



Muse

Mary Novik

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Richly engaging historical adventure in the vein of *The Winter Palace* and *The Malice of Fortune*.

Muse is the story of the charismatic woman who was the inspiration behind Petrarch's sublime love poetry. Solange Le Blanc begins life in the tempestuous streets of 14th century Avignon, a city of men dominated by the Pope and his palace. When her mother, a harlot, dies in childbirth, Solange is raised by Benedictines who believe she has the gift of clairvoyance. Trained as a scribe, but troubled by disturbing visions and tempted by a more carnal life, she escapes to Avignon, where she becomes entangled in a love triangle with the poet Petrarch, becoming not only his muse but also his lover.

Later, when her gift for prophecy catches the Pope's ear, Solange becomes Pope Clement VI's mistress and confidante in the most celebrated court in Europe. When the plague kills a third of Avignon's population, Solange is accused of sorcery and is forced once again to reinvent herself and fight against a final, mortal conspiracy.

Muse is a sweeping historical epic that magically evokes the Renaissance, capturing a time and place caught between the shadows of the past and the promise of a new cultural awakening.

Muse Details

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Author : Mary Novik

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From Reader Review Muse for online ebook

Angie says

Muse is the story of Solange LeBlanc who was a scribe, muse and lover of poet Francesco Petrarch. It takes place in the 14th century in France when popes lived in Avignon instead of Rome. Solange is raised by Benedictine nuns who believe her to be clairvoyant and she is trained to be a scribe, an unusual career for a woman of her time. She meets Petrarch as a teenager and becomes his scribe, later his muse, and then mother of his children. The story of her life is filled with betrayal and suffering but she is strong and always finds a way to rise above after her many falls.

Novik says she based her story on this woman whom little is known about, other than her being the mother of Petrarch's children, but she marvelously fills in the blanks with her descriptions of life in the 1300's.

Solange may be a fictional character but her story comes alive on the pages. That is what I love about good historical fiction, though the story may be an invention of the author's imagination, the details of every day life are real and it is obvious Novik did a lot of research to make this time period become real. I loved her descriptions of the scriptorium. I could almost smell the oak-gall and wormwood which was used to make ink. Her attention to the details allows the reader to step back in time.

If you like historical fiction I recommend this book. I gave it 5 out of 5 stars. Now I want to read Novik's first book titled 'Conceit' which is about 17th century London.

Darlene Williams says

Muse is my introduction to Mary Novik. An excellent read which kept me enthralled, sitting at the kitchen island long after I finished lunch (when I always read) to finish a chapter.

Novik's prose draws you into the era, evoking the glorious and, more often, inglorious times. Muse highlights how helpless a woman was about her destiny; the Church and men bore absolute authority over her life and death.

I will definitely seek out Novik's debut novel, Conceit.

Aditi says

Michael Bassey Johnson, a Nigerian Poet, Playwright, Novelist, Aphorist, Satirist, caricaturist and a Newspaper columnist, quoted remarkably about "carnal joy" as:

"Once you are defiled, you can't get back your purity by any means, instead, you will only look for ways to be defiled over and over again."

Mary Novik, an Canadian award-winning author, spun a spectacular tale, called, *Muse*, tells us the life-story of a orphan girl, named, Solange Le Blanc, in the 14th century, anti-women society in Avignon in France.

Synopsis:

Solange Le Blanc begins life in the tempestuous streets of 14th century Avignon, a city of men dominated by the Pope and his palace. When her mother, a harlot, dies in childbirth, Solange is raised by Benedictines who believe she has the gift of clairvoyance. Trained as a scribe, but troubled by disturbing visions and tempted by a more carnal life, she escapes to Avignon, where she becomes entangled in a love triangle with the poet Petrarch, becoming not only his muse but also his lover.

Later, when her gift for prophecy catches the Pope's ear, Solange becomes Pope Clement VI's mistress and confidante in the most celebrated court in Europe. When the plague kills a third of Avignon's population, Solange is accused of sorcery and is forced once again to reinvent herself and fight against a final, mortal conspiracy.

Period: 14th century, Place: Avignon, France

This was the period when women were destined either to be an abbess of the church or someone's wife or everybody's harlot.

This was the only place in the world where seven successive popes resided other than Rome.

