

The Muse by Jesse Burton

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Reviewed by Melanie White

The title of *The Muse*, as with Jesse Burton's successful first novel *The Miniaturist*, is something of a red herring. Although the book revolves around a writer in 1960s London and a painter in 1930s Spain, Burton focuses more on issues of authorship than inspiration: the creator, rather than the object of the creator's gaze.

The dual protagonists are women, and both shy away from public recognition, preferring to work in secret despite, we are told, their prodigious talents. As no plausible reason beyond the fact of their sex is given for their reticence, the book's central thrust feels weak and, in these times of "leaning in", outdated. Of course, this is a historical novel, and the lack of promotion given to women in the past (specifically, here, in the art world) has been well documented. But contemporary readers will find little to connect with in the portrayal of such unconvincing characters. Olive, for example – the artist in Spain – is depicted as independent-minded and daring; yet, despite her inner circle's resounding approval of her work, she hides her identity as creator of her paintings.

Burton's lightweight handling of her central theme is symptomatic of her overall tendency to touch on diverse elements – immigrant experience, radical politics, racism, first love, family mysteries, identity and the rise of Nazism, in addition to artistic authorship – but fail to explore them with any depth or insight. Instead, she offers platitudes along the lines of, "I would have preferred not to have to choose between writing and loving; because for me, they were often the same thing," or, "A piece of art only succeeds when its creator ... possesses the belief that brings it into being."

This insubstantiality corresponds with the implausible plot (about a mysterious artwork, painted by Olive, which turns up in London thirty years later, camouflaged by a series of obscured identities). Fatally, the story hinges on coincidence far more than character. Burton's dialogue, too, is flawed: not only does it vary little between the characters but, oddly, her main character in the London segment, Odelle, veers unevenly between native Trinidadian patois and ironed-out English. "Eh *heh*," she says at one point. "I busy. I work. What, because I got no husban' feet to worry me, I better go speakin' my *poetry* an' ting?" A little later, she is telling someone, "Your English is not as good as mine. It does not have the length and breadth, the meat and the smoke."

Several excellent novels in recent years have taken missing or overlooked art as their focal point: Ali Smith's *How to Be Both*, for example, and *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt. Unlike these, *The Muse* occupies a bland sort of limbo: neither well written enough to be considered literary, nor emotionally satisfying enough to become a summer blockbuster. At best, it's a demure holiday read that doesn't ask much of the reader, and gives little back in return.