

KATHLEEN O'CONNOR OF PARIS

AMANDA CURTIN

ABOUT THE BOOK

What does it mean to live a life in pursuit of art?

In 1906, Kathleen O'Connor left conservative Perth, where her famous father's life had ended in tragedy. She had her sights set on a career in thrilling, bohemian Paris.

More than a century later, novelist Amanda Curtin faces her own questions, of life and of art, as she embarks on a journey in Kate's footsteps.

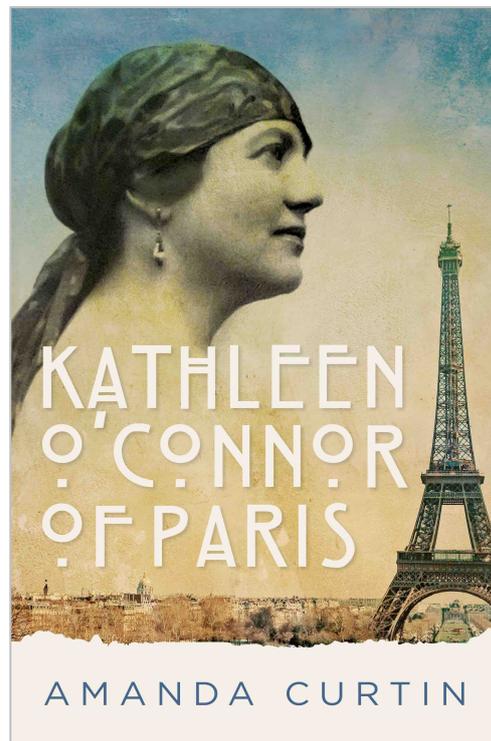
Part biography, part travel narrative, this is the story of a distinctive and talented artist who, with limited resources and despite the impacts of war and loss, worked and exhibited in Paris for over forty years. Images of Kate's distinctive figure paintings, portraits and still-lives, highly prized today and held by every major gallery in Australia, are reproduced in the book, together with photographs of the artist herself, and these form an inseparable part of the telling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Curtin is the author of novels *Elemental* (2013) and *The Sinkings* (2008), and short story collection *Inherited* (2011). *Elemental* was shortlisted for the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards, and in 2016 was published in the UK. Amanda has also worked as a book editor for many years. She lives in Perth with her husband and an opinionated Siamese cat, and works in a backyard studio among magpies, doves and old trees. Visit the author at www.amandacurtin.com.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author, a fiction writer, describes her enterprise in this biography on pages 16 and 17. How possible is it for anyone – biographer or fiction writer – to capture a life, especially when the subject appears to be a particularly private person?
2. At p. 54, Amanda Curtin writes: *But I wonder if she knew, when throwing streamers from the deck of the Runic, waving farewell to a country not of her birth but of the birth of her adult self, that there were threads – some clear, some nebulous – that would tie her here forever.* How would you describe Kathleen O'Connor's relationship with Perth? Where would you say that Kathleen was 'from'?
3. How important is place in shaping one's identity?
4. In what ways was Kate 'part of a great whole', living nearly 40 years of her life in Paris?
5. What are we to make of the apocryphal story of Kate throwing her paintings into the Indian Ocean?
6. How does the author use this tale as one of the motifs for her consideration of this artist's life?
7. In the chapter titled 'Another Irish father' (p. 55), the author contemplates the relationship of one person to a piece of art across time. Do you agree with Sean O'Hehir's observation that art doesn't change but we do? How is this refrain repeated and examined through the book?
8. How does 'exposure to the creative process' (p. 56) inform the author's own reception and discussion of Kate's artwork?



