



Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life

Claire Tomalin

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Katherine Mansfield is the celebrated biography by bestselling author Claire Tomalin 'One of the best biographies I have ever read: a perfect match of author and subject. It should become a classic' Alison Lurie Pursuing art and adventure across Europe, Katherine Mansfield lived and wrote with the Furies on her heels; but when she died aged only thirty-four she became one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. Sexually ambiguous, craving love yet quarrelsome and capricious, she glittered in the brilliant circles of D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, her beauty and recklessness inspiring admiration, jealousy, rage and devotion. Claire Tomalin's biography brings us nearer than we have ever been to this courageous, greatly gifted, haunted and haunting writer. 'Generous, dispassionate, even-handed, setting out probably as plainly as anyone ever will Katherine's high hopes, the odds she faced and the impossible obstacles that ditched her in the end' Hilary Spurling, Daily Telegraph 'Provides the finest and most subtly shaded portrait so far' John Gross, New York Times From the acclaimed author of Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self, Charles Dickens: A Life and The Invisible Woman, this virtuoso biography is invaluable reading for lovers of Katherine Mansfield everywhere. Claire Tomalin is the award-winning author of eight highly acclaimed biographies, including: The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft; Shelley and His World; Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life; The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens; Mrs Jordan's Profession; Jane Austen: A Life; Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self; Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man and, most recently, Charles Dickens: A Life. A former literary editor of the New Statesman and the Sunday Times, she is married to the playwright and novelist Michael Frayn.

Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life Details

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From Reader Review Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life for online ebook

Petra says

Katherine Mansfield has always interested me ever since I heard that Virginia Woolf envied her way of writing. This biography is interesting and very easy to read, describing Katherine and people around her. For some reason, I was really annoyed to hear so much talk of her second husband, and would have wished to hear more of Katherine's side.

Sarah says

punches Claire Tomalin in the face

So maybe there's no pleasing me...

But why must *every* biography of *every* woman be the *same* biography?: *She was promiscuous/prudish/feminist/not feminist enough. The end.*

And then she criticizes the writing! *pfff*

Matthew Davidson says

In my opinion, Claire Tomalin's biographies set the standard by which all others in the field may be judged. In many of her books, she will start off with a touching or dramatic scene from an important moment in the subject's life and then discuss why the moment was important. Her occasional "novel-like" approach is matched by a meticulous attention to detail and research - which is usually very carefully detailed at the end so that, if one wished to, it would be possible to come to many of the same conclusions.

This biography is no exception. Shorter than some of her others, it is nonetheless filled with very intense descriptions of Katherine Mansfield's life. I suspected Mansfield was not a particularly pleasant person, but one can't judge an artist by their social behaviour. In my opinion, Mansfield was one of the great short story writers of all time, along with Somerset-Maugham and de Maupassant.

What is extremely interesting is that the reason for her talent and expertise was that she was one of the very first English-speakers to encounter Chekhov's short stories - AND - that she (arguably) plagiarized one of them! Despite this questionable action, a great many of her other stories remain some of the best ever written.

In my opinion, this is an engaging and fascinating book about one of the world's most under-rated and lesser known authors who deserves a far greater audience than she has currently. I am very grateful to Ms. Tomalin for giving us such a fine and well-written book to cast a greater light on this wonderful New Zealand writer.

Mr Jeremy C Allan-Smith says

Biographical brilliance!

Tomalin claims in the foreword that, as a woman 'fighting her way through two fronts', she has a special sympathy for Mansfield. As a female biographer, she feels that some of her subject's 'actions and attitudes' are 'less baffling than for even the most understanding of men.' It's an unusually crass perception in a biography that reveals the the most meticulously-researched details of a torn and fraught existence. It also drives Mansfield into arcane space, needing, we assume as readers, a rarefied level of sensitivity to appreciate it. For men reading this biography, the battle lines are thus drawn!

Tomalin identifies conflicted veins of thought and behaviour in every phase of Mansfield's life. "Intimacy," she writes, "was established with a mixture of wheedling and lying."

