

Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo Study Guide

Frida, a Biography of Frida Kahlo by Hayden Herrera

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Plot Summary

Frida is a total biographical account of the life of Frida Kahlo, the important Mexican painter. The biography covers important events in her life, including relationships and events that influenced her and her famous paintings. Many people that knew Kahlo thought that she was intricately linked to her paintings and that it was impossible to separate the woman from the artist. With this in mind, the biography of Kahlo allows the reader to have a greater understanding of and appreciation for the life of Kahlo and her impressive array of artistic works.

The biography starts with Kahlo's early days and gives a detailed account of her family life. To give a better understanding of Kahlo's beginnings and her education, these situations are fully covered, including the people with whom Kahlo became friends and letters written at the time. When she was young, she was the victim of a terrible bus accident that affected her for the rest of her life. Steel bars penetrated her and ripped apart her body. She suffered greatly and was subjected to the first of many, many operations and physician procedures during her lifetime. However, her confinement to the bed allowed her to find the skill that defined her life — painting.

When she was still young, Kahlo met Diego Rivera, the man who would one day be her husband and obsessively the center of her world. She sought his honest opinion of her artistic work so she could determine whether she should pursue it or move on to a different career. Rivera was taken with her at the time, but it would be years before they became involved romantically. Throughout their marriage, divorce, and subsequent remarriage, Rivera and Kahlo maintained a unique and unusual relationship. Both individuals had numerous affairs, many of them quite public. Nevertheless, both husband and wife remained somewhat constant to each other and influenced the other's life tremendously. As they were both painters with strong political leanings, they intrigued and inspired one another as they simultaneously managed to hurt the other as much as possible.

Although Rivera initially was the more famous painter in the marriage, as time progressed, Kahlo began to exert more and more influence in the artistic world. Rivera was always quick to point out that Kahlo was one of the first Mexican painters to be shown in the Louvre. Before she died, she had her own exhibition in Mexico and although she was very sick, she traveled by stretcher and entertained from a bed in the gallery. As she became more and more ill, she brought the world in to her through friends and family members. She eventually passed away in her bed while asleep.



Chapter 1, The Blue House on Londress Street and Chapter 2, Childhood in Coyoacan

Chapter 1, The Blue House on Londress Street and Chapter 2, Childhood in Coyoacan Summary and Analysis

The beginning of Frida Kahlo's life is explored in the first chapter of the novel. The life and story of Kahlo begins and ends in the same place, at the blue house on Londress Street. While it once contained Kahlo and her family, it is now the Museo Frida Kahlo where a recreation of Kahlo's life is accurately conveyed. Painted on the wall are two inscriptions that say that Kahlo was born there and that she and Rivera lived there for many years. However quaint those inscriptions might be, neither one of them are accurate.

The house was built by Guillermo Kahlo, Frida's father. He migrated from Germany and worked at a jewelry store named La Perla, where he met his second wife (whom he married after his first died suddenly after the birth of their second daughter) and Frida's mother, Matilde. Guillermo starts to make a name for himself as a photographer and gains commissions from the Mexican government.

Frida Kahlo was actually born on July 6, 1907 (despite her claims that she was born in 1910, the year of the Mexican Revolution). During the Revolution, Kahlo's father brought them into penury whereas before his commissions with the government had placed him in a comfortable lifestyle. During this time, Guillermo becomes more and more misanthropic and his wife has to raise the girls with a traditional Mexican upbringing as best she can, teaching them how to cook and attend religious services regularly. Nevertheless, when one of her half-sisters, Matilde left to be with her boyfriend, she was kicked out of the house permanently and not permitted to be heard or seen for years to come.

When Kahlo was six, she contracted polio, spending nine months confined to a room. Whereas before she was a chubby, playful imp, the sickness made her thin. When she was up again, the doctors prescribed physical exercise. Guillermo encouraged his daughter to play a number of outdoor sports, making her even more of a tomboy than she already was. Nevertheless, one of her legs remained thin and she was constantly teased about it. Like the paintings she made of herself as a child, Kahlo portrayed her childhood and life as being separate and alone due to her change in personality after the sickness.



