

Proposed Roundtable: Transgression and Fame in *Almost Famous Women*

Long abstract:

This discussion panel addresses the interrelation of transgression and fame in Megan Mayhew Bergman's story collection *Almost Famous Women*. We notice that each of the "almost famous" figures treated in the books, both the historical characters and the often non-historical narrators who voice certain stories, fails to conform to conventional notions of gender and sexuality. We consider whether these figures—many of them artists, writers, or performers—would have been more famous if their lives and bodies had not transgressed so many boundaries. Alternately, is the minute degree of fame these women possess due to their difference from perceived norms?

Each student will introduce a discussion question and then invite participation from the audience.

Discussion questions include:

1. Each woman depicted in this book is non-conforming in some way and thus unique. What features do they have in common? How do the fictionalized life narratives Bergman creates tie together?
2. We notice that each story depicts one or more acts of violence, either willful or accidental. How does each woman's near-fame contribute to the violence she experiences?
3. These stories are centered in the bodily experiences of their female protagonists. Why does Bergman depict such phenomena as the visceral connection of Violet and Daisy Hilton, Edna St. Vincent Millay's use of opiates, Romaine Brooks's helplessness, and Allegra Byron's fevers?
4. We notice that many of the stories treat women whose sexual identities or behavior do not conform to the heterosexual norm. How does sexual non-conformity contribute to the misery each woman experiences?
5. Why are these women "almost" famous? Did they achieve their degree of fame because of their deviation from the norm, or do their differences prevent them from being truly famous?

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