D.H.Lawrence goes further and strikes gold in his portrait of Gudrun (Katherine Mansfield) in 'Women in Love': "Once inside the house of her soul, there was a pungent atmosphere of corrosion, an inflamed darkness of sensation, and a vivid, subtle critical consciousness that saw the world distorted, horrific." The reader, male or female (!), gets close to Mansfield here and the strange liminal space she occupied as a short-story writer. She was seduced by the very things she found most alienating and grotesque, and what emerges is dry, comic pathos at every point as she edges around her colonels, aunts and betrayed lovers, scratching out her pen-portraits with the exquisite skill of a miniaturist. Tomalin brings this hideous brilliance to life in her biography by focusing on the no-holds-barred description of the gonorrhoea that ravaged Mansfield's body after her 1908 encounter with Floryan Sobieniowski, her Polish evil genius. Her debilitating illnesses give her writing a disengaged, glacial feel and she is likened to a bird, descending into the ugly melée of human relations, giving them some neat parodic pecks before flying off again. Tomalin brings this out as pure Mansfield, most 'austere and caustic' towards those she most loves - especially towards Ida, her slavishly loyal idolater - drip-feeding the most loving and the most loathsome character sketches simultaneously. Tomalin echoes this perplexing ambivalence in her own writing, bewitched and bewildered by turns. This biography will haunt my memory for a long time.

Rita says

1987

I enjoyed this book!

Tomalin certainly knows how to write a biography! I look forward to reading others she has written.

Mansfield [New Zealand 1888--1923] was a troubled person and I felt sorry for her through much of the book, while at the same time her endless manipulation of people and restless moving from here to there grated on my nerves. In the middle of the book I even felt I just did not want to know the details of each of her moves, preceded by pleading with whoever might offer her lodging or pay for it, and then her almost immediately expressed dissatisfaction with whatever place she had gone to.

How miserable to have had such very poor health during her adult years [gonorrhoea, and this probably accounts for the restlessness and dissatisfaction [but not the manipulation]].

Tomalin devotes quite a lot of space to DH Lawrence and his [and his wife's] relations with Mansfield. He does seem to have understood her quite well. Same is true of Virginia Woolf.

"Katherine and Virginia admired in one another their professional dedication to writing. Both felt themselves to be writers first and foremost; everything else -- their lives as women, social life, even success, although both craved it -- was of lesser importance; and both took reviewing seriously as a corollary to their main work. Katherine praised the beauty of Virginia's prose, and was conscious of her range of knowledge.. What she found lacking was immediacy, the thing she strove for in her own writing, and true human feeling. Katherine once said Virginia seized on beauty as though she were a bird rather than a person. It is a perceptive remark, for there is often a sense of remoteness about Virginia's observation.

...Both writers were intensely interested in the ambivalences of family life and feeling between men and women, parents and children....The immediacy of Katherine's writing, her ability to be there and make the reader be there alongside, made its impression on Virginia. *Jacob's Room*, her third novel [published after Katherine's death], suggests that she had studied her friend's technique. Compared with "Night and Day", it is overwhelming in its immediacy.

...Both Virginia and Katherine made the fragility of feeling, of happiness and life itself, into their subject; both felt a degree of antagonism for the male world of action [and for male sexuality]; both turned to their childhoods and their dead to nourish their imaginations.

....Yet they remain very distinct. Virginia's writing is always reflective. Her people inhabit a world of social, cultural and historical connections; her houses and landscapes are rich in historical associations too.

Katherine's characters often seem to inhabit a void; she excels 'in expressing a child's sense of things'.

...Katherine's characters are equipped with nothing more than charm or absurdity or pathos....They may strike us as both pungently alive and vulnerable. Katherine often gives them broadly comic speech or thought patterns, whereas almost all Virginia's characters speak and think in well-formed sentences." p 201

"Virginia knew that Katherine was a liar and a flatterer."

"Virginia, like Lawrence, was devoid of sentimentality, so that, while her criticism is sharp, her love and praise ring with authority. Her Katherine, tricky and treacherous, utterly dedicated to the craft of writing although her stamina is broken by illness, seeking love and approval, but not so cravenly that she will write a false review, fascinating and inscrutable, fits remarkably well with everything that has been revealed about her since." 205

pp202-204 have two long beautiful quotes from Virginia's diary about Katherine, just a week after her death.

Although I won't reread the book, I feel I can't give it away but want to keep it as reference! [Time now to read some of Mansfield's stories, which I believe I have hardly done before!]

