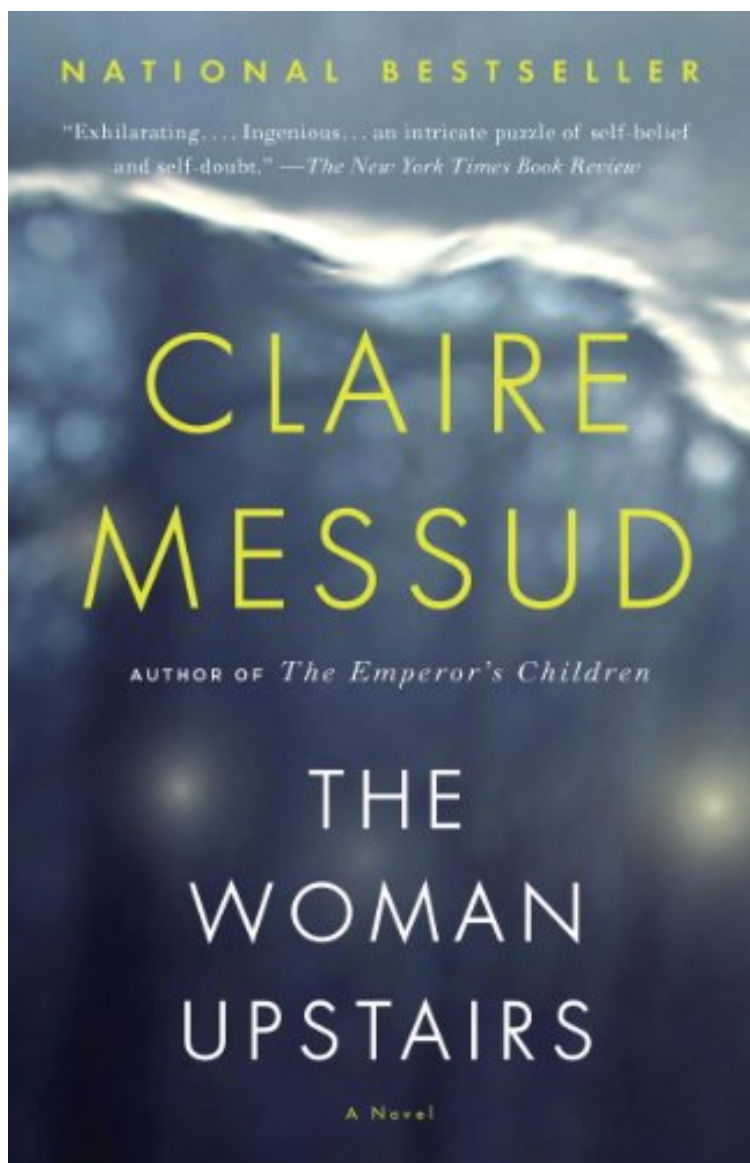


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The Woman Upstairs



Par Claire Messud
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTold with urgency, intimacy, and piercing emotion, thisNew York Timesbestselling novel is the riveting confession of a woman awakened, transformed, and abandoned by a desire for a world beyond her own.Nora Eldridge is a reliable, but unremarkable, friend and neighbor, always on the fringe of other peoples achievements. But the arrival of the Shahid familydashing Skandar, a Lebanese scholar, glamorous Sirena, an Italian artist, and their son, Rezadraws her into a complex and exciting new world. Noras happiness pushes her beyond her boundaries, until Sirenas careless ambition leads to a shattering betrayal.ANew York TimesBook Notable Book AWashington PostTop Ten Book of the Year AChicago TribuneNoteworthy Book AHuffington PostBest Book ABoston GlobeBest Book of the Year AKirkusBest

Fiction Book A Goodreads Best Book Extrait Chapter 1 How angry am I? You dont want to know. Nobody wants to know about that. Im a good girl, Im a nice girl, Im a straight- A, strait- laced, good daughter, good career girl, and I never stole anybodys boyfriend and I never ran out on a girlfriend, and I put up with my parents shit and my brothers shit, and Im not a girl anyhow, Im over forty fucking years old, and Im good at my job and Im great with kids and I held my mothers hand when she died, after four years of holding her hand while she was dying, and I speak to my father every day on the telephone every day, mind you, and what kind of weather do you have on your side of the river, because here its pretty gray and a bit muggy too?

