

Gabriële

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An ambitious reconstruction of a hidden personal life, *Gabriële* is Anne and Claire Berest's biographical novel about their formidable great-grandmother.

At twenty-seven, Gabriële Buffet had carved out an unusual life—studying musical composition at a time when few women did; teaching music in Germany; vowing never to marry. When her brother introduced her to Francis Picabia, “An enchanted ogre with an insatiable appetite” whose impressionistic paintings were celebrated, she was hostile to his charms. Electrified by her indifference, he made her his muse; together, they planned to revolutionize art. And so they did—though Gabriële's promising, defiant musical career was sacrificed in the process. Her own story became elusive: She shaped artistic movements on both sides of the Atlantic, but it seemed that she herself “wanted to be forgotten.”

Years after her death, Gabriële's great-granddaughters, ignored by her in life, decided to sift through archives, letters, and personal writings to determine who this mysterious woman was. Their chapters often conclude with self-referential notes about the writing process—and about their goals for the project. Raw questions arise, like “would they have loved me?” And the subjects' own words weave in, too, as though the text is in active dialogue with the past.

Gabriële's story runs alongside the advent of cubism, dadaism, and other avante garde artistic styles; Belle Époque salon and cocktail party scenes at the cusp of World War I ignite its pages. Gabriële herself, though defining the period for her husband and artists including Marcel Duchamp, remains somewhat evasive: a mother who did not want to be one; an artist stunted.

Working up to the “apocalyptic bacchanal” scenes that represented the end of her volatile marriage, *Gabriële* is a revealing, heartrending biographical novel about a complicated woman whose imprint on art history is undeniable.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2025)

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