



Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life

Julia Frey

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Debauched aristocrat, cabaret painter, accidental dwarf? Julia Frey's definitive, superbly researched biography strips away the myth of Toulouse-Lautrec to reveal the tortured man beneath. This is a remarkable and compelling portrait, featuring 135 photos and illustrations.

Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life Details

Date : Published October 1st 1995 by Orion Publishing (first published June 16th 1994)

ISBN : 9781857993639

Author : Julia Frey

Format : Paperback 600 pages

Genre : Art, Biography, Nonfiction, Art History, Cultural, France, History

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From Reader Review Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life for online ebook

Richard says

Other than a basic familiarity with some of his iconic posters, I knew very little about Henri Toulouse-Lautrec until I saw the 1952 movie, *Moulin Rouge*, starring Jose Ferrer. The movie, as I recall, indicates that the cause of his stunted height was a childhood injury to his legs. In fact, Henry (as author Julia Frey refers to Toulouse-Lautrec throughout the book) had dwarfism, as did a few of his cousins. Apparently it was a custom in his family for cousins to marry each other -- Henry's parents were first cousins -- and as a result, a recessive dwarfism gene manifested itself several times in Henry's generation.

This book is, put simply, just about everything I wanted it to be. As a good biography should, it vividly describes the time and the place where the subject lived, in this case late 19th Century France. The book is interesting, at first, from a medical perspective, as we see the various ailments that Henry suffered from and how the doctors of the time attempted to treat him. (I seem to have a particular fascination with old-fashioned medicine.)

And then, as Henry matures, the story becomes more and more about his art: the style, the inspiration, the controversy, and the technique. The book is well-illustrated, as any book about an artist should be. We have black-and-white pictures integrated into the text and a section of glossy color plates in the middle of the book. When one of the plates is mentioned in the text, the plate number is indicated in parenthesis, which is very helpful. You know when to look for the color illustration and when not to bother. Another nice touch is that at the top of each even-numbered page, in brackets, is the current year in the narrative. Many times when I'm reading non-fiction I wonder what year it is that I'm reading about, and I often have to double back through quite a few pages to find out. With this book it's very simple. This is a great idea, and I wish it would catch on. (And evidently it hasn't; the book was published in 1994. Oh well.)

I rarely give a five-star rating here on Goodreads, but I found it so absorbing that it definitely qualified. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec led a short but very interesting life, and produced some amazing artwork (I actually like his paintings more than I do his prints) and Julia Frey did a fantastic job of telling his story.

Samantha says

An all-encompassing biography of a great Parisian artist. Must read if you are a scholar or just curious about his life.

Sam says

I found this to be such an amazing insight into the strange yet amazing world of Toulouse Lautrec- I've always loved his posters and lithographs ever since I studied him at GCSE level. I now feel as if I have a much better grounding of the artist as a person, as well as understand much more about his condition and why he was often at the Moulin Rouge thanks to this book.

Lewis Weinstein says

I read this (quickly, following my wife's yellow highlights) to prepare for a course we are taking this summer as part of The Oxford Experience. It is well written and comprehensive. The parts I read carefully brought the facts, and more important, the emotion of Lautrec's life - his struggles, his successes, his relationships - into sharp focus. Perhaps, after the course, I will go back and savor more from Frey's biography.

Joseph Adelizzi, Jr. says

When fate dictated I read two unrelated biographies simultaneously I admit I thought the plan was stupid. Recent reads of Christopher Moore's "Sacre Bleu" and Andrew Graham-Dixon's "Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane" left me curious about both Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and the Baroque period in Italy, respectively, and fate was not to be deterred, especially by a feeble mind. So onward I pushed with my reading of Julia Frey's "Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life" and Franco Mormando's "Bernini: His Life and His Rome" expecting confusion reminiscent of that old Reese's Peanut Butter Cup commercial: "You got your Toulouse-Lautrec on my Bernini....No - you got your Bernini on my Toulouse-Lautrec."

Some people are born into this world, others are born alongside it. Gian Lorenzo Bernini was definitely one of those individuals born into this world, embracing it, molding it to his desires, squeezing every last drop from it. Recognized immediately as a prodigy, the world seemed to be there for Bernini's picking. And pick he did, combining his artistic talents with his amazing abilities to dissimulate to gain the favor of pope after pope and king and queen alike and amass an unrivaled fortune. Bernini would use that fortune to cushion him from many attacks by jealous rivals and to allow him and his family to escape actions which should have destroyed their noble standing.