It was supposed to say Great Artist on my tombstone, but if I died right now it would say such a good teacher/daughter/ friend instead; and what I really want to shout, and want in big letters on that grave, too, is FUCK YOU ALL. Dont all women feel the same? The only difference is how much we know we feel it, how in touch we are with our fury. Were all furies, except the ones who are too damned foolish, and my worry now is that were brainwashing them from the cradle, and in the end even the ones who are smart will be too damned foolish. What do I mean? I mean the second graders at Appleton Elementary, sometimes the first graders even, and by the time they get to my classroom, to the third grade, theyre well and truly gone theyre full of Lady Gaga and Katy Perry and French manicures and cute outfits and they care how their hair looks! In the third grade. They care more about their hair or their shoes than about galaxies or caterpillars or hieroglyphics. How did all that revolutionary talk of the seventies land us in a place where being female means playing dumb and looking good? Even worse on your tombstone than dutiful daughter is looked good; everyone used to know that. But were lost in a world of appearances now. Thats why Im so angry, really not because of all the chores and all the making nice and all the duty of being a woman or rather, of being me because maybe these are the burdens of being human. Really Im angry because Ive tried so hard to get out of the hall of mirrors, this sham and pretend of the world, or of my world, on the East Coast of the United States of America in the first decade of the twenty- first century. And behind every mirror is another fucking mirror, and down every corridor is another corridor, and the Fun House isnt fun anymore and it isnt even funny, but there doesnt seem to be a door marked EXIT. At the fair each summer when I was a kid, we visited the Fun House, with its creepy grinning plaster face, two stories high. You walked in through its mouth, between its giant teeth, along its hot-pink tongue. Just from that face, you shouldve known. It was supposed to be a lark, but it was terrifying. The floors buckled or they lurched from side to side, and the walls were crooked, and the rooms were painted to confuse perspective. Lights flashed, horns blared, in the narrow, vibrating hallways lined with fattening mirrors and elongating mirrors and inside- out upside- down mirrors. Sometimes the ceiling fell or the floor rose, or both happened at once and I thought Id be squashed like a bug. The Fun House was scarier by far than the Haunted House, not least because I was supposed to enjoy it. I just wanted to find the way out. But the doors marked EXIT led only to further crazy rooms, to endless moving corridors. There was one route through the Fun House, relentless to the very end. Ive finally come to understand that life itself is the Fun House. All you want is that door marked EXIT, the escape to a place where Real Life will be; and you can never find it. No: let me correct that. In recent years, there was a door, there were doors, and I took them and I believed in them, and I believed for a stretch that Id managed to get out into Reality and God, the bliss and terror of that, the intensity of that: it felt so different until I suddenly realized Id been stuck in the Fun House all along. Id been tricked. The door marked EXIT hadnt been an exit at all. *Revue de presse Fantasicone* of those seemingly small stories that so burst with rage and desire that they barely squeeze between hard covers. The prose is impeccable. . . . Messud writes about happiness, and about infatuation about love more convincingly than any author Ive encountered in years. She fills [her] protagonist with an inner life so rich and furious that you will never again nod hello in the hall to the woman upstairs without thinking twice. . . Is Noras entrancement erotic, or bigger and stranger than sex? Im not telling. Read the book. Lionel Shriver, National Public Radio, All Things Considered Bracing . . . not so much the story of the road not taken as that of the longed-for road that never appeared. . . . Noras anger electrifies the narrative, and Messud masterfully controls the tension and pace. In this fierce, feminist novel, the reader serves as Noras confessor, and its a pleasure to listen to someone so eloquent, whose insights about how women are valued in society and art are sharp. Jenny Shank, Dallas News An elegant winner of a novel . . . quietly, tensely unfolding . . . Remarkably, Messud lets us experience Noras betrayal as if it were our own, and what finally happens really is a punch in the stomach. Highly recommended. Barbara Hoffert, Library Journal Utterly compelling . . . Crisply illuminated. Katherine Rowland, Guernica Messud has many gifts as a novelist: She writes well, dramatizes, has a sharp ear, a literary critics knack for marshaling and reverberating themes and, most crucially, a broad and deep empathy that enables her to portray a wide range