Guillermo was not attentive to any of his daughters, but he was attentive to Kahlo, most likely because he saw much of himself in the girl. He did not have any boys to favor and so put his attentions towards Kahlo instead. She painted portraits of him and when recalling her life, fondly remembered her father.



Chapter 3, The National Preparatory School and Chapter 4, Accident and Aftermath

Chapter 3, The National Preparatory School and Chapter 4, Accident and Aftermath Summary and Analysis

In 1922, Kahlo enrolled in the National Preparatory School, the best preparatory school in Mexico. It was an impressive school and Kahlo's personality as a unique and powerful character started to develop here. She was one of the first girls permitted into the school and one of only thirty-five girls among two thousand students. Most likely, Guillermo was the strongest reason that Kahlo was permitted to attend this impressive school.

Kahlo was friendly with a number of cliques but her closest pals were a group called the Cachuchas. There were two girls and seven boys in her group and they were united in their sense of irreverence. They would often get into trouble from their pranks, but another favorite activity was to find a better book than the others, finish it first and dramatize it in front of the other members.

They were not particularly respectful to their professors and famous painters were no different. A group of painters was commissioned to create a set of murals for the school. One of these painters was Diego Rivera. At the time, he was thirty-six, internationally famous and physically large. He was also gregarious and a prominent womanizer. Although a child at the time, Kahlo stole food from Rivera and soaped the stairway from the stage he was painting on in the hopes that he would fall. Her prank did not work. Kahlo saw the many woman that Rivera entertained despite being married at the time, including his mistress Lupe Marin whom he married in 1922 and then divorced in order to marry Kahlo.

Despite Kahlo's attraction and fascination with Rivera, she was dating the undisputed leader of the Cachuchas, Alejandro Gomez Arias. Arias marked the beginning of Kahlo's love affairs with serious and important men throughout her life. Their relationship was not sanctioned by her parents, nor did his parents approve.

Late in the afternoon on September 17, 1925, the accident occurred that would forever alter Kahlo's life. The bus on which she was riding with Arias was in a horrible accident. Her spinal column was broken in three places, her collarbone and two ribs were shattered. In addition, her right leg had eleven fractures, her right foot was crushed and her pelvis was broken in three places. A steel handrail entered her abdomen and came out through her vagina. It was doubtful that she would survive. However, after a month in the hospital, she returned home. Throughout her time in the hospital and in traction,

she wrote often to Arias. During this time, she spent time learning how to paint as she wrote letters to her boyfriend and received visits from her friends.



Chapter 5, The Broken Column and Chapter 6, Diego: The Frog Prince

Chapter 5, The Broken Column and Chapter 6, Diego: The Frog Prince Summary and Analysis

Until the time of her death, Kahlo's life would be a struggle against death and decay after the accident. There would be good times and periods of unmanageable pain. Her first relapse came a year after her accident. She continued to paint and reflected the intensely personal nature that her paintings would be known for. She wrote passionate letters to Arias and her friends, showing her strong will not just to endure the pain, but to live life fully.

For many Mexicans and her friends, Kahlo's accident was seen as destiny. She was not meant to die. Instead, she was meant to live a remarkable life filled with pain and despair in order to create her unusual paintings. One of the most powerful paintings from this time is called *The Broken Column* depicting her feelings of paralysis and despair at the time. Whereas her first self portrait seemed to show a synthesis of life, *The Broken Column* instead represented the possibilities of life that were so far away from the broken Kahlo.

Kahlo made a significant enough recovery that when Arias returned from an extended trip to Europe, she was able to go to Mexico City and visit with him and her friends. He was elected president of the National Student Confederation in 1929. It was around this time that Kahlo met Rivera again; this time, Rivera was forty-one to her mere 22 years old. A powerful, driven muralist, Rivera was famous for his paintings and infamous for his antics both professionally and personally. He regaled with wild stories and had an exuberant personality that complemented and challenged Kahlo's.