Conversely, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, owing to a hereditary bone growth disorder, was born alongside the world, feeling forced to look at the world from a few feet away, anxious to be a part, angry to be apart, quick to point out the world's flaws even – or, rather, especially – amid its beauty. Escaping unscathed was never a possibility for Toulouse-Lautrec. Sentenced from the outset to a life as a derided spectator he thought solace and acceptance were to be found in drink, and that decision brought his life to an early end.

As for the art of the two talented men, again the extreme differences prove somehow complimentary. Much of Bernini's work is at first glance beautiful but seems to bend toward the grotesque with continued examination. It feels as if Bernini takes the sacred and underpins it with touches of the profane which ultimately bleed through to dominate and spoil the work; as evidence consider Bernini's portrayal of St. Theresa. On the other hand, most of Toulouse-Lautrec's work initially feels grotesque but often becomes more beautiful with continued examination; I'm thinking now of his work "Au Salon de la Rue des Moulins (reprise). He takes the profane and adds in gentle touches of the sacred which ultimately come through to augment the work. Admittedly, Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings very often feel like jabs at conventional ideals of beauty, but I really can't blame the man for wanting to jab a world that excluded him from every aspect of its beauty.

Even the subtitles of the two works are revelatory of the difference between the lives of the two men. Mormando's Bernini is subtitled "His Life and His Rome," indicating the control and mastery Bernini had over his life and his time. Frey subtitled her work on Toulouse-Lautrec impersonally and generically "A Life."

Regarding each biography as a reading experience I would give the edge to Frey. The many color plates showing many works of Toulouse-Lautrec along with her comments on these works strengthened my feelings for Toulouse-Lautrec the artist, and her sympathetic and thorough text strengthened my feelings for Toulouse-Lautrec the human being. The only complaint I would have is often the references to the paintings are not presented in the same order as the plates themselves. As for the Mormando book, I don't think the chosen plates do justice to the talents of the artist; most plates are just the busts of certain figures from Bernini's time, and these busts feel like little more than concrete evidence of Bernini's dissimulating nature. The author often mentions many of Bernini's architectural masterpieces but no plates showing these masterpieces are present in the book.

Who knew? What initially felt like an ill-advised foray into two unrelated lives at the same time actually ended up as an enjoyable study in contrasts. Like the characters in that old Reese's Peanut Butter Cups commercial, I was pleasantly surprised by the results of the serendipitous blending of such different tastes. I guess it goes to show you - sometimes you feel like a nut, and sometimes you don't.

Divvy says

Long and detailed, but thoroughly interesting account of the artist. The author spent a decent amount of time on artistic analysis of individual works in the artist oeuvre. I would recommend to any biography/Lautrec fan.

Mark B. says

"The" book on Toulouse-Lautrec in my opinion (and many others.) Hefty, detailed and spot-on. It probably doesn't hurt that it plays up to my passion with Paris at the end of the 19th century.

Trailhoundz says

This book is a hefty- but riveting- bio of Toulouse-Lautrec. From start to finish, I couldn't put it down. Photos throughout the book, as well as a color section of artwork, makes this book A+. Even if you aren't a fan of his work, I think you'll find this a wonderful read.

Mercedes Rochelle says

I was surprised at how many misconceptions I had about Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec before I read this biography. Taken predominately from thousands of letters only recently made available, Julia Frey has given us an extensive biography that reveals an incredibly complicated, brilliant personality whose art may never have been so poignant except for his disabilities. I had always thought that Henri's problems with his legs began after two falls in his boyhood. But no, his parents knew their child was in trouble way before he ever started to walk; the falls were a symptom of his condition, not the cause of it. I also thought his father was a

stern, distant disciplinarian, only to discover quite the opposite. Alphonse, nicknamed Alph, was a bit of a profligate; he was absent when he was needed most, showing up unexpectedly and insisting that everyone take his advice. He was often neglectful—usually out hunting or traveling—sometimes affectionate, sometimes endearing, but never helpful. Henri's mother learned to make decisions on her own and took upon herself the long-suffering role of “keeper”, an overprotective nurse who may have contributed greatly to Henri's subsequent dependence on her. What a way to grow up! Apparently he was a joyful child despite his literal growing pains, and throughout his life his upbeat attitude carried him through situations that would oppress an average person, not to mention an ugly, misshapen one. Nonetheless, as one would expect from a person who is the center of attention, he learned how to manipulate others: “He had learned as a child how to impose his will by psychological means, and his friends, both male and female, found him irresistibly charming but unrelentingly tyrannical. He had become extremely good at getting others to do his bidding—and managed to do so in large part without resorting to demands on their pity for his physical state.” Henri learned to deflect scorn and discomfort by making fun of himself, both in public and private, and by making it so easy to be around him, he managed to attract many loyal friends throughout his lifetime.

But there is no getting away from the fact this his family considered him unsuitable to the title of Count, especially when he decided to devote himself entirely to art—not just acceptable art, but low-life, common art both in medium and subject matter. The more they objected, the more he indulged himself. And, as if to emphasize, or explain, his own relationship with the world, his art became known for its realism—in a harsh way—exposing false beauty and getting to the heart of the subject. An article from editor Arthur Huc tells us: “Henry's originality as an artist came largely from his use of ugliness and exaggeration of physical quirks to reveal the psychological truths of his models, to bring forth, albeit with cruelty, the irony of the antagonism between interior and exterior beauty.” This, in a nutshell, describes Henri's approach to art, which he also emphasizes in a letter to his friend: “I have tried to draw realistically and not ideally. It may be a defect, for I have no mercy on warts, and I like to adorn them with stray hairs, to make them bigger than life and shiny.”

It turns out that the author has had years of training as an artist and printmaker, which makes her a perfect interpreter of his art. She has interspersed both black-and-white sketches in the text, where appropriate, and several pages of full-color works that she explains in detail. It's so very helpful! It was like Julia was taking me by the hand and pointing out details that I had missed for many years (mostly the peripheral stuff, always significant as it turns out). She knows who the models are and what Henri's relationship with them were; many of the models were somewhat unidentifiable in the backgrounds of some of the paintings, but there they are. She explains how Henri would paint an oil as a preparatory sketch for a lithograph, then display them side-by-side to demonstrate the creative process. This, and a lot of his other artistic applications are woven into the text, giving us a thorough picture of his work as well as his personality and, inevitably, his decline into alcoholism. I would consider this a definitive biography. Highly recommended.

Cynthia Karl says

A great artist and a tortured human being - this biography of Toulouse-Lautrec is fascinating both for the story of his life and the picture the reader gets of turn of the century France. My only caveat is that the author occasionally does too much conjecturing and supposing, coming up with analyses that may or may not be true.

Suzanne says

So much work went into this very long chronology, but shorter, thematic chapters would have brought life to "... a Life."

Jan-Maat says

[in the book either Henry, once or twice Henri, Toulouse or Lautrec, Frey is similarly inconsistent with other people's names, which irked me since I am an irritable bastard (hide spoiler)]

Kate says

I wanted to learn more about Lautrec's life-- and to check the actual history against the visually remarkable but suspiciously romantic biopic "Moulin Rouge" (John Huston, 1952).

This bio met both of those goals for me. I thoroughly enjoyed the detailed presentation of "Henry's" personality, his eccentric family life, the colorful milieu that he inhabited. As a letter-writer, he was a charmer! The illustrations of his work are plentiful and well chosen, the photos of his life, perhaps less so. (Do you really need to see photos of Toulouse-Lautrec with his trousers down, defecating on a beach? No, neither did I.)

But that is a mere cavil. A larger difficulty with this reading is one that other Goodreaders have noted: the author is mighty free with conjectures about what Henry and others "must have" been thinking. By the time I was halfway through, I was regularly muttering, "But there are any number of OTHER things that they might have been thinking!" I felt even less interest in the incessant interpretation of the subconscious motivations she perceives in every work of art--

Sometimes an elephant's trunk is just an elephant's trunk!

Jason says

i was rummaging through my shelves last night and saw this...i bought it a very long time ago and for some reason didn't read it...
easily remedied...

Edmund says

Lively and amazingly well researched biography of the deformed genius who was both a French aristocrat

and a painter of genius whose subjects were the cabaret dancers, circus performers, pimps and prostitutes of late nineteenth century Paris.