of characters from the inside. . . . The Woman Upstairs is first-rate: It asks unsettling, unanswerable questions: How much do those who are not our family or our partners really owe us? How close can we really be to them before we start to become needy or creepy? The characters are fully alive. John Broening, The Denver Post Messud is a tremendously smart, accomplished writer, [and] Noras fury explodes from the very first sentence of The Woman Upstairs. . . . The novel gives a voiceless woman a chance to howl.

Yvonne Zipp, The Christian Science Monitor Engrossing . . . Think of her as the woman who leans out: the A student who puts others needs first, plays by the rules, teaches instead of doing. Through the ensuing drama, which includes one of the more shocking betrayals in recent fiction, Messud raises questions about womens still-circumscribed roles and the price of success. Kim Hubbard, People (A Peoples Pick) Messuds account of [Noras] search for recognition and release is as tight and vivid as Noras pent-up passion. I was pulled in. Mary Rawson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Messuds crystallization of how it feels to crash into a midlife reckoning that resonated most and haunted me in the days after finishing her mesmerizing novel. . . .

It boils and burns, and Messud gives us a double whammy to ensure we feel the pangs of midlife. . . . Messud is most interested in the collision between our inner lives and our reality. . . . While it was Messuds achingly beautiful characters that drew me in, it was her portrait of an inner life free to swell, untethered to the realities of children, a spouse and a mortgage that made me think. Seeing Nora live so obsessively in her self-made dioramas in search of joy made me find refuge. For those who live in leafy Cambridge surrounded by alluring visiting intellectuals from afar, students and Somerville artists, it must be said that there is a great writer of our times in our midst who is a nice girl, who never walked out on a friend. Just dont get her angry. Heidi Legg, The Huffington Post Clear-eyed . . . a passionate and skillful description of female ambition and women artists at work . . . Like Messud herself, Nora knows some women need to stay on fire. Britt

Peterson, The New Republic Spellbinding, psychologically acute . . . Like Emily Dickenson Noras heightened state lets her see things others miss. [Yet] how much of Noras fantasy is true and to what degree the Shahids must share the blame when its notis the real subject of Messuds novel. She may evoke [Ralph] Ellison, but as is often true with her work, the writer who comes to mind is James with his often unreliable narrators and focus on the disconnect between American innocence and European experience. . . . By novels end, Nora has every reason to be angry with the Shahids. But Messud also makes clear that if Nora is living her life upstairs rather than down on the main floor, she has even more reason to be angry with herself . . .

Exquisitely rendered. Mike Fischer, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Noras story could also be every womans story. . . . [She] is angry, but her anger rekindles her spirit and makes her alive, makes her determined to emerge from her upstairs world. Readers will root for Nora, hoping that her anger will sustain her to live an authentic, felt, and even ruthless life as the artist she has been afraid to be. A masterful, honest look at one womans desire to be seen by herself and others for who she really is. Amy Goodfellow Wagner, Examiner Riveting . . .