Despite being married at the time with two small children, Rivera's conquests with other women were well known. He was large and homely, but it was said that more women threw themselves at him than vice versa. However, Kahlo introduced herself to Rivera not as a potential conquest, but as an artist. She wanted his honest opinion about her work and demanded truthfulness from him. Later, he said that he was immediately taken with her and her artwork. He pursued Kahlo and was even warned by Guillermo that she was a devil, but was more and more entranced by her.



Chapter 7, The Elephant and the Dove and Chapter 8, Newlywed: The Tehuana Frida

Chapter 7, The Elephant and the Dove and Chapter 8, Newlywed: The Tehuana Frida Summary and Analysis

Although Rivera was separated from his wife Marin at the time, Marin became quite jealous of all the time that Rivera spent with Kahlo. Her spunk and freshness, however, ultimately tempted Rivera and he was entranced by her fast mind. One of the key successes to their eventual marriage was that they both were easily bored; thus, their unusual styles challenged each other.

The way that Kahlo dressed herself was an important part of who she was. Even during her sickest times, she would spend a great deal of time and attention to her looks. Around the time that she met Rivera, she went from dressing like a flapper girl to styling herself as a member of the Young Communist League with workers' attire and haircut.

As Kahlo and Rivera's courtship became more and more intense, the quantity of her painting increased, as did her confidence. She started to borrow some of Diego's techniques yet her style was wholly her own. Rivera also started to include Kahlo as a figure in his murals at the time. While Rivera's portraits were huge, sweeping masses, Kahlo worked hard to produce and capture an individual life. She was also painting things intimately connected with her life and of her immediate experiences.

Finally, Kahlo and Rivera decided to get married in a small civil ceremony. Her parents called the match a marriage between an elephant and a dove. Their first home was a huge house with a French-gothic-style facade and mismatched furniture. Kahlo did not paint often during the first few months of her marriage. She spent a great deal of her time learning how to be a wife to Rivera. Remarkably, Lupe Marin was the one that taught her what Rivera's favorite foods were, and how to pack a picnic lunch for him while he was working. In return, Kahlo painted Marin's portrait.

Although Kahlo did not paint often, Rivera used her frequently as a critic of his murals due to her blunt honesty. During their honeymoon, Rivera continued to paint every day while Kahlo would spend time walking around town or cooking. She wanted a child, but learned she could not give birth due to the bus accident. She later had miscarriages, and was never able to have a child with Rivera.

Kahlo began to dress in traditional Mexican costumes as a Tehuana woman, resplendent with ornate jewelry that she adored. Rivera gave her lots of jewelry because he knew she enjoyed it.



Chapter 9, Gringolandia and Chapter 10, Detroit: Henry Ford Hospital

Chapter 9, Gringolandia and Chapter 10, Detroit: Henry Ford Hospital Summary and Analysis

Trouble begins to brew in Mexico. Rivera, who accepted commissions from both the Mexican government and the capitalist United States, started to hear complaints from his Communist party. Rivera and Kahlo decided to visit San Francisco for a commission that Rivera was granted. He waited over two months before he started to paint in order to capture the American people. However, while Rivera loved the new experience, Kahlo did not take to the "gringo" people very well. She considered them to look like unbaked rolls of bread. She met Edward Weston, the photographer, for the first time and also met an important doctor, Leo Eloesser. He was a thoracic surgeon, but his specialty was bone surgery. For the rest of her life, when her pain increased, his guidance and opinion was trusted above Mexican doctors.

Kahlo began to paint again, including the Portrait of Eva Frederick, Portrait of Mrs. Jean Wight and Luther Burbank. When she and Rivera returned to Mexico in April, Kahlo gave him a kind of wedding portrait painting she called Frida and Diego Rivera. In this portrait, she depicted them the way that San Franciscans had seen them — as newlyweds.

Right after they returned to Mexico, they were invited to New York to have an exhibition at the fledgling Museum of Modern Art. Rivera was to have 143 paintings in the exhibition, three of which were to be new compositions based on observations of Manhattan life. Rivera worked day and night, while they both attended a succession of parties in the evening. However, Kahlo was not impressed with New York and her distaste for Americans continued.