9. Throughout her life, Kate seems to have displayed great clarity of vision in pursuing her art. What do you think is won and lost when women 'insist on a life of their own' (p. 79)?
10. What are the skills that a novelist can bring to the composing of a biography in which there are (often inevitably) gaps and absences? As readers, do we have expectations about what an author should and shouldn't tell us about, when she is writing a biography?
11. How does the presence of the author, and her own journey through this text, inform and enhance our understanding of the author's subject, Kate O'Connor?
12. *I puzzle over ... yet another example of the gregariousness of a woman who so often seems, at this distance, secretive, unknowable. People liked Kate. She made friends easily. But how well did they know her? I long to question those who knew her best, or longest, or long enough to observe more than what was held at the surface – Miss Killen, Maude Ball, Estelle Beere? Harriet Stewart Dawson? Biddy? All of them gone. Or could Kate only truly be known through the prism of her art? Were the artists in her orbit the ones who saw her?* (pp. 136–137) Sometimes Amanda Curtin appears to have more questions than answers about her subject. From what we do know of Kate O'Connor, is it possible to reconcile the seemingly contradictory elements in her nature?
13. In what ways was Kate 'a woman ahead of her time' and also a woman 'of her time' (p. 170)?
14. What is the vision of the artist Kathleen O'Connor that we see expressed through her own thoughts on p. 251?
15. In the chapter 'Homage', Kate's profile and reputation in Australia grow. In what ways can Kathleen O'Connor be considered to be an 'Australian artist'?
16. The author tells us that the death of her artist friend and the writing of this book are in some way linked (p. 9). What is the connection that the author comes to discover?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What did you discover in the process of writing this book – about art, about life, about yourself?

The experience reinforced, in new ways, some things I already knew, as a person and as a writer of fiction: that 'facts' are elusive, that memory is endlessly malleable, that art matters, that art and life are intimately connected, that appreciating art, like appreciating a life, is both instinctual and contingent, and highly subjective. And, given all the things I am not – not a biographer, not a curator, not an art historian, not a visual artist – it perhaps proved to me that I am a little braver than I thought I was!

As a fiction writer approaching a real-life subject, did you find that you had to establish 'rules' for yourself in writing this book?

I was working mostly on instinct during the writing process, but some imperatives emerged. It felt important to make transparent the gaps and silences in Kate's story; to be clear about what was speculation, what was reflection or imagination, what was constructed from particular sources. The decision to incorporate the research process into the story was part of that. The questioning, the 'talking to Kate', was another. And I wanted to establish the context for my taking on this challenging, utterly absorbing project – especially since I am *not* a biographer, a curator, an art historian, a visual artist. Any biographical work is a life, not *the* life, of its subject, mediated through the consciousness of the writer, who selects, constructs, interprets, shapes. I wanted my hand to be visible.

Do you feel differently about your subject, Kathleen O'Connor, now than you did at the beginning of your writing?

She remains as fascinating to me as when I first encountered her story in the 1980s, but I think I understand now that there were many Kates: the fearless, larger-than-life Kate who refused to conform; the Kate who quietly observed, and was studiously absorbed in, the art world of Paris; the Kate who proclaimed herself a bohemian, with no interest in society; the Kate who fitted in when she needed to; the Kate who understood the artist's need for self-promotion; the Kate who remained resolutely silent about the more private aspects of her life. She is all the more interesting to me for her 'unfixability'.

I also have a greater appreciation for her commitment and determination as an older female artist; she has become something of a role model for me in that respect.

Do you think that women artists and writers now face similar challenges to the ones they did in Kate's time?

In Kate's lifetime, it was monumentally difficult for women artists to have their work taken seriously. To give just a few examples: I analysed the catalogue for Kate's first known exhibition in Paris, the Salon d'Automne of 1911, and found that only 24% of exhibitors were women, representing only 15% of the works selected. The first state exhibition of women artists in Paris was not until 1937. In an exhibition of Australian artists at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1962, only four of the forty-eight artists selected were women.

You would think that the world had moved on. But women artists and writers still face such challenges today. In a recent study on gender bias in the art industry, prices for work created by women artists were found to be nearly 50% lower than for work created by men. In the case of writers, the Stella Prize was initiated in 2011 in part because of the underrepresentation of women as winners of literary prizes. The Australian Women Writers Challenge was established around the same time, as a grass-roots response to gender imbalance in book reviewing. Even in the latest Stella Count (2017), the number of books being given review space in major Australian newspapers failed to achieve gender parity overall (in fact, the percentage of books reviewed by women decreased between 2016 and 2017).



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