Messud is adept at evoking complex psychological territory, and here favors a controlled and notably unreliable style of narration. She is interested in the identities that women construct for themselves, and in the maddening chasm that often divides intensity of aspiration from reality of achievement. The New Yorker Smoldering . . . a furious account of betrayal, the true source of which is withheld until the final pages. . . . Messud crams much into her portrait of Noras life: tart meditations on the creative impulse and the artistic ego, on the interplay between reality and fantasy and the often-pitiful limits of human communication. . . . Noras world is piercingly evoked. Hephzibah Anderson, Bloomberg

Businessweek You know a Woman Upstairs; maybe you are one. . . . This is not a simple story of a sidekick woman thwarted by her own fear, and the betrayal that haunts the Shahid years explodes in a sudden, cruel flash, forcing Noras long-simmering anger to boil over into a justified rage. Messud is an immensely talented writer, and in Nora she gives us a compelling, complex, and unforgettable narrator. The Woman

Upstairs is a brilliantly paced story of fearsome love and obsessive longing, and the boundaries and sacrifices of what is to be a woman and to be an artist in the world. Amanda Bullock, Everyday eBook [A] powerful psychological thriller . . . As in a fairy tale, Nora becomes spellbound by a family that seems to embody what she is missing. The power of self-deception is one of the key themes. . . . This is not just a novel of real psychological insight. It is also a supremely well-crafted page-turner with a shocker of an ending. Julia M. Klein, The Boston Globe Thrums with fury . . . Startling: a psychological and intellectual thriller. Los Angeles Times Tightly focused and intensely first-person . . . Nora storms onto the page in a fury to tell us the story of a few months that changed her life. . . . The stage is set for a terrible betrayal, and the ending delivers it. The writing in this book is on fire, and the connections it makes a Chekhov short story, a Larkin poem, Alice in Wonderland pop like intellectual fireworks from the page. Marion Winik, Newsday

