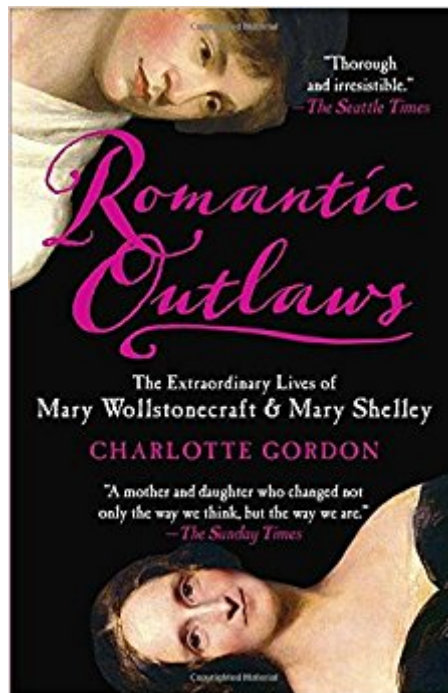




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Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives Of Mary Wollstonecraft & Mary Shelley



Synopsis

NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD WINNER *Named One of the Best Books of the Year by the Seattle Times* This groundbreaking dual biography brings to life a pioneering English feminist and the daughter she never knew. Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley have each been the subject of numerous biographies, yet no one has ever examined their lives in one book—until now. In *Romantic Outlaws*, Charlotte Gordon reunites the trailblazing author who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and the Romantic visionary who gave the world *Frankenstein*—two courageous women who should have shared their lives, but instead shared a powerful literary and feminist legacy. In 1797, less than two weeks after giving birth to her second daughter, Mary Wollstonecraft died, and a remarkable life spent pushing against the boundaries of society’s expectations for women came to an end. But another was just beginning. Wollstonecraft’s daughter Mary was to follow a similarly audacious path. Both women had passionate relationships with several men, bore children out of wedlock, and chose to live in exile outside their native country. Each in her own time fought against the injustices women faced and wrote books that changed literary history. The private lives of both Marys were nothing less than the stuff of great Romantic drama, providing fabulous material for Charlotte Gordon, an accomplished historian and a gifted storyteller. Taking readers on a vivid journey across revolutionary France and Victorian England, she seamlessly interweaves the lives of her two protagonists in alternating chapters, creating a book that reads like a richly textured historical novel. Gordon also paints unforgettable portraits of the men in their lives, including the mercurial genius Percy Shelley, the unbridled libertine Lord Byron, and the brilliant radical William Godwin. “Brave, passionate, and visionary, they broke almost every rule there was to break,” Gordon writes of Wollstonecraft and Shelley. A truly revelatory biography, *Romantic Outlaws* reveals the defiant, creative lives of this daring mother-daughter pair who refused to be confined by the rigid conventions of their era. Praise for *Romantic Outlaws* “[An] impassioned dual biography . . . Gordon, alternating between the two chapter by chapter, binds their lives into a fascinating whole. She shows, in vivid detail, how mother influenced daughter, and how the daughter’s struggles mirrored the mother’s.” —The Boston Globe “Written with the galloping pace of a skilled novel peopled with fascinating characters . . . these women live on in its pages. . . . Thorough and irresistible.” —The Seattle Times “Gordon unfolds the two stories in tandem, deftly balancing the gossipy aspects of her subjects’ lives with their serious intellectual concerns.” —The New Yorker “[A] thoughtful, intelligent and deeply felt book . . . Gordon has written a book

about two women, a mother and her daughter, who changed not only the way we think, but the way we are. *The Sunday Times* (London) "A most welcome deeper take on the women who scandalized Victorian England and whose stories continue to resonate today." *Vogue* "By linking these two lives, Ms. Gordon's biography stretches over a fascinating era in history, characterized by great flux in political and cultural thinking and involving some of the main figures in English literary and philosophical history." *The Wall Street Journal* From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

"[An] impassioned dual biography . . . [Charlotte] Gordon brings a rousing zeal to her pages. Both Wollstonecraft and Shelley have been the subject of previous biographies the author builds her account on a tremendous variety of sources and scholarship but Gordon, alternating between the two chapter by chapter, binds their lives into a fascinating whole. She shows, in vivid detail, how mother influenced daughter, and how the daughter's struggles mirrored the mother's." *The Boston Globe* "Written with the galloping pace of a skilled novel peopled with fascinating characters . . . these women live on in its pages. . . . Thorough and irresistible." *The Seattle Times* "Gordon unfolds the two stories in tandem, deftly balancing the gossipy aspects of her subjects' lives with their serious intellectual concerns." *The New Yorker* "Thoughtful, intelligent and deeply felt . . . Gordon has written a book about two women, a mother and her

daughter, who changed not only the way we think, but the way we are. . . . Skillfully entwining the story of two generations that spanned a century, Gordon's *Romantic Outlaws* enables readers to compare the different ways in which these two remarkable women confronted their tragically difficult destinies.