The author, Mary Novik, who is a truly remarkable author, painted the picture of this commune town so gorgeously and vividly. While reading this book, I can bet that you will feel like you are standing by the canal just outside the main town of Avignon and observing the people intently, moreover, you'll even time-travel back in the 14th century, when the streets of Avignon filled with poets and courtesans, nuns, benedicts, etc. In short, you will transport yourself to a culturally rich society.

Her protagonist, Solange, is vulnerable yet strong enough to challenge the norms of the society. However, Solange portrayed as an exemplary figure in the society, but because of her ability to stand up against the tide, made her an outcast in her own birth-land. The whole story, told from her perspective, made us realize how brave she was to handle all her hurdles in a men-dominated society. Another aspect of Solange that will strike you remarkably was her ability to enjoy her carnal pleasures freely without shame. She betrothed herself with her lover, Petrarch and later to claim power in the society, she became the mistress of Pope Clement VI. She was the only woman who wanted to earn her bread and butter by becoming a professional scribe, but the 14th century Avignon was not right place for her. Instead, she used her sexuality to claim back to power.

The author's emphatic prose will completely bewitch you. Moreover, the author unfolded Solange's life-story filled with mysteries, danger, challenges and many unexpected twists, thus making the plot very intriguing to read. The narration is easy, simple, and free flowing and that makes it easy to read the story. Moreover, the supporting characters, though portrayed as flawed, will still make an impression upon your minds. While reading the book, you cannot turn away your eyes from the vivid darkness surrounding the plot.

Verdict: *A must read for all women of all ages, and for the historical fiction lovers, this historically-rich book will only allure your soul and mind.*

Courtesy: *I'm highly indebted to the author, Mary Novik, for giving me the opportunity to read and review her novel.*

Melinda says

I received an advanced copy of this book from Goodreads.

I have to admit, it took several pages before I was drawn into this novel, possibly because the writing style was slightly different than I was used to and I was just finishing up another historical fiction.

Although this is set in the 14th century, the actions and emotions of Solange mimics those in recent times. The best times that Solange experiences, albeit slightly dull and filled with daily rituals, is her time at the abbey. However, that peace is torn away and she is thrown back into the world that she grew up in.

(view spoiler)

While this novel is a fairly good read, it certainly was not an instant hit with me due to the heroine being the way she is for a good chunk of the book. There were also moments where it felt like the author was trying to make the novel more than it really is by using lots of fancy words. However, it might just be the author's writing style that I am not an instant fan of. Some characters could be fleshed out more instead of being one dimensional characters. Also the use of these 'visions' are a decent touch, adding a certain element to the story, however it becomes too predictable and pointless when it occurs at the most crucial time. I have to say, Mary Novik, the author, does succeed in developing and portraying 14th century Avignon in both lights (through prosperous times and plague times). Also how she portrayed some of the characters (Pope Clement, Francesco, Laura, etc), made me want to read and discover more about these historical figures. The incorporation of Francesco's poetry throughout the novel was wonderfully woven and stitched together.

Mirella says

Muse is Mary Novik's second novel; a story about a young woman named Solange LeBlanc who was born to a harlot in 14th century. She becomes orphaned and sent into a Benedictine convent. There, the nuns believe her to be gifted as a visionary. Her clairvoyant dreams raise her status while also bringing danger from those who are superstitious. After an attack, Solange escapes the confines of religious life, and sets out on her own to make a living copying books with her beautiful penmanship. It is then that she meets Petrarch and becomes the inspiration behind many of his poems. Petrarch, however, is obsessed with his growing fame and leaves her behind with limited funds to pursue his career among the rich and noble. Unmarried and pregnant with Petrarch's son, Solange gives birth in diminishing circumstances. When Petrarch learns about his son, he kidnaps him, spurning a desperate search by Solange to find him.

Muse is an epic story with a powerful, resilient heroine at its centre. The author excels at bringing to life the political and social atmosphere of the times, including those pertaining to the French Pope to whom Solange becomes an advisor. Written with a compelling voice, this is a gripping story of a young woman who rises above the hardships of her time.

Tom says

Reading Muse I found immense pleasure in just "being there" in this amazing re-creation of early-Renaissance Italy and France. The writing itself was a joy, truly literary in the best sense.