Hypnotic. In Nora, Messud has conjured a self-contradictory yet acutely familiar character; we've all met someone like her, if we aren't like her ourselves. . . . An air of imminent betrayal hangs over the novel. Yet even as she describes the emotional circles of her obsession, Nora does not become monstrous or pathological or even (like Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*) absurd. This, in a way, is her tragedy. Deliverance when it does come takes the most unlikely form. Like Ibsen's Nora, Messud's walks offstage in a moment of pure potential. What will she do? I can't begin to imagine, and that, surely, is the point. Laura Miller, *Salon* A rare work of fiction seemingly destined to become a cultural benchmark, a byword even. It provides an indelible label for a member of society (and a long recurring figure in literature) who has somehow been confined to anonymity. Messud's coinage the *Woman Upstairs* is so broadly defining and so necessary that even those who never read the novel may soon find themselves making unwitting use of it. . . . [Nora's] narration hisses with rage for her hypocritical, accommodating former self and for anyone who has ever taken advantage of her. . . . Once Nora is well lost in love, the author takes us steadily, suspensefully, heartbreakingly toward a jolting conclusion [and] a breathtaking act of betrayal. . . . The *Woman Upstairs* is a trenchant exploration into the mercenary nature of artistic creation. . . . [It] updates the dictum of Virginia Woolf's manifesto: It's not only a little money and a room of one's own that women need to produce art; it's a willingness to use and manipulate other people; it's a capacity for cruelty. . . . Messud's strongest influence here is Philip Roth. [She] seems to have drawn from [his] outrageous exfoliations of ferocity and contempt in fashioning Nora's voice. [But] of course, Messud's unsparingly frank narration comes from a woman, which makes the novel a kind of rejoinder to Roth's decidedly male-centric universe. . . . The *Woman Upstairs* is unquestionably a breakthrough for the writer. It forces itself on you, demands your attention, impresses and irritates. There is a genuine sense of unease in these pages, of something solid being overturned by the sheer force of Nora's rage. . . . Causing a disturbance is the point. It is an altogether impolitic piece of artistry. It is a big, defiant gesture of the sort that women like Nora fear they no longer have within them. Sam Sacks, *The Wall Street Journal* Every new Claire Messud novel is a reason to rejoice. . . . Her prose is so exquisite and immersive that it can make you forget that you're sitting at home with a book in your hands. . . . [Nora's] plight elicits empathy, and her palpable disappointment resounds in every sentence. . . . While *The Woman Upstairs* is set in our all-too-real world, something about Messud's fiction is reminiscent of filmmaker Wes Anderson's imaginary wonderlands. Maybe it's the sheen of technical perfection and old-fashioned dedication to craft. . . . Colorful and fascinating, . . . Nora Eldridge has to be one of the richest and most fully human characters to come along in years. . . . Messud writes with the patience of a saint and that she does so without telegraphing what is to come makes her worthy of serious veneration. The pinnacle of this slow-burning plot comes across as simultaneously shocking and inevitable. . . . These characters and their problems are inseparable from the political and social upheaval around them. The prose here never calls undue attention to itself, and *The Woman Upstairs* dazzles without outwardly trying. It also solidifies Messud's place among our greatest contemporary writers. Andrew Ervin, *The Miami Herald* Intimate . . . Messud's cosmopolitan sensibilities infuse her fiction with a refreshing cultural fluidity. . . . The *Woman Upstairs* opens with extraordinary heat and momentum . . . [and] brims with energy and ideas. . . . A suspenseful psychological thriller . . . Brilliant. Jane Ciabattari, *NPR* Exhilarating . . . Messud's previous novels, extraordinarily intelligent and well-crafted, are characterized by rationed or distant emotion. [But] *The Woman Upstairs* is utterly different; its language urgent, its conflicts outsize and unmooring, its mood incendiary. This psychologically charged story feels like a liberation. Messud's prose grabs the reader by the collar . . . Reading Nora's turbulent testament of belief and betrayal, you feel less like a spectator than a witness. . . . In this ingenious, disquieting novel, Messud has assembled an intricate puzzle of self-belief and self-doubt, showing the peril of seeking your own image in someone else's distorted mirror or even, sometimes, in your own. Liesl Schillinger, *The New York Times* Book From its opening lines, Messud's new novel grips like a choke hold. . . . The most unlikely hero, Nora, self-identifies with scornful wit and rage as the titular *Woman Upstairs*. But oh how Messud, whose last novel was the sharp and brilliant *The Emperor's Children*, gives her woman room to roar. . . . Sirena awakens in her an unapologetic lust of life that Nora was previously too good or too scared to claim. The narrative burns toward an inevitable betrayal of startling proportions, one that instead of diminishing Nora lights her ablaze. This is a book sweating with rage, and an exhilarating one. Read it in an openmouthed gulp. After the final powerful paragraphs, in which Nora howls in galvanized fury, throw it down and have a drink, or a dreamless nap. Don't be surprised if you then pick it back up and start all over again. A Karen Valby, *Entertainment Weekly* In the ongoing debate over whether or not women can have it all comes a Molotov cocktail thrown by an unlikely provocateur: Claire Messud

new novel . . . of friendship and betrayal . . . [which] posits that the natural state of womanhood, at least after age 40, is to have nothing, and that satisfaction of any sort can come only via self-deception. . . . Im not crazy, Nora declares at the beginning of the novel. Angry yes, crazy no. In Sirena self-possessed, artistically fulfilled, a mother, foreign, Nora has found the proof that she need not view herself as a woman society has rejected, an archetypal Woman Upstairs with her cats and pots of tea and her goddamn Garnet Hill catalog. The Woman Upstairs avoids moral judgment. [It is] simultaneously a justification for extreme acts in the name of friendship, and Noras rallying cry for women like her to rage against the world that has been handed to them. . . . Nora is both sympathetic and horrific. She is at once raising a voice to deep-seated misogyny against aging women, and confirming every bias. Messuds ability to find the frailty, even the artist, in Nora, makes Sirena more complex as well. For all her perfection, Sirenas rebukes seem, somehow, unconscionably depraved. . . . The novel offers no comfort in the end; it is, at last, the story of a woman for whom reality and a rich fantasy life have merged. Daniel DAddario, New York Observer