Since Detroit was the heart of the American industry to Rivera, he was invited to paint murals there on the theme of modern industry. Remarkably, however, while they were in Detroit, they were wooed by the wealthy just as they were in New York. In addition, they were invited to dinner parties with famous people including Henry Ford. In fact, Ford danced with Kahlo many times and she often stood out in the traditional Mexican attire that she wore to these formal events.

Kahlo was very bored in Detroit and rather than spend her time painting, as Rivera hoped she would, she taught herself to drive. She soon discovered she was pregnant, but eventually lost that baby, too. After her miscarriage, she spent 13 days in the hospital. During that time, she drew pencil sketches of the incident. Later, she created a painting called Henry Ford Hospital, which expressed her feelings at that time.



Since she could not have a child, Kahlo started to transfer her yearnings to other people's children, especially to Diego and Lupe Marin's children, Lupe and Ruth — and to her own nieces. At this time, Kahlo began to paint on metal to make retablos. The Henry Ford Hospital painting was her first retablo, but it was a method that she would continue in her painting career.

They returned to Mexico by train and a week after her arrival, Kahlo's mother passed away following the removal of 160 gallstones. When Kahlo returned to Detroit to be with Rivera, she painted *My Birth*. The Detroit winters depressed Kahlo and her irritable husband did little to ease the pain. In addition, she was mourning the death of her mother so soon after her own miscarriage. However, she painted and came back to life with a *Self Portrait* at this time showing her in even brighter attire than before.



Chapter 11, Revolutionaries in the Temple of Finance and Chapter 12, A Few Small Nips

Chapter 11, Revolutionaries in the Temple of Finance and Chapter 12, A Few Small Nips Summary and Analysis

While Rivera was working hard on his murals in Detroit in order to move on to the Rockefeller Center, more and more people started to find fault with his work. Some thought it obscene; others sacrilegious. Nevertheless, when Rivera arrived back in New York, he was very popular, and people were purchasing tickets to watch him paint. Kahlo herself went there a few times a week to hang out and chat with friends. She enjoyed being back in New York, unlike her previous visit. She delighted in making fun of the New York press and watching them squirm.

When Rivera's mural was partly finished, the environment started to grow hostile. An article ran in the New York World-Telegram calling the piece communist. Rivera wanted to paint the head of Lenin and balance it with the head of Abraham Lincoln. The response to this idea was his being fired. There was a public outcry to keep the project going, but that failed; the mural was chipped away. In addition, Rivera and Kahlo were hurt financially by the move away from the Rockefeller Center.

Kahlo became ill and her right foot seemed paralyzed. She became desperate to go back to Mexico after nearly four years of living in the United States. Rivera, on the other hand, did not want to leave visit Mexico or leave America. Kahlo's painting *My Dress Hangs There* symbolized her aching to return to her homeland. Finally, in 1933, after Rivera finished a fresco at the New Workers' School, they went to Mexico.

When they returned from Mexico, they moved into their new house in San Angel with two separate buildings connected only by a bridge. The painting she exhibited at the time was called *A Few Small Nips* in reference to a man who murdered his lover and afterwards said he gave her only a few small nips. Clearly, Kahlo was consumed by the story and painted to represent it. The painting symbolized Kahlo's dashed hopes for a new life in Mexico when she learned of Rivera's affair with her sister Cristina. She was distraught, cut her hair and stopped wearing Tehuana costumes. In addition, her health deteriorated greatly. She went to the hospital again for trouble with her right foot, to have her appendix removed and to have an abortion.

Kahlo and Rivera separated after she discovered his affair with Cristina. However, they continued to see each other frequently. Kahlo moved out of their San Angel house and

secured her own flat to create a life far away from Rivera's. Although she put up a good face, the painting *A Few Small Nips* clearly shows her pain.



Chapter 13, Trotsky and Chapter 14, A Painter in Her Own Right

Chapter 13, Trotsky and Chapter 14, A Painter in Her Own Right Summary and Analysis

After Rivera's affair with Cristina became public, Kahlo changed from an adoring bride to a more complex woman. Her relationship with Rivera and his women changed as well. Their new relationship was symbolized by the house in which they lived. When she was angry with him, she could simply lock the bridge that connected their upstairs. This forced him to talk with her maid downstairs, who would dismiss him away. Rivera generated, and freely spent, their income but Kahlo was the one in charge of the finances and bill paying. Some weeks, they would not have enough money due to Rivera's overspending.