Jody says

I really enjoyed *Muse*. I was "with" Solange from the opening pages and enjoyed all her ups and downs immensely, finding her adventures both exciting from a modern readers point of view and realistic for the time and setting, which is fourteenth century Avignon, France. The characters and their relationships are very believable, especially the "fatal attraction" between Solange and Petrarch, who writes the most incredible poetry (to another woman, the famous Laura) because of her help. Novik hit the right note for me, not too modern and not too historical, believable yet authentic, a really good read from start to finish.

Asmaa says

The author makes use of historical facts, showing how the characters act in those circumstances. For the main character Solange, an introspective ingredient is added. Parallel to chronology of fourteenth-century Avignon and real figures is Solange's life story which is entwined with those happenings and with those of Laura, Petrarch, and Pope Clement. Novik fleshes out those once vital beings as they live again in the Avignonnaise years of the Babylonian Captivity, guilds, plague, society, etc. Novik's scenes have dramatic contrasts, taking the reader to the brink of the worst or best experience. Her characters and their relationships are nuanced, ever changing and surprising. Poetry and figurative language run throughout; period objects are named as such. The created character of Solange seems quite real in her motivations at different times of her life.

Previous review: *Muse* is Mary Novik's second novel. The first, *Conceit* is the fictional biography of the English poet John Donne's daughter Pegge. Her amazing feat is to rescue her father's effigy from St Paul's with Izaak Walton during the Great Fire of London in 1666. The current book is relative to the fourteenth-century Renaissance poet Petrarch. Novik imbues scanty historical facts with imaginative narrative, teasing life out of what now in the twenty-first century is a mystery surrounding the great poets. The fictional and factual nicely merge with Novik's sense of storytelling. Competent, realist, determined female protagonists prove beneficial to the poets, as in *Muse* Solange edits Petrarch's poetry which Laura inspires. A distinct appreciation of Solange's role as Petrarch's amour and muse comes through the printed text. -- Jan. 2014

Jen Sookfong Lee says

Mary's writing always bowls me over, both in its precision and in its ability to unflinchingly expose what is gritty and beautiful. *Muse* is a thrilling, page-turning read, but it's also an exploration on poetry and how historical women, seen and unseen, shape the careers and lives of the men they love.

June says

I read Mary Novik's *Muse* in manuscript form some time ago, and am pleased that the finished product retains the power of language that initially captivated me. Too often I have begun novels only to put them down, unfinished, but, line-by-line, *Muse* drew me in, and kept me enthralled to the last page. Bravo, Mary! I

wish more writers shared your love of words.

Suze says

Although it's summer, I'm not especially fond of beach books and Muse offered a lot more than the usual historical novel. It was extremely enjoyable, but also I learned a lot about human nature and what the people of the time believed, for instance about prophecy, saints, prostitutes, and so on. There's a lot of fascinating history of Avignon in this book, and interesting glimpses of the poet Petrarch and other people of the time, like Pope Clement. I could see taking the book with me on a trip to Avignon to check out some of the locations. I haven't read a book about the city before, and this one is a real treat.

Anne says

This was a goodreads win!
Very well written throughout and an interesting story!
(Read and reviewed by my mother as she was very keen to read it!)

Caitlin Hicks says

I found this book at BLACK BOND BOOKS on Broadway, only to discover the author was scheduled to appear at a reading the evening I was there. Couldn't make it as I had to catch a ferry home, but I was intrigued. I've been to Avignon, I've been a catholic, my book A THEORY OF EXPANDED LOVE is another very different take on Catholicism. I have enjoyed Historical Fiction in the past.

I was thrilled that this Vancouver writer I had never heard of was reviewed by BC Bookworld, The Globe & Mail, Vancouver Sun, Saint John Telegraph Journal, Quill & Quire and more. Her debut novel *Conceit* was chosen as book of the year by Quill & Quire and Globe & Mail and won The Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. Canada Reads named *Conceit* one of top 40 Essential Canadian Novels of the Decade. And here was her second book.

So I waded in. The book begins in 1309 and goes to 1348, the time when the papacy of the Catholic Church was situated in Avignon, southern France. So many details of the time were woven into the story, including words in use at the time, many whose meaning had to be hunted down. It was a brutal time for women and paupers, and the events tumbled out so effortlessly in the narrative that sometimes I was forced to watch a rape, a brutal death by torture or a burning at the stake, or a skull smashing, but it added up to a fascination for the time, the people and their fear-based beliefs. Solange Le Blanc (who in this fiction became the Muse to the poet, Petrarch) was orphaned and then raised by the Benedictine nuns and taught to be a skilled scribe. An intelligent girl, she was also known to have prophetic visions.