For practical advice about how women can thrive and control their destinies, check out Lean In by Facebooks ever-gracious COO, Sheryl Sandberg. But maybe after a hard day of believing in yourself, you just want to luxuriate in a fire of cleansing rage. Go ahead: Push the billionaires affirmations aside and listen instead to the she-devil in Claire Messuds ferocious new novel. Lean in shell singe your eyebrows off. [Nora] may [have] rage, but its fantastically smart rageanger that never distorts, even in the upper registers. When Nora complains about women like herself who dutifully tuck themselves away, she ricochets from Charlotte Bronte to Jean Rhys to Henry David Thoreau to Ralph Ellison. Wherever she digs, she hits rich veins of indignation. [This is] a tightly wound monologue with the intensity of a novella that reads more like a curse. . . . Anger provides the heat, but the novels real energy comes from its intellectual fuel, its all-consuming analytical drive . . . Noras self-knowledge keeps the reader off-balance. . . . Even as that psychological drama races toward a dark climax, Nora seduces us with her piercing assessment of the way young women are acculturated, the way older women are trapped. It doesnt matter if youre a man or a woman: Its hard not to feel your own anxieties and fragile hopes being flayed by these braided strands of confession and blame. Lean in. I dare you. Ron Charles, The Washington Post

Messud knows how to make fiction out of the clash of civilizations. Her heroines . . . inhabit the inky space between continents, physical and generational. Survivors to the core, they cling to the ledge even as their worlds are upended. . . . Messuds writing shows a growing mastery of mood. Comedy, pathos, sadness: nothing seems beyond her. Her new book has all this and more. Noras dormant rage, which her mother warned would one day awaken, drives her on and on. The Woman Upstairs is not a pretty read, but that is precisely what makes it so hard to put down. The Economist

Terrifyingly perceptive . . . The Emperors Children is a quite good novel, [but] The Woman Upstairs does far more with a smaller cast [and] has much greater weight. Messud wants to make a point that even successful people can suffer from a lethal celebrity complex. Nora Eldridge is a kind of Madame Bovary for our time, someone who dreams not of romantic passion but of personal fame, in which the envy of the less fortunate figures importantly. . . . Nora is like Emma Bovary in the conviction that she needs the love of glamorous and important individuals to give her life meaning. . . . One particular triumph of The Woman Upstairs is that Messuds heroine is so sympathetic, and so eloquent and convincing, that the depth of her illusions is not always apparent. . . . Because Messud has lent Nora her own outstanding gifts as a writer we cannot help believing what she tells us, at least for a while. Alison Lurie, The New York Times

The new novel by the author of The Emperors Children is like Gone Girl meets The Bell Jar: A lonely teachers fixation on a students family slowly drives her insane. Messuds magic power? Keeping her flawed protagonist relatable to the very end. Megan Angelo, Glamour

In this literary page-turner, a Boston teacher with dreams of becoming an artist is first enamored of, and then feels betrayed by, a seductive couple whove relocated from Paris. Abbe Wright, O, The Oprah Magazine

Almost without knowing it, I was hungry for Nora Eldridge, the hero of Messuds new novel. The title names an archetype: the nice, unmarried lady on the third floor who smiles in the lobby and is quickly forgotten. Nora is a caring schoolteacher seemingly content to look after her ailing father, her dreams of living the life of an artist subsumed by the act of simply living a life. Bitterly funny and self-aware, she claims to be having a Lucy Jordan moment, name-checking the Marianne Faithfull song . . . It seems right that Messuds follow-up to The Emperors Children grasps furiously at life and punches back at encroaching age. In The Woman Upstairs, she abandons the polyphonic narration of the previous novel for first-person carpe diem prose that is leaner and meaner. . . . Nora [is] exhilarating, a fiery heroine who arrives to serve [both] middle-aged readers, and the young women who will soon see what its like when the spotlight swings away, urging us to make the most of that time between here and the finish

