as Margaret Fuller was not. Far from being characters removed from my life, over time these thoughtful, political people of Concord and Boston, and their concerns, have become almost realer to me than this 21st century world of cynicism and despair. They were so brave, so hopeful, so full of energy for a better world. I think we would do well to spend more time with them, despite their flaws.

Except in the middle section, which is in Fuller's voice, she is seen through the eyes of "Anne Thoreau." Is this a real person?

No, Anne, an adopted third cousin in the Thoreau family, is my own invention—a fictional device. What she sees, what she lives, is fiction—as is the text putatively in Fuller's hand, the "recovered" manuscript that I have Henry Thoreau find at the site of the shipwreck.

Why did you invent her?

I wanted someone “ordinary” who could look at this “extraordinary,” world-changing woman, Margaret Fuller – and who would reckon with the puzzlement, and admiration, and dislike, and fear, that such people do indeed inspire in those around them. It is clearly not easy to have been Margaret Fuller; nor, I am sure, was it easy to know her. People who change the world are like that.

What was so extraordinary about Fuller?

She was, I believe, the first female foreign correspondent when *The New-York Daily Tribune* sent her to Europe in 1846. Once there, she got involved with Mazzini and the Italian revolutionary cause, married another revolutionary, had a baby, and ran a hospital during the siege of Rome, all the while writing regular and very lengthy dispatches for the newspaper back home. When she died in 1850 – in a shipwreck coming home from Europe – she was the most famous woman in the world. She was better educated and more intellectually brilliant than almost anyone around her – and although, to be honest, some of her writing is a little turgid, she was famously the most exciting conversationalist of her day.

Why haven't more people heard of her?

That is the million-dollar question, and one of the main reasons I wrote the novel. I wanted to find out why she had more or less vanished from our collective historical memory – and I hope the novel suggests some of the reasons.

Can you tell me any?

She was a forceful, political woman who made people angry, and who led a brave and unconventional life – but accusations of “immoral” behavior became an excuse to dismiss her accomplishments and contributions. Something very similar happened to Mary Woollstonecraft; and I believe something similar is being done, right now, to the memory of Susan Sontag.

There's a thesis there!

Yes, but I don't think I'm the one to write it. I wrote this novel instead.

Questions for Discussion

Note: Before your group begins discussing *Miss Fuller*, invite each member to take one minute to present his or her general impression of the book, without interruption or comments from the other members. This preamble to group discussion provides an opportunity for everyone to voice their opinion, and does not hinder the discussion that follows.

1. Why does Henry Thoreau decide not to read the manuscript of Margaret Fuller's that he finds? Would you have read it?
2. Are Margaret Fuller's concerns relevant to the lives of women today?
3. Why does Anne never travel, as she longed to do when younger?
4. The picture of the writer's life—especially its money worries--as outlined in Margaret's "My Life in Economies," is pretty grim. Why do you think the author included this section in the novel?
5. Would you have done what Anne did with the manuscript? Why doesn't she just hand it over to someone like James Freeman Clarke?
6. What do you make of the canary that Anne and Henry rescue?
7. Anne is both attracted to and repelled by Margaret Fuller. Do you think women have difficulty admiring one another's accomplishments?