

## GWEN

GOLDIE GOLDBLOOM

### ABOUT THE BOOK

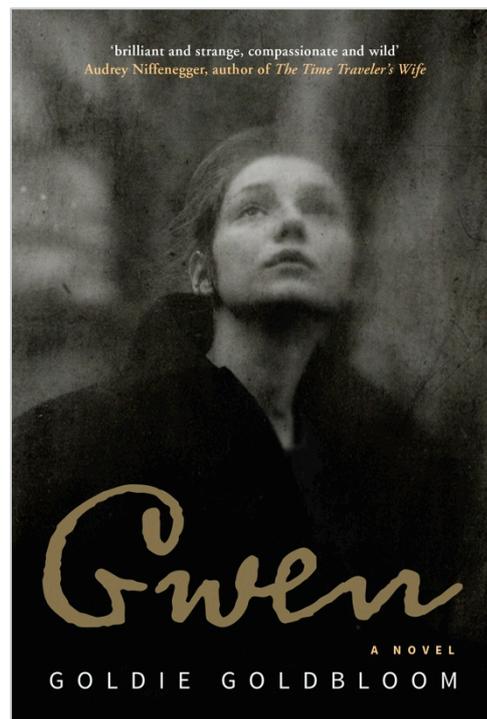
In 1903, the artist Gwendolen Mary John travels from London to France with her companion Dorelia. Surviving on their wits and Gwen's raw talent, the young women walk barefoot from Calais to Paris. In the new century, the world is full of promise: it is time for Gwen to step out from the shadow of her overbearing brother Augustus and seek out the great painter and sculptor Auguste Rodin. It is time to be brave and visible, to love and be loved – and time perhaps for Gwen to become a hero as the stain of anti-Semitism spreads across Europe.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Goldie Goldbloom grew up in Western Australia. She has received many national and international awards for her fiction and her nonfiction, and is author of *The Paperbark Shoe* and *You Lose These and Other Stories*. One of her stories was selected for inclusion in the *Best Australian Short Stories* of 2015. She is a professor of creative writing at the University of Chicago and the mother of eight children.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Goldie Goldbloom's website contains a great deal of primary material ([www.goldiegoldbloom.com](http://www.goldiegoldbloom.com)). What do you see as the relationship between 'history' and 'historical fiction'? Should rules apply about what the writer of historical fiction can and can't do?
2. What do you see as the impact of the death of Gwen's mother on her?
3. How would you describe the relationship between Gwen and her brother? Which one of them holds the power in this relationship?
4. Gwen becomes Rodin's student, his model, and his lover. But does she really get what she wants?
5. Do you think that the Rodin of the novel loves Gwen?
6. *Time is a human invention, as ephemeral as light.* (p. 294) What other clues and hints are we given as the novel progresses that perhaps time is not linear?
7. Why do you think that Gwen is particularly sensitive to the ephemeral nature of time?
8. *Help us! Don't deny that you see us, like all those others! Please, for God's sake, there are women here, children, grandparents! Have mercy!* (p. 242) Gwen has both a fascination and a fear of Jewish people. They unsettle her and she can't leave them alone. Why is Gwen drawn to them? And why can she see them when others can't?
9. What bearing does Rilke's epigraph have on the novel and its themes?
10. How does the somewhat unexpected framing of the novel – prologue and epilogue – shape our understanding of the story that comes in between?
11. Many of Gwen John's paintings might be found via Google. What is the effect of Goldbloom's having named chapters after the paintings of the real Gwen John?
12. How is it that the Gwen John of this novel wants to be remembered? Why is this important to her? Does she succeed?
13. What difference does it make to the story of the life of Gwen John that we also hear chapters from the points of view of Gwen's brother Augustus, her student and muse Dorelia, and Auguste Rodin?
14. Is Gwen John mad?
15. *Paris is full of people who draw and paint and carve. But there are very few artists. And of those who paint, I am the only woman.* (p. 333) If we take the lives of Gwen and those she knew as examples, how do you think an artist's life at the turn of last century is different to the life of a female artist at the beginning of this?



## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

***I have the feeling that you have lived with the artist Gwen John for a long time, and that you utterly immersed yourself in her world. Can you tell me where you first encountered Gwen and where that journey has taken you?***

One of my closest friends is the artist Riva Lehrer. One afternoon, maybe back in 2011 or 2012, we were sitting at her kitchen table when she suggested I take a look at two of her art books, one about Sophonisba Anguissola and the other about Gwen and Augustus John. From the moment I opened the book about Gwen and saw her first painting, I was hooked.

I started researching her life and that led me to a stack of letters Gwen wrote to Rodin that is referenced in several books about her life. But where were these letters? I finally tracked them down to the Musée Rodin in Paris, where I also found countless representations of Gwen's anatomy in Rodin's sculptures and paintings.

The two craziest things that happened to me though, were discovering – after I'd written *Gwen* – that my holiday home in Italy was full of sculptures of Augustus John's children. And the second crazy thing was discovering, this year, that there is an undocumented portrait of Gwen by Augustus hanging over the bed I sleep in while I am in Italy. Shades of *The Twilight Zone*. Apparently, Augustus was great friends with the owner of the villa, Fiore de Henriquez. As a writer and a great believer in the mysteries of life, I can't help thinking that all along, Gwen was urging me to write her story.

***What do you see as the responsibilities of the writer of historical fiction as she melds research and fiction? Did you need to establish 'rules' around the fictional world you were creating and the lives you were drawing from?***

I teach weird fiction at the University of Chicago, where I have the privilege of hearing from scholars who are much more knowledgeable than myself about the physics of the natural world. I have been told that, while it is unlikely that time travel into the past is possible, one-way time travel into the future might be possible via time dilation. In creating the world for Gwen, I wanted it to seem that a) she is able to see into the future in a very limited way and b) she might just be a teeny tiny bit crazy, and I wanted her to be haunted by both possibilities. At the same time, due to physics and relativity, the children in 1942 cannot see the world of 1904. That created a unique set of problems and parameters that I had to work with while writing the story.

But I think I haven't answered this question satisfactorily. I have made for myself, of course, other rules for 'ordinary' historical fiction. What can I reasonably find out through research? With what information can I make an educated guess? I promise my characters to search and search until I have satisfied myself that no further information can be found. But on top of that, and probably most importantly, I have to think about the why of everything. History rarely talks about the whys. Why did Gwen leave England? Why didn't she return? Why did she have an affair with a man so much older than herself? Why did she live in a shack without windows and doors with dozens of cats? And why *did* she draw so many images of children? History gives the framework, but fiction puts the flesh on the bones and the heart in the chest.

***At what stage of the research/writing did you realise that this was also going to be a novel about anti-Semitism and Jewish persecution in the first half of the 20th century?***

While researching Gwen's homes in Paris, I discovered that there was a little sign posted outside her first flat. The sign said something like, 'From this site in 1942, 100 Jewish children were deported by the Nazis.' I'm paraphrasing. This little note from the future was added to my puzzlement over Gwen's obsessive drawing of children. In her catalogue, there are literally hundreds of drawings of anonymous children, many of them the same girl, over and over. And then I saw her painting *Girl with a Blue Scarf*. It stopped me cold. It was supposedly painted between 1910 and 1920, and yet the girl looks as if she is a Jewish child living in 1940. Her hair appears hacked off, her clothing seems modern, and lastly, there is a yellow smear over her chest, as if – perhaps – there was once a yellow star sewn to her blouse. Amongst other issues with this painting, it has the same background as paintings that were completed much earlier than 1910. So there I am, wondering

about all of these things and how they intersect, and what is the reason for it all, and somehow the story I wrote rolled out of all of my confusion and questioning.