At first I had a bit of trouble with the voice as things unfolded so quickly (the narrative was quite spare) and sometimes I found myself confused as to what exactly was happening, only to go back and read more slowly to understand, but soon the pace picked up as I began to inwardly cheer on the heroine.

The novel left me with a sense of pride for women who have come before me; in this novel their mistreatment and disrespect was not unfamiliar, but distressing. Solange was a beautiful woman, independent to the core. She was not officially connected to a man (as she was sired by a priest) and therefore was subject to the tides of favor, gossip, jealousy and whim. She was seen as a visionary, a whore or alternately, a witch. The tension in the novel stemmed from our understanding that her fortunes could change at any second. Although she became one of the most powerful women in Avignon at the time, as consort ('niece' of the Pope) Solange was constantly betrayed by others jealous of her closeness to power, and her life was in danger numerous times. And yet she loved generously. Her observations painted a picture of a corrupt and glutinous church, and the teeming masses of peasants who survived in a filthy, mucky, cold world. The historical events of the time - including the plague - were well integrated, as was knowledge of the lives and work of craftsmen, artisans scribes, artists, poets, guildsmen, clergy - a wonderful vision of a complete and pulsing world.

(I was thrilled to recognize the ending - Novik ends her work as I ended mine - with the woman, the writer determined to tell her own story in her own way!)

Thought-provoking, rich and compelling MUSE is a brilliantly feminist take on life in the early Renaissance.

Shaena Lambert says

If I were to describe Muse in a single sentence, I would say it is about the pleasures of the sensual world, and the importance of choosing those pleasures, dangerous as such a road might be (particularly in an anti-female society like 14th Century Avignon).

In this novel, the entire kingdom of sensuality is personified in the gorgeous, wanton figure of Solange Le Blanc, who, after growing up in a Benedictine nunnery, flees to Avignon, where she becomes the lover of both Petrarch (enabling him to write his love sonnets) and of Pope Clement VI. Generous and deeply sexual, Solange is able to transition between these two men (one's a sex god, the other's like your aging grandfather) with remarkable sangfroid and ease. And there is something so comforting in this, so real. Solange is a woman of the world, and she takes pleasure where she can get it, drawing political power to herself along the way. How different this is from all the hard bodied sex we encounter in books like Fifty Shades of Grey, or The SECRET. And how much more interesting this is!

But the deliciousness of the sensual world also shows up in the details Mary Novik uses to paint her world of 14th Century Avignon. The street scenes, the various guilds at work on the narrow streets, the smells, of baking and sewage. The scenes in the Benedictine scriptorium – where the illuminated manuscripts are created by nuns, and where Solange gets her early training as a scribe, copying Dante's *La Vita Nuova* – are among the most fascinating. Novik takes great care to describe the slant of light (or lack of it -- amazing to think how all those illuminated manuscripts were created in dimly lit rooms), the feel of the paintbrushes, the delight in the expensive paints, made from gold or from iris root. It is a tribute to how good these scriptorium scenes are that, for sensual interest, they rivalled the sex scenes with Petrarch.

Ultimately this is a novel about female sexuality and power, in a society bent on erasing and sublimating both. There is a wonderful scene, mid book, where all the 'wanton women' and harlots of the town are rounded up during a ferocious lightning storm, Solange among them, and sent up to the towers of the many

churches to ring the bells, in order to draw the lightning to them, as punishment, and to protect the city. Many are struck dead. But Solange survives, and she goes on to tell her tale – which ultimately is a bell-ringing for the joys of female desire, fully expressed.

Nicole Laverdure says

I received an advanced copy of Muse written by Mary Novik on a Goodreads giveaway. Muse is the story of Solange LeBlanc who was a scribe, muse and lover of poet Francesco Petrarch. She was raised by Benedictine nuns who thought she was a clairvoyant and then became a scribe. It's a well written historical fiction, lots of details of the day to day life in the early Renaissance. If you really love historical fiction, then this book is for you.