By 1935, Kahlo forgave Cristina for the affair, although she would never totally forgive Rivera. In fact, Cristina's children came to represent family for Kahlo and became the children that she could not have on her own. Many people came to visit the San Angel house which became a kind of an international intelligentsia. During this time, Kahlo started to drink more and more, making her behavior less civilized and more "indecent." Her relationship with Rivera took on a more maternal tone, where she cared for him as a mother would for a child rather than a lover. In addition, Kahlo started to explore homosexual relationships with women, which Rivera looked upon favorably. While Kahlo preferred men to women and would take many men as lovers, the homosexual relationships were better for her when her physical frailty made heterosexual love nearly impossible. In addition, they started keeping pet monkeys as child-like replacements.

During this time, sculptor Isamu Noguchi became her lover. They even went so far as to get an apartment together but when the furniture was delivered, the delivery man accidentally handed the invoice to Kahlo and the affair was discovered — and ultimately ended.

Rivera's politics encouraged him to become part of the Trotskyites that urged the Mexican government to grant Leon and Natalia permission to live in their house after nine years of exile. Although both Rivera and Trotsky were obsessive workers, both made time to see each other often. They could see each other without first making an appointment and Trotsky dropped his usual formal manner. Meanwhile, Trotsky and Kahlo started their secretive love affair. He would write her notes and slip them inside books he suggested she read; after a few weeks, they began a full affair, meeting at Cristina's house. Rivera remained unaware of the affair but Natalia became deeply depressed. Kahlo ultimately ended the affair, although he begged her not to leave him. Her only response was to give him a present of a painting on his birthday.



Kahlo then pursued more casual affairs and laughed at Rivera's. She greatly improved her technical painting skills and produced more paintings than she had in the previous eight years of marriage. However, Kahlo was still unhappy about being childless and her paintings, such as *My Nurse and I*, indicated that she had had yet another miscarriage. Even Kahlo's still life paintings were not mere still-lives, but instead were placed in dramatic settings that indicated a larger setting.

Kahlo had her first major sale in 1938. She left for New York in high spirits that October and told everyone that she was going to divorce Rivera and begin her own truly independent life. She held her art exhibit while in New York and displayed 25 paintings there. Time magazine reported on the show, and overall the reviews were positive. Roughly half of her paintings sold. She loved the exhibit since this was the first time she was being swept up and praised without having her celebrated spouse next to her.

Kahlo began another serious affair with a photographer named Nickolas Muray. Although their relationship was volatile, it was extraordinarily passionate as well. They fell deeply in love and she entertained the idea of leaving Rivera forever for Muray.



Chapter 15, This Pinchisimo Paris and Chapter 16, What the Water Gave Me

Chapter 15, This Pinchisimo Paris and Chapter 16, What the Water Gave Me Summary and Analysis

Kahlo sailed to Paris in 1939 and Europe was in an unsettling peace. She stayed with Andre and Jacqueline Breton. She was not immediately happy with the city and ended up ill in the American Hospital. She moved out of the hospital into her own apartment after the Bretons began to irritate her. Since she could not spend all day alone, she visited with Marcel Duchamp for entertainment. Here, she also learned more about the Surrealist movement. However, overall, Kahlo did not appreciate the decadence of Paris or their empty posturing.

During her time in Paris, Kahlo supported and participated in meetings with various Trotskyites. Upon her return to Mexico, however, she supported Rivera's public voicing of turning from Trotsky and breaking from those political views. Rivera's personal and political conflicts with Trotsky influenced this conclusion for the couple and Trotsky would state to the Mexican press that he no longer had "moral solidarity" with Rivera.

