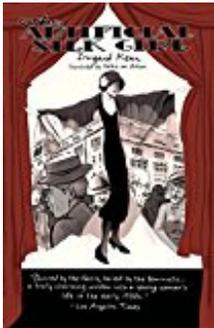


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The Bombshell

"God forgive me for my sins -- but I can really write": Irmgard Keun, Anita Loos, and Women Who Dare to Write



Recently, Nobel Prize for Literature laureate V.S. Naipaul stated in a *Guardian* interview that no woman writer could ever be his equal due to her innate "sentimentality, the narrow view of the world." My impulse was to dismiss Naipaul's misogynist "tosh" as a reflection of his own impoverished psyche; alas, the luxury of dismissal is not yet ours. Naipaul's words go beyond the man to expose the diseased strain, ancient and pernicious, in our culture's attitude toward women in general, and in particular toward women who dare to write.



An appreciable antidote to the Naipaulian Scourge is the increased interest in the excavation of women writers by publishers who find and return significant voices that have disappeared from the cultural landscape. To this end, Other Press reissued German author Irmgard Keun's second novel *The Artificial Silk Girl* (1932), and Melville House published her third novel *After Midnight* (1937), the lead title in their tantalizing new series The Neversink Library. These stunning works of literature are searing satires of life under the Third Reich in which fascist ideology is subtly and hilariously subverted, Nazi racism pilloried. (Both books were eventually banned.) The overwhelming power of Keun's work lies in her surprisingly raw, witty, and resonant feminine voices.

The Artificial Silk Girl is narrated by Doris, an attractive, ambitious, street-smart, endearingly naïve twenty-year-old who flees her small-town life to seek her fortune in Berlin. "I want to become a star. I want to be at the top. With a white car and bubble bath that smells from perfume, and everything just like in Paris." In the grand yet seamy metropolis, Doris faces tough challenges, but always remains the brilliant star of her own life story. Her incisive observations often result in Raymond Chandleresque one-liners, with a Keun twist: "My heart is a gramophone playing inside of me, scratching my bosom with a sharp needle," "There is a subway; it's like an illuminated coffin on skis," "Heavenly Father, perform a miracle and give me an education -- I can do the rest myself with make-up."

Channeling Moll Flanders, Doris points out the age-old hypocrisies riddling male-female relations:

If a young woman from money marries an old man because of money and nothing else and makes love to him for hours and has this pious look on her face, she's called a German mother and a decent woman. If a young woman without money sleeps with a man with no money because he has smooth skin and she likes him, she's a whore and a bitch.

In Doris, Keun creates a character doomed by both her sex and crude intelligence to the periphery of socio-cultural structures from where she relates some blistering truths about who we are.

In *After Midnight*, Keun's protagonist Sanna, also an outsider on the inside, is more sophisticated than Doris; still, her immediate concerns are love and money. But five years on in Germany, politics are impossible to ignore: Sanna, through her agile, trenchant feminine perspective, paints a devastating picture of a Germany lost to the human weaknesses of fear and cruelty.

Sanna and her friend Gerti, searching downtown Frankfurt for Gerti's Jewish lover, are inadvertently caught up in a crowd gathered to see the Fuhrer's motorcade.

Men who were currently famous were getting into position on the long balcony of the Opera House, with much ceremony, bowing politely to each other. They waved to the crowd too. They weren't really doing anything of interest, but you were allowed to look at them. Gerti's opinion was that you didn't get much fun out of looking at these eminent men, the eminent men must get far more fun out of having all of us looking at *them*.

Sanna is denounced by her aunt for some trifling transgression, an excuse for evicting her. Awaiting her fate at the police station, Sanna describes in darkly humorous terms the state of her civilization:

This Gestapo room seems to be a positive place of pilgrimage. Mothers are informing on their daughters-in-law, daughters on their fathers-in-law, brothers on their sisters, sisters on their brothers, friends on their friends, drinking companions on their drinking companions, neighbours on their neighbours. And the typewriters go clatter, clatter, clatter, all the statements are taken down, all the informers are treated well and kindly.

Sanna flees Germany, as Keun herself did in 1937 for Holland where *After Midnight* was completed. Upon finishing the manuscript, she excitedly wrote to her lover in America, "God forgive me for my sins -- but I really can write."

Likened to Alfred Döblin, Christopher Isherwood, and Bertold Brecht, Keun herself claimed as her inspiration Anita Loos, author of the wildly popular *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925). Edith Wharton described Loos's book as: "*the great American novel (at last!)*." Loos's Lorelei Lee is so entertainingly subversive, her critique of corrosive male power so ingeniously guileful, it is easy to see why Keun chose Loos as a model for her own work.

Despite her dazzling career as a screenwriter, Loos believed her success destroyed her marriage and her husband. In her autobiography, *Cast of Thousands*, she wrote: "I've always thought there's something rather monstrous about any female who writes." Her statement is worthy of Lorelei in its seditious accuracy: the woman writer is a true deviant, her choice to write outrageously perverse, her words an act of heinous hubris.

In response to V.S. Naipaul's comments about women writers, *Harper's* posted a seminal essay by Francine Prose entitled "Scent of a Woman's Ink: Are Women Writers Really Inferior?" first published ten years ago. Her impetus for writing the essay was an observation penned by Norman Mailer:

I can only say that the sniffs I get from the ink of the women are always fey, old-hat, Quaintsy Goosy, tin, too dykily psychotic, crippled, creepish, fashionable, frigid, outer-Baroque, maquillé in mannequin's whimsy, or else bright and stillborn.

Mailer's description is an extraordinary recommendation of women's writing, intimating that one might do better to read exclusively women writers. In her piece, Prose delineated the gross inequalities a woman writer faces in the industry, her statistics nearly identical to those in the 2011 Vida report. Speculating on the tenacity of the injustice, Prose commented, "Perhaps the problem is that women writers tell us things we don't want to hear -- especially not from women," and cited Virginia Woolf's assessment:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size... That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to them this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be, without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would do who gave the same criticism. For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished.

In *The Artificial Silk Girl*, Doris, standing next to a wealthy woman in the restroom of a nightclub, observes, "She had such light white hands with elegantly curved fingers and an assertive look on her face, and next to her I looked so labored." Doris expresses a universal sentiment -- the commingled fear and desire for what the Other has, along with the brutal acknowledgment of one's own shortcomings. If V.S. Naipaul, and those of his ilk, could absorb the truth of the words flying from the pens of monstrous women, they might find it liberating.