Kari says

Career biographers make me suspicious. Just how much investment do they truly have in their work, in doing justice to their subject, being fair and researching it well without relying on previous works from others? In its basic sense this book did what I expected it to do - it was a biography charting the life of Katherine Mansfield. On that level it was interesting as I am interested in Mansfield. The style of writing though was frustrating and at times just plain bad. The best way to explain would be to pose the question is iller a word? Tomalin uses it and this surely speaks volumes about her writing! Also, and what infuriates me more than anything, is when a biographer believes that their views and judgements on a person are somehow made universal by the mere fact of writing a biography on said person. Nearly all the time Tomalin was critical and negative in her views. One example would be her calling Mansfield's actions "grotesque" when she got across into a war torn France to meet a lover. Reckless yes, but grotesque is a slight exaggeration and personal feelings should surely never be expressed to that degree. I do not want her opinion. Even if it had been positive, I would not want it. Biographers should show balance and let the subject speak for him/herself. The biographer sets down the story and surely it is for the reader to make a judgement if they even feel the need to. Tomalin feels herself qualified enough to pass literary criticism on Mansfield also. It seems for Tomalin her work was at its best when she is in pain, suffering from fever and basically slowly

dying. I have read some amazing biographies and some average biographies in my reading life but none had the personal voice of the biographer pervade the story in quite the way this one did. It jarred the flow and was an unwelcome noise - I wanted to hear Mansfield's voice not Tomalin's.

Octavia Cade says

A really very interesting biography of Katherine Mansfield - certainly *far* more enjoyable than the Journal by KM that I slogged through a few weeks back. It left me with a very clear picture of Mansfield's personality, which is one of the things I want most from a bio so thumbs up there.

Tomalin is chatty and opinionated in her discussion of Mansfield's life, and she doesn't flinch from her subject's more negative characteristics and behaviour. As a reader, this makes any biography far more enjoyable - reading about a paragon can be so tiresome! Mansfield is very far from a paragon - but she is interesting to read about. Recommended.

Elaine says

It is time someone wrote another biography of KM. Claire Tomalin evidently had trouble writing this one. It doesn't seem that she liked her subject or that she had much regard for Mansfield's talent and modernist writings. Through the book there is very little on KM's innovations. Tomalin doesn't even bring in KM's stories until one third of the way through.

KM is undoubtedly a difficult subject. As a child she was different, and as a young woman she may have been impossible, at least from her middle-class family's perspective. This may have been why they allowed her to return to London on her own.

It seems that KM had strong lesbian feelings and wanted to fashion her life after Oscar Wilde, but before long she learned how untenable that position was for a young woman. In the end it seems that she denied her lesbianism and tried to live the straight life. Not a happy one either.

The bio was published in 1987. Things have changed. We need an update, without the internalized misogyny and homophobia.

Terry says

You know, I'm really starting to feel bad for Katherine Mansfield.

I wasn't crazy about the Anthony Alpers biography--it was incredibly detailed, which was either nice (if you're that curious) or exhausting (I'm not sure if all of his sources were trustworthy and so to quote from them so extensively was questionable, to me). But his tone was rather, well, nasty, I thought--quite judgmental.

Tomalin's biography is significantly more "readable"--she breezes through what Alpers gets bogged down in--so if you're trying to decide between the two, there's that. However, Tomalin ALSO seems quite judgmental

of Mansfield--I mean, she calls Mansfield some variation of "fat" at least half a dozen times before page 30! If this aspect of Mansfield was at all actually accurate (debatable) AND somehow MEANINGFUL to Mansfield's life and/or work--that's one thing. But no; Tomalin makes no case for that. She just wants us really to know that KATHERINE MANSFIELD WAS FAT (again--debatable. I mean, Tomalin comments on a photo of Mansfield that her skirt was "visibly straining" and I just did not see it.).

And similar to Alpers, there seems to be some sort of "tsk tsk, look what you brought upon yourself through your sluttish ways" attitude from Tomalin. Clearly Mansfield's health problems sent out poisonous tentacles to all areas of her life. While it seems Tomalin has made a discovery of the true root of Mansfield's illnesses, her attitude toward it seems...mean spirited. Is it really so shocking that a woman had sex? More than once? With more than one man in her life? And maybe got accidentally pregnant in a time of not a whole lot of birth control available to unmarried women? Is all of that so worth frowning upon?

As with Alpers' biography, my reaction is deeper sympathy for a woman who seemed restlessly intelligent and relentlessly driven to live a certain kind of free and creative life. She seemed beaten up enough by her family and society and gendered behavior/expectations and finance-based constraints. Do her biographers need to shit on her too?

Rachael says

I thought Tomalin gathered together the information about Mansfield's life in a fairly interesting way, particularly her relationship with DH Lawrence and travels around Europe. However, reading a biography written by someone who doesn't appear to have much authorial empathy (this doesn't mean she has to like her) or a sense of wanting to explore the complex inner life of their subject can make for occasionally tedious reading.