Roberta Rich says

Muse is the story of a Solange, the daughter of a whore who is taken in as a little girl by Benedictine nuns as a charity case. She proves herself to be a dab hand at writing, re-copying manuscripts in the scriptorium. She becomes a novitiate and is on her way to becoming a nun. She has a special gift, which sometimes deserts her, clairvoyance, a potent gift to have in 14th century Avignon where life for poor girls is hard and the opportunities few. When a visiting artist rapes her, Solange leaves the convent to seek her fortune elsewhere. Soon she embarks on a love affair with the poet Petrarch. Clairvoyance is not her only gift. She is a poetess and serves as Petrarch's inspiration and scribe.

Fans of Novik's last novel, Conceit, have a treat in store. Muse is beautifully crafted, the writing skilful. But it is the character of Solange that entrances. She is a woman who eventually finds contentment but what a hard, bitter and unhappy, and interesting road she travels before finding peace.

Kristen says

It's pretty bad when you know absolutely ON THE FIRST PAGE that you aren't going to be able to finish a book. But that is what happened here, sadly.

The very first thing we are told about our main character is that her first psychic vision was IN HER MOTHER'S WOMB. And that she remembers it in clear detail years later?? REALLY?! Fiction is one thing, but this was just way too much for me to even hope to be able to buy. Sorry, but no.

Misty Rios says

Muse is a 14th century historical narrative about a clairvoyant woman trying to survive during the

Renaissance.

Throughout her endeavors she is accused of being a harlot, a witch and even a saint but she refuses to give up and fights to survive for the sake of her illegitimate children.

I truly enjoyed this book as it is beautifully written in my opinion. I loved the challenging language used and the raw but yet delicate way that all of Solange's perverse ordeals are described. Mary Novik really gives an inside perspective of what went on behind the closed doors of the Papacy in France.

I was admittedly able to connect with Solange and truly felt for her during all of her ordeals. I cried with her losses and smiled with her victories and ingenuity. She is undoubtedly a wonderful mother that would do anything for the sake of her children and surely a true heroin in my opinion.

The storyline was just charming and I absolutely loved how it all tied together throughout and especially in the end. Those of you that did not finish the book really missed out on the glory of it.

Mary Novik managed to transport me into the Renaissance and I was not able to put this book down until it was done. My only regret is that I would have liked to find out the stories of her children afterwards.

Assuredly, this is one of the finest pieces of literature I have come across and it is truly a masterpiece of the written word! Thank you so much for the opportunity to have read such a magnificent piece of art!

I received a free ARC copy of this book via Goodreads First Reads.

Andrea (Cozy Up With A Good Read) says

This review and others can be found on Cozy Up With A Good Read

I had this book on my Waiting on Wednesday post a few weeks ago, I had just finished reading CONCEIT by Mary Novik and I knew I wanted to read more from her. Lucky for me I ended up getting this in the mail a little while ago, it was a great surprise and I'm so happy to be able to feature a review for this book for Canadian Historical Fiction Month!

This book is very different from CONCEIT, and yet I loved it just as much (if not even more). This book is about Solange's journey growing up with the gift of clairvoyance and all the danger she is in throughout her life. Solange moves around a lot, but what I love about her is that she does things for herself, in a world that is dominated by men, Solange is the woman who tries to change things and be her own person.

The one thing that I absolutely love about Mary Novik's writing is that she brings her characters to life. She also really shows the dark and gritty parts of history. I love that she doesn't shy away from making her stories dark. Solange has good fortune every so often, but much of her life is difficult.

The book is intriguing, and readers are kept wondering about what Solange will deal with next. I definitely loved the love story between Solange and Petrarch and how it grows and changes over time. She finds herself in love with this man, who continually betrays her, Novik writes this love story beautifully and really makes readers feel for Solange (yet I also wanted to yell at her many times over as well).

I really enjoyed how this story is split into different sections, depending on where Solange is in her life.

Solange becomes stronger and she continually fights for herself and what she believes she deserves. I believe that this book gives female readers a hero that they can root for. Solange picks herself up again and again, and continually fights.

I think it's great to see writers picking up female figures in historical fiction and bringing them to the forefront more often. I have fallen in love with Mary Novik's writing style and I hope she doesn't wait as long in between her stories!

Elise says

I won this book from the first read program and I loved it! The writing and story was engaging and I was drawn into Solange's story after a few pages. I did find that the years did pass quickly but I was so interested in Solange's story and fight for her survival and her children. This is an excellent choice for anybody who loves historical fiction. Thanks to Good Reads, Doubleday Publishing and the First Reads program for this book!