line. Katrina Onstad, Toronto Life Corrosively funny . . . Fifty years ago, Simone de Beauvoir faulted creative women for their unwillingness to dare to irritate, explore, explode. Two generations later, anger this combustible still feels refreshing. Megan OGrady, Vogue Heartfelt and profound. . . . From the outset, it's been clear that Claire Messud has all the necessary equipment: a fertile imagination, a grown-up sensibility, and writerly ambition in spades to write very good fiction, perhaps even a novel that defined our times. Her latest novel is an absolute page-turner, from its grab-you-by-the-collar opening to its final rumination on the creative uses of anger. . . . For another, it may well be the first truly feminist (in the best, least didactic sense) novel I have read in ages: the novel, candid about sex and the intricacies of female desire, that Virginia Woolf hoped someone would write, given a room and income of her own. *The Woman Upstairs* takes on, at full throttle, the ways in which women are socialized into being accommodating nice girls, and the ruthlessness that is necessary to pursue artistic ambition. It shows Messud at the height of her considerable powers, articulating the quandary of being alive and sentient, covetous and confused in the twenty-first century. . . . *The Woman Upstairs* is an extraordinary novel, a psychological suspense story of the highest sort that will leave you thinking about its implications for days afterward. Messud's skills are all on display here, [in] a work of fiction that is not just beautifully observed but also palpably inhabited by its gifted writer in a manner she has not quite dared attempt before. Daphne Merkin, Bookforum With exhilarating velocity, fury, and wit, the superlative Messud immolates an iconic figure: the good, quiet, self-sacrificing woman in this acid bath of a novel, while taking on the vicissitudes of family life and the paradoxes of art. Nora [is] our archly funny, venomous, and raging narrator. . . . Messud's scorching social anatomy, red-hot psychology, galvanizing story, and incandescent language make for an all-circuits-firing novel about enthrallment, ambition, envy, and betrayal. A tour de force portraying a no longer invisible or silent woman upstairs. Donna Seaman, Booklist (starred review) Claire Messud's daring, Jamesian new novel takes so many chances and provokes so many questions. . . . Messud is a truth teller about the ruthlessness of art [and] makes a key point about creative work: It means smashing boundaries, using imagination to remake the world. . . . Messud is such a gifted painter of our choices and their consequences. She's never gone this deep before in showing us how our reality and our pipe dreams intersect. Her portrait of Nora Eldridge, a decent woman who has perhaps crossed the wrong bridges in her life, would move stone. What's going to become of Nora? What will the Shahids do to her? *The Woman Upstairs* is Claire Messud's greatest novel. Dennis Haritou, Three Guys One Book A self-described good girl lifts her mask in Messud's new novel. How angry am I? Nora Eldridge rhetorically asks in her opening sentence. You don't want to know. Nora is furious with herself: for failing to commit to being an artist, for settling for life as a third-grade teacher, for lacking the guts even to be openly enraged. Instead she is the woman upstairs, whose trash is always tidy, who smiles brightly in the stairwell. So when the exotic Shahid family enters her life, Nora sees them as saviors. Reza is in her class; after another student attacks and calls the half-Lebanese boy a terrorist, she meets his Italian mother, Sirena, the kind of bold, assertive artist Nora longs to be. . . . Nora's untrustworthy narration, a feminine counterpoint to the rantings of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, is an astonishing feat of creative imagination: at once self-lacerating and self-pitying, containing enough truth to induce squirms. Messud persuasively plunges us into the tortured psyche of a conflicted soul. . . . Brilliant and terrifying.

Kirkus (starred review) From the Hardcover edition.