I thought Tomalin's narration was often priggish and wanting to keep Mansfield at arm's length which doesn't make for the most engaging of biographies.

When I was reading this book, I kept contrasting it to Hermione Lee's biography of Virginia Woolf that really revels in the complexity of Woolf and is fascinating as a result.

Helen Stanton says

An engaging account of a fascinating and tragic writer. Well researched but written with a light touch .

Ruth says

The writing is some of Claire Tomlin's best. She fills you in on historical details, and other major players we would know of.

Katherine was a pretty horrible person. She had a wealthy upbringing in Australia, then emigrated to London in her early twenties. She managed to ingratiate herself to the extent that she had friends in the publication biz, but she had no talent whatever for friendship. When she was on a tear about some imagined slight anyone was grist for her mill. And, as Tomlin mentions early on, she was a liar. She lied constantly. Her most faithful companion, Ida, she would bring back into her life at times when she needed help.

Otherwise, Ida was persona non grata. I could not see that Katherine had any redeeming qualities. She was lucky to have made some Bloomsbury group people, and that was her entrée into many homes, homes whose occupants she would later denigrate.

I would not read this book again. Katherine was a very minor short story writer; I remember liking the stories. Now, I'm not so sure.

Paul Bryant says

Katherine Mansfield was many things and from where I am sitting not that many of them were particularly likeable. Really and truly, in fact, I would go a little bit further and say that she seemed like a fairly nasty piece of work, but you're really not allowed to say that about someone who got TB at the age of 28 and died of it aged 34 after six years of horrible suffering. It just seems tacky. So please ignore that.

She was born with a silver spoon in her gob, the podgy one of three sisters and a brother, in the remotest part of the civilised world which was Wellington, New Zealand, in 1888, where they were trying like crazy to be more English than the English. As soon as she could formulate the phrase "sod this for a game of soldiers" she had formed the ambition of escaping both New Zealand and her family (but if possible not its wealth). So when they took another of their frequent trips to London, she bailed out at the age of 19, and she lived with her devoted friend Ida with a mere £100 annual allowance from daddy, which equates to around £12,000 in today's money, so not a princessly sum, in fact approximately what a pensioner receives from the government in modern Britain.

Cue Noel Coward who sums up the next phase pretty good:

*Poor little rich girl, you're a bewitched girl, better take care
Laughing at danger, virtue a stranger, better beware
The life you lead sets all your nerves a-jangle
Your love affairs are in a hopeless tangle
Though you're a child, dear, your life's a wild typhoon*

It did not take young Katherine five minutes to figure out where she wanted to be : Bohemia. And it worked. She was something of a social wizard, but she was brittle and had major highs and lows. As I was reading old songs kept popping into my mind

*She's pretty as a daisy
But look out man, she's crazy
She'll really do you in
If you let her get under your skin*

*You're gonna need an ocean
Of calamine lotion
You'll be scratching like a hound
The minute you start to mess around*

That could have been Mark Gertler quoting the Coasters in 1909, a little presciently. Or this could be Bertrand Russell a couple of years later:

*You're trying to make your mark in society
Your using all the tricks that you used on me.*

*You're reading all them high fashion magazines
The clothes you're wearin' girl are causing public scenes!*

But that doesn't sound like the stately tone usually adopted by the master of philosophy. After she became big friends with DH Lawrence though it's easy for me to imagine him denouncing her in these terms:

*Well, it seems to me that you have seen too much in too few years
And though you've tried you just can't hide your eyes are edged with tears
You better stop, look around
Here it comes, here it comes, here it comes, here it comes
Here comes your nineteenth nervous breakdown*

(What he actually wrote to her at one point was:

You are a loathsome reptile - I hope you will die.)

So she was liked and disliked pretty strongly by everyone who was anyone in the 1910s. Dora Carrington said:

An extraordinary woman, , witty and courageous, very much an adventuress with the language of a fish-wife in Wapping

And Virginia Woolf said her manner was

Unpleasant but forcible and utterly unscrupulous

The boho circle KM eagerly glommed onto was populated by wannabes of all types, but sometimes she would come across an already-is like Gilbert Cannan, whose accomplishments would make anyone feel very tired:

Fair-haired, handsome, pipe-smoking, dog at heel, the very model of the successful young man of letters. At twenty-eight he had already published several novels, and was translating Romain Rolland's ten volume novel Jean Christophe as it appeared; several of his plays, mostly dealing with such social problems as alcoholism, had been produced in the West End... Lecturing and reviewing in national papers came easily to him

(Well, don't hate him too much, because he developed schizophrenia and was in mental hospitals from the age of 40.)