Despite being embraced as a Surrealist by Andre Breton and the others in Paris, Kahlo remarked that she never knew she was a Surrealist until it was put upon her; she just painted what she knew. Although the European Surrealists had high hopes to make Mexico a center of Surrealism, the movement did not catch on the way that they had hoped. Part of the reason for this was the high dominance of murals in Mexican artwork that dominated the landscape and promoted realism over the fantastical.

Kahlo's most Surreal work came during this period — What the Water Gave Me. She would later say that this painting had special importance for her. However, unlike the European Surrealists, Kahlo's approach to Surrealism was working with symbols and ideas that were closely tied to her personal life and experiences. Not long after What the Water Gave Me was completed, Kahlo began to vehemently deny that she was a Surrealist. The movement started to lose popularity in the 1940's and no doubt Kahlo resisted being associated with a dying trend. Even Kahlo's diary was considered to be highly Surreal, although her intent was obviously not for public viewing and even had a high amount of "realism" enclosed within.



Chapter 17, A Necklace of Thorns and Chapter 18, Remarriage

Chapter 17, A Necklace of Thorns and Chapter 18, Remarriage Summary and Analysis

After Paris, Kahlo stayed in New York briefly and ended her affair with Muray. She returned to Mexico shortly thereafter, most likely to nurse her hurt after the break-up with Muray. Perhaps also, Kahlo's sadness was exacerbated by the divorce proceedings that had started with Rivera. Although there were many reasons and explanations that friends gave for the divorce, Rivera and Kahlo told the press that their divorce was the only way they could remain friends.

After the divorce, Kahlo became even more openly seductive with both men and women. The day that the divorce papers come through, Kahlo completed one of her most famous paintings, *The Two Fridas*. In the painting, one of the Kahlo depictions is wearing a necklace of thorns reminiscent of Jesus on the cross. From this point on, Kahlo would have a stronger grasp on the use of color, as shown in various self-portraits.

A month after her divorce became final, Kahlo cut her hair short just as she did after learning of the affair Rivera had with Cristina. She destroyed all aspects of her female sexuality to highlight her loneliness and demonstrate her defiant feelings to be left alone. Now, she had to live off selling her own paintings and sent more of them out with friends helping her as much as they could. Despite her need to sell paintings to live, Kahlo refused to make her work more salable in order to gain profits. When she was granted a commission, she did not always give the patron what he or she expected, but instead used the opportunity to display her personal pain. One instance was the patron of Clare Boothe Luce, who commissioned a portrait for the New York Opening of Kahlo's art exhibit. The suicide of Dorothy Hale was the subject, but Kahlo's memorial was a shock, bringing an already-difficult subject in the foreground by painting right into the frame. Luce was so horrified that she had to have her name taken off the painting.

In 1940, assassins attempted to kill Trotsky by machine-gunning his bedroom. They missed, but due to his falling out with Trotsky, Rivera was immediately listed as one of the prime suspects. He had to stay in various homes while the police searched for him, although he was innocent. Later, Rivera would say that he had Trotsky's asylum granted only to have him in the ideal position to be assassinated, but more likely, these were just words from a man who loved to hear himself pontificate rather than a serious statement.

Kahlo's health deteriorated during this time and Dr. Eloesser recommended that she fly to San Francisco for treatment. He did not approve of the recommended surgeries by the Mexican doctors and instead believed that her recent situation caused her health to decline. The doctor also wrote that Rivera loved Kahlo very much and perhaps she

should consider remarrying him in order to help resolve her situation and improve her health simultaneously.

In early September, she flew to San Francisco and was reunited with Rivera. She was put into a hospital after spending a few days with Rivera in his apartment there. Her health improved greatly. They would eventually remarry, although it would take Rivera many tries before she would succumb to the request. On Rivera's fifty-fourth birthday, they remarried in a small ceremony.



Chapter 19, Patrons, Politics, Public Recognition and Chapter 20, The Little Deer

Chapter 19, Patrons, Politics, Public Recognition and Chapter 20, The Little Deer Summary and Analysis

Kahlo received international critical acclaim, and her career started to take off. However, previously, her work was seen only as private pieces for Rivera's personal pleasure. Now, her paintings started to reveal greater technical proficiency and realism. She painted with greater momentum as well. She participated in a Surrealist show in Mexico City and another one in San Francisco. In addition, her work was finally being recognized in her own country and shown in many of the major group exhibitions. She was selected to be among the founding members of a Seminario de Cultura Mexicana.