• *The Sunday Times (U.K.)* " [Romantic Outlaws] is an innovative dual biography that foregrounds the writing of two women who disregarded the moral codes of their eras and shaped their own destinies. Gordon's parallel mapping of their lives reveals fascinating similarities in the ways writing sustained, and sometimes saved, them both.

• *Financial Times* " "A most welcome deeper take on the women who scandalized Victorian England and whose stories continue to resonate today.

• *Vogue* " "By linking these two lives, Ms. Gordon's biography stretches over a fascinating era in history, characterized by great flux in political and cultural thinking and involving some of the main figures in English literary and philosophical history.

• *The Wall Street Journal* " "The relationship between Mary Shelley and the mother she never knew . . . is explored with remarkable insight and perspicacity in this exhilarating dual biography. . . . Gordon's perceptive reading of both women's published works illuminates their core ideas [and] identifies the emotional fault lines caused by the drama in their lives. Her lucid prose and multifaceted appraisal of Wollstonecraft, Shelley, and their times make warm-blooded and fully fleshed-out people of writers who exist for readers today only as the literary works they left behind.

• *Publishers Weekly* (starred review) " "Gordon infuses literary history with electrifying discoveries in this symbiotic portrait of radical mother-daughter writers who indelibly changed society and the arts. . . . The first to fully investigate the life-determining influence Wollstonecraft's feminist writings had on Mary Shelley, Gordon chronicles their harsh, tragic, and courageous lives in alternating chapters that are as emotionally incisive as they are finely particularized in their astute renderings of tumultuous settings and dire predicaments.

• *Booklist* (starred review) " "This excellent dual biography . . . examines the profound influence Wollstonecraft had on Shelley and the impact both women have had on women's rights in succeeding generations. . . .

Gordon's prose is compelling and her scholarship meticulous, her contention that both women led lives as memorable as the words they left behind is brilliantly supported.

• *Library Journal* " "A fascinating, thoughtful and continuously absorbing book, one to which I know I shall return on many future occasions.

• *Miranda Seymour*, author of *Mary Shelley* " "Charlotte Gordon reunites a mother and daughter tragically separated at birth in this rousing and surpassingly

readable epic spanning the Romantic era. Wordsworth and Byron must step aside to make room for two brilliant women, Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Shelley, early and late Romantics whose remarkable contributions to their time and ours lend Gordon's artfully twined tale special significance.

•Megan Marshall, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*

“Romantic Outlaws is a gripping account of the heartbreaks and triumphs of two of history's most formidable female intellectuals, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley. Gordon has reunited mother and daughter through biography, beautifully weaving their narratives for the first time.

•Amanda Foreman, author of *A World on Fire*

“Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Shelley stand out as daring, unconventional, and courageous women in their times and ours. Appreciate the heroic exertions of their lives and savor the skill with which Charlotte Gordon tells their intersecting stories.

•Susan Ware, general editor, *American National Biography*

From the Hardcover edition.

Charlotte Gordon is the author of *Mistress Bradstreet: The Untold Life of America's First Poet* and *The Woman Who Named God: Abraham's Dilemma and the Birth of Three Faiths*. She has also published two books of poetry, *When the Grateful Dead Came to St. Louis* and *Two Girls on a Raft*. She is an associate professor of English at Endicott College and lives in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

From the Hardcover edition.

The present biographer's purpose is to demonstrate how closely Mary Shelley studied her dead mother's writings and how strongly they influenced her own attitude toward the conventions of her day. Once those points were firmly established, the analysis lost my interest, but fortunately there is much, much more to this book. This is a dual biography in which the chapters alternate, first for the mother Mary Wollstonecraft, then for her daughter Mary Shelley. The arrangement works surprisingly well. Both women lived unconventionally, published unconventional books, and were punished by society for transgressions against its rules. Mary Shelley's own life is full of interesting vignettes. How can anyone not be moved when she and Percy see in the distance a Rhineland castle named Frankenstein, whereupon a peasant tells them that long ago an alchemist lived there who experimented with dead bodies to create living ones. Within a year or two, Mary, at the age of nineteen, wrote the book for which she will always be remembered. For several years the Shelleys were closely associated with Lord Byron, a man whose friendship never came without an emotional cost to everyone around him. Mary's stepsister, Claire Claremont, became pregnant by him and he