One of the main things about the life of KM is that she was never in one place more than five minutes before she got sick of it and wanted to move, usually to some other country. So you get sentences like this :

She returned to France for the third time in as many months

And it also means that around 25% of this biography is like an estate agent's brochure

A two-room flat in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, with a view over the river and decorative touches such as a human skull used as a candle holder

Or

A small house in the village of Runcton, set in the salt-marsh land between Chichester and Selsey, with a walled garden and trees

She had such an obsession with going to the place she had just thought of that even the First World War didn't stop her taking various holidays and breaks or whatever they were in the south of France. She would be moaning about the lack of a darning-woman and the absence of artichokes while thousands were dying a few hundred miles to the north.

When she knew she had TB she still madly plunged on :

They went to the Hotel Select in the place de la Sorbonne, taking rooms at the very top. Apart from the obvious folly of a lung-damaged person having six flights of stairs to deal with, they were in some danger from the German shells

She had a strange relationship with her long term partner and eventual husband John Murry. In 1918 she wrote

He ought not to have married. There never was a creature less fitted by nature for life with a woman.

Claire Tomalin says that they were bad for each other, misunderstood each other, but couldn't get rid of each other. After she died they said he boiled her bones to make his soup. Meaning that he became chief priest of the KM cult, proclaiming her genius and publishing many books by and about her.

KM was a central cog in an intricate literary scene but after getting together with John Murry their joint BFFs were DH Lawrence and his eventual wife Frieda. So we get wonderful moments such as that in 1914 when they all gather round to read the first review of *The Rainbow* which had taken Lawrence three years to write. It said *The Rainbow* was

Windy, tedious, boring and nauseating

It's hard to disagree with that!

This is a solid biography of a very odd figure. I thought she was going to be some kind of radical bisexual scandalising all who beheld her but that wasn't the case. She was an entitled egomaniac with a dread disease who wrote brilliant stories and who had two dogged faithful-unto-death self-flagellating slaves, her husband and her craven DUFF Ida who followed her everywhere and did everything for her (sew me some underwear, get me some fresh peonies, peel me a grape; now I am tired of you, go away). I guess none of that matters though. Or does it? If it didn't there wouldn't be any biographies like this.

Melanie says

That I love the work of Katherine Mansfield probably is apparent from the way I've rattled on in this blog. How I wish for a new biography of this doomed and brilliant miniaturist! In the meantime, I recommend this 1987 work by Claire Tomalin.

Tomalin can always be counted on for clarity and an unbiased rendition of a life. In the case of Katherine Mansfield, both must have been difficult. Not only did Mansfield try on various personae and artistic identities, not only did she hide and lie about some of her past - she even changed her name several times, finally alighting on the name we know today.

She was, for her times, more sexually adventurous than many. Her early lovers may have included women. Some of the physical suffering she endured before her death from tuberculosis may have been the result of an STD she contracted, relatively early in her life.

Even as her strength ebbed, she flung herself into her art and the artistic life, socializing with such luminaries as Lady Ottoline, Virginia Woolf, and Aldous Huxley. She and her odious husband lived with the volatile D.H. Lawrence and Frieda Lawrence for a tumultuous period. (Lawrence later based two characters in *Women in Love* on Mansfield and Lady Ottoline.) Her stories, crystalline and (sometimes) bitter, caught the attention of Virginia Woolf, who considered Mansfield her only true literary threat.

Mansfield's death in the enclave of the mystical Gurdjieff was part of a desperate search for a cure when conventional medicine failed her. Tomalin takes the reader through the last days and last hopes with the dispassionate details that make Mansfield's decisions tragically clear.

Tomalin's biography brought me closest to feeling that I was in the presence of this complicated woman. I recommend it to all who love Mansfield, and all who admire a good biography.

Sam says

Loved the book - a fascinating and very difficult life plus even better, inspires you to read KM's short stories (I even toyed with reading some DH Lawrence to read the characters inspired by Katherine herself ...). There is a wonderful paragraph in one of her stories describing the relief women feel when the 'man of the house' has bugged off and they can be themselves - reading about her husband and lovers, you can totally see why she could express that feeling so vividly!!
