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REVIEW

Book Review: *Alias Olympia* - A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model & Her Own Desire by Eunice Lipton

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In [French Seduction](#), art historian Eunice Lipton explores her sensual obsession with France, the pool of memory and the way that obsession is fused to a contradictory history of her childhood and her connection to the Holocaust. Before that, Lipton authored a biography of Degas and in *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model & Her Own Desire*, she attempts to cast light on a pivotal, but now obscure figure in the Impressionist movement.

Victorine Meurent was the model for Manet's notorious painting, *Olympia*. In it, Manet re-stages that ancient pose of the odalisque. However, Victorine appears in the painting as bold, sexually aware and powerful. This caused an outrage in Paris at the time, and sadly, is still the reaction a sexually self-aware woman receives in present time. I stumbled upon this book, looking for more role-models, fodder, inspiration, other lifelines.

I was glad this book found me. The story is so much more than the telling of an artistic controversy. Meurent was an artist, a brilliant one in her own right. She and her work were buried in a barrage of lies as result of her posing for Manet.

The popular story about Meurent was that she had descended into prostitution, drunkenness and despair. Not so different than the double-standard of scrutiny and criticism that women who push the barriers, especially barriers of the body and sexuality, continue to face. There still is a threat, albeit more sub-rosa perhaps, that in claiming one's full physical and sexual power, a woman leaves herself open to the psychic version of public stoning for her 'lewd' behavior.

While Meurent did know despair, it was one born out of a career thwarted, and a reputation slandered. She lived a 'comfortable' life as bourgeois wife, but not one in which she could move freely, express her ideas or create within the confines of women's roles at the time. Lipton wrote the book in a narrative style, so that it reads and moves like a novel. No stuff of fiction here, but the complex and brilliant story of a women who dared conventions, and was meted out the punishment of a gilded, dulled existence and obscurity as a result.

I was struck with how women are still offered the choice of 'comfort' vs. authenticity, with the implied message that an authentic will surely be the more painful one, the one with the greatest social and emotional costs. To the extent that this blackmail is still being played out, Lipton's book is a sadly cautionary tale.

[Lisa Alvarado](#) is a poet, novelist, and performance artist. She is the author of *The Housekeeper's Diary*, a chapbook based on her work as a domestic, and *Reclamo*. Her first novel, [Sister Chicas](#)—was released in 2006 by NAL/Penguin Books. In 2007, *Sister Chicas* was the 2nd place winner of the Mariposa/International Latino Book Award, for Best 1st Novel in English. She also shares her views and literary criticism on La Bloga. [Drop her a line](#) if you are an author or editor that wants your book reviewed, or if you just want to chat about what you've read.

Comments

#1 — June 11, 2007 @ 01:31AM — Gordon Hauptfleisch [\[URL\]](#)

Serendipitous match-up of book and reviewer. Nice work, Lisa.

#2 — June 11, 2007 @ 11:47AM — bliffle

Excellent review. Thank you.

#3 — June 11, 2007 @ 19:35PM — Natalie Bennett [\[URL\]](#)

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