A Typical Love Affair In Belle Epoque Era

Born in 1879, the daughter of a Viennese painter, Alma Mahler inspired the passionate love and devotion of an astonishing array of creative artists. She married three of them--the composer Gustav Mahler, the architect Walter Gropius, and the writer Franz Werfel--and had a host of admirers and lovers, including the painters Oscar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele, and Gustav Klimpt. The composer Alban Berg dedicated his opera Wozzeck to her and a violin concerto to the memory of her daughter, Manon, who died of polio.

In Alma Mahler, Francoise Giroud provides a spirited portrait of one of Europes great femme fatales, ranging from her childhood (she was raised on a steady diet of Nietzsche) to her heyday as a leading figure in Europes art scene, to her later life as an exile in California and New York. We meet a woman of remarkable beauty and unconventional mind, the possessor of a fine, demanding intelligence, who was highly conscious of herself as a member of the elite, a woman never truly conquered by her lovers. Her last husband, Franz Werfel, called her one of the very few sorceresses of our time. And indeed when she appeared, her presence attracted all eyes as she moved like a queen through a room. And what eyes she drew. Virtually all the great figures of 19th-century Vienna march through these pages, including Sigmund Freud, Richard Strauss, Arnold Schonberg, Hugo van Hofmannsthal, Karl Kraus, and Elias Canetti, and Giroud pens striking portraits of each. There are also many memorable scenes: Franz Werfel singing Verdi arias with James Joyce in a Paris cafe; the young Gropius, having an affair with then-married Alma, chased from the Mahler home by guard dogs and taking refuge under a bridge; Kokoschka, after his affair with Alma has died, commissioning a life-sized doll, a faithful reproduction of his former lover. But the heart of the book is Almas marriage to Mahler. We read Almas own first impression of Mahler--He is terribly nervous. He paced around the room like a wild animal. He is pure oxygen. You get burnt if you go too near. Unfortunately for Mahler, his attempt to subjugate his young wife to his will--you have only one profession from now on: to make me happy--led to disaster, and he himself was burnt.

Alma Mahler stood at the center of the creative world, the intimate friend (if not lover) of the major artists of her age, and Giroud paints an unforgettable portrait. It was awarded Frances Grand Prix litteraire de la femme in 1988.
My Personal Review:
Like CAROLINE OTERO, MISIA SERT and a few others, ALMA MAHLER came to symbolize the emerging power of women in the arts, at least in terms of the influence they had over their famous husbands. What FRANCOISE GIROUD tried to establish with that book, is that GUSTAV MAHLER gradually destroyed his wife's personality. We've come a long way since then, but back then, it was almost impossible for a woman to make a name for herself, even if she had a strong personality. It was simply put a man's world, and FRANCOISE GIROUD in a true feminist way has found herself a good subject with the love affair between the composer and ALMA. I enjoyed reading this a lot. It's actually not a so-called biography, more an essay about love and the way it can alter your life.

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