***The lives of great men can cast long shadows. Did your perceptions of Augustus John or Auguste Rodin shift as you researched their lives?***

Oh my God, yes. I started off knowing next to nothing about either man, and through their biographies and Gwen's letters, came to know rather more than I had ever wanted to. They were so similar; both brilliant artists but so narcissistic and misogynistic. They probably aren't so very different from rock stars and politicians these days, but because I cared about Gwen, I almost wanted to grab her by the front of her dress and yell into her face, 'Run! Run for your life!'

I had the great good fortune of speaking with Michael Holroyd, Augustus John's magnificent and very wise biographer, and it was very satisfying to hear that some of my leaps in logic and deductions about the physical relationship between Gwen and Augustus were things he had also wondered about as he wrote his own book. Writing nonfiction, he couldn't include any unsupported material, but I am a fiction writer. In trying to understand Gwen's life, the choices she made, I was able to draw the lines between the dots.

***Did you have any sense that Gwen was in some ways 'invisible' or rendered less visible by this formidable pair? Did you also feel as if you had to draw Ida and Dorelia out of that shadow and into the light?***

I think that most women in turn-of-the-century London and Paris were invisible to the culture. They were unable to hold positions of power (besides good Queen Victoria of course), own property, vote. In early films from that time, the streets are full of men, and it's very rare to see even a single woman out walking. Gwen's independence in the face of that cultural norm is startling – she walked barefoot across France in 1903, singing and painting portraits so she could eat! It's even more startling when you realise that both her brother and her lover were media whores, massive personalities who soaked up any attention in a room. It's remarkable that Gwen was ever able to sell a painting to a collector, let alone cultivate a relationship with an art dealer. And yet she did. To me, that says she had more backbone than the average woman from a hundred years ago.

***Rilke is a delightful character, someone who is both comforting and reliable. His friendship with Gwen creates a line of steady, uncomplicated love and support for her through much of the novel. Did you know that Rilke and Gwen were friends before you began your research? How much did Rilke's own writing inform the way you shaped him?***

While I was in France, I found a copy of a note that was supposedly written to Gwen by Rodin, but which was signed by Rilke. Until then, I hadn't known that Rilke was Rodin's secretary during the beginning of Gwen's affair with the sculptor. The note mentions the amount of wood sent to her flat for her fireplace, a very practical and unromantic piece of information. In other places, I read that Gwen dropped off daily notes to the secretary for Rodin and that Rilke conveyed information, including times for romantic liaisons, to Gwen. Gwen hated later secretaries, who barred her from Rodin, but she never complained about Rilke, who lived very close to her in Montparnasse and with whom she had many friends in common.

One of my favourite discoveries was finding that Gwen and Rilke wrote about the same things at the same times. This suggested to me that they didn't just exchange notes and factual information, but that when they had their daily meetings, they talked deeply about things they both cared about: philosophy and poetry, imagery and humanity. There are many surviving letters between Rilke and Gwen over a six-year period in which it is clear they have great sympathy for one another. They shared books and good news, sorrows and lovely images. In short, they were friends. Even after his death, she spoke to Rilke and wrote letters to him, telling him about her life. It seems clear that for her, Rilke was a bastion of calm that she wished to emulate.

I have been a long-time fan of Rilke's poetry and writing. In the process of writing this book, I had the happy chance to imagine him as he might have been in Paris, lonely but self-contained, thoughtful, kind even to

Gwen at her most chaotic and lost. I looked at many photographs of him and read his early works, including his book about Rodin, searching for clues to the way in which he experienced France, the maestro and Gwen. Though there are no documents remaining that support a connection between Paula Modersohn-Becker (for whom Rilke wrote 'Requiem for a Friend') it seems likely that Gwen and she modelled for each other and shared the friendship of Rilke. Though Rilke died before Gwen, I still feel that his words in 'Requiem for a Friend' also partially apply to Gwen, whom he loved and encouraged to live a life devoted to art.

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