spent the rest of his life loathing her and trying to avoid her. Their child, a little girl, was placed by him in a convent where she was treated affectionately but succumbed at the age of four to one of the fevers endemic to Italy. The Shelleys had tried heroically to pry the child from Byron's grip and restore her to her mother, but without success. Claire Claremont, unhinged with grief, became a bitter enemy of Byron and even more unstable than she had always been. She remained the albatross around Mary's neck until the end. The history of the Shelley circle cannot be written without taking Claire always into account. A curious fact, the kind that remains in a reader's memory, is that Mary and Percy buried their own little daughter on the Lido, the beach within sight of Venice where today crowds gather to sunbathe. Years later, Mary returned but could not find the grave. After Percy Shelley drowned in a storm off the coast of Italy, Mary's suffering was intensified by her duplicitous friends, including Leigh Hunt and his malicious wife. Only Byron helped her by interceding with Shelley's father, that same man who had driven the young poet from his house and now would have liked nothing better than to keep the widow and her fatherless son away as well. The best Mary could expect from him was a small allowance, but in return, she was forbidden to write about her husband, whose memory she dearly wanted to defend before the world. Mary Shelley is so much better known than her mother, yet her accomplishments owe much to the dead woman. This study is valuable for its thorough treatment of Mary Wollstonecraft's turbulent life and her significant contributions to the advancement of women's rights. For many readers, that will be reward enough for choosing this book. For others, enjoyment will be found in experiencing again the lives of those remarkable human beings, those outcasts from proper British society, who, in Italian exile, enriched English literature as few others ever have.

This dual biography of Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter Mary Shelley utterly enthralled me. Both were talented, groundbreaking, independent thinking women, they each had drama and difficulties in their lives worthy of a Brontë novel, and between them they knew intimately some of the most interesting people involved with Romantic literature and radical political thought from the French Revolution through to the mid-Victorian years. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born into a poor family with a very difficult, sometimes violent father, but Wollstonecraft was at least as spirited as he was and she struggled to surmount the boundaries gender and poverty put on her life in every way she could, eventually becoming a leading progressive thinker and the author of several influential books, including *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She loved passionately but refused the traditional roles women were expected to embrace at the time, so she married the political philosopher William Godwin late in life and only reluctantly. Wollstonecraft died days after

giving birth to the daughter named for her, so it was through her extensive writings that Mary Godwin Shelley came to esteem, cherish, and love her mother. While still a teenager Mary Shelley began writing *Frankenstein*, a social commentary many consider the first science fiction novel, while holed up in Switzerland with a crowd that included Lord Byron. Like her parents she rejected social conventions about love, life, and marriage and at sixteen she scandalized her more staid contemporaries by running away with the already married poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, though that particular rebellion she came to regret because it hurt so many people. Mary longed for and looked up to her mother, using her mother's writings as guideposts for her own life, and that reverence was shared by her husband, her stepsister, Lord Byron, and many of Mary's other peers. *Romantic Outlaws* is written in a back and forth chronology, with chapters about the two women alternating, so the section about Wollstonecraft's early life is followed by one about her daughter at a similar age. I thought this might be confusing, especially since they're both named Mary, but their circumstances were different enough that it was usually simple to keep track of who I was reading about, and structuring the book that way makes it easy to compare the lives of the women, which adds even more interest to their stories. The book is well researched and documented with notes, but far from being a dry recitation of facts I found it quite compelling. Many of the chapters even end in what might almost be called cliffhangers, a technique that definitely kept me highly engaged. Before reading this biography both Marys were more symbols to me than women with families, lovers, personal trials and private doubts, but Charlotte Gordon illuminates the hearts and minds of her subjects and succeeds at bringing the two women and the era they lived in to life. William Godwin, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron are among the people who are also well rendered, and many other fascinating people spend time on the book's pages, including Coleridge, Keats, and John and Abigail Adams. Saying it's engrossing is almost an understatement--I don't remember ever finding a biography so hard to put down. I read an advanced review ebook copy of this book supplied by the publisher through NetGalley, but I've already preordered my own copy hardback edition of *Romantic Outlaws*.

This is one of the most fabulous works of nonfiction I have ever read. The lives of Mary Shelley and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, are so interesting and their impact on culture and society in Europe, especially as regards views of gender, cannot be underestimated. Both women were creative geniuses, and their lives were both romantic and tragic and utterly engrossing. The biggest tragedy is that most people know far more about the men in their lives and of that time, and I feel that these women's contributions were infinitely more valuable and in some ways further reaching.

The story was riveting, particularly the sections dealing with Mary Wollstonecraft, about whom I knew nothing. But the writing was less successful. The book alternated chapters between Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelly, and it very difficult following either story in this manner. I have colleagues who would read every other chapter to connect the sorely line more easily. And clearly Gordon had strong prejudices which resulted in uneven handling of some of the facts. It's well worth reading, but it could have been much better.

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