However, despite the increase in her popularity, she still found it difficult to sell paintings and live by her work. She loved children and put some of them in her work. She was invited to teach children at La Esmeralda, the Ministry of Public Education's School of Painting and Sculpture. They were taught to be essentially Mexican. The students adored Kahlo. Her unstructured teaching style allowed them to learn how to be artistic without being regimented. She was there to stimulate their artistic passions alone.

After a few months, the long commute taxed Kahlo's health and she requested that her students come to see her at her home instead. Many of the students dropped out after the long bus commute, but four loyal students remained and were forever changed. They maintained a friendship with her for years and were referred to as "Los Fridos." She started to help her Fridos secure commissions, including murals. She helped them find work as assistants and secured venues to exhibit their work. The Fridos stayed close and enjoy the moniker as a symbol of intense pride.

Kahlo's health deteriorated again and she was forced to cut back on her teaching schedule. She had no appetite, and lost weight quickly. Fainting spells restricted her to her bed. In 1945, she was put into a plaster corset that made the pain in her legs and spine worse. She described all the corsets that she had to wear (there were twenty-eight different ones in total) as pure punishments. Understandably, Kahlo became obsessed with her own pain.

She flew to New York to for spinal fusion surgery, but that didn't alleviate her pain. Later, she believed that the physicians did not fuse the correct vertebrae. During her recuperation, she painted *The Little Deer* to express her suffering.



Chapter 21, Portraits of a Marriage and Chapter 22, Naturaleza Viva: Alive Still Life

Chapter 21, Portraits of a Marriage and Chapter 22, Naturaleza Viva: Alive Still Life Summary and Analysis

Rivera and Kahlo would later be seen by friends as "sacred monsters" enacting in a marriage together. They had an unusual definition of marriage and their mutual autonomy of each other was atypical of most conventional marriages. There were plenty of battles with bitter separations and consequent reconciliations. Kahlo continued to paint the changing landscape of their marriage along with her self-portraits.

The success of the marriage depended on their humor, social conscience, strong affinity for Mexicanism, intelligence and bohemian ways. However, they often lived apart with both having affairs with other individuals. Kahlo would even tease and some say, enjoy hearing about Rivera's different conquests. She was no passive flower, though, as she had many casual connections of her own over the years. However, one of Rivera's affairs in particular affected Kahlo. He fell in love with Maria Felix and there was even talk of his proposing to her and leaving Kahlo. Kahlo responded by making Felix one of the women in her closest circle of friends.

Kahlo treated Rivera as his mother during their marriage. She would laugh at his enormous size. At times, Rivera would pout and become upset if he did not get what he wanted. However, in the end, Kahlo remained married to her husband despite his intense love for Maria Felix and the numerous affairs that he had over the years.

In 1950, Kahlo went to the hospital in Mexico City and was so ill, she remained there for a year. Rivera took a small room in the hospital to be closer to Kahlo. She had constant visitors. Despite her doctors' orders to rest, she decorated her room with painted sugar skulls and candelabra with various other artistic decorations.

As Kahlo's health declined, so too did her attachment to material things. She began to give away her belongings to friends. Her devotion to communism intensified and she even tried to make her still-lives more political by putting flags and inscriptions on them.



Chapter 23, Homage to Frida Kahlo and Chapter 24, Night is Falling In My Life

Chapter 23, Homage to Frida Kahlo and Chapter 24, Night is Falling In My Life Summary and Analysis

In 1953, despite Kahlo's declining health, a one-person art exhibit honoring Kahlo is arranged in Mexico. Kahlo is incredibly proud of the show. The doctors, however, forbid her to move, but she refuses to miss her exhibit. To compromise, a bed is delivered to the exhibit and Kahlo is brought in on a stretcher and placed on the bed. From there, attendees stand in line to greet her and speak with her. She has an incredibly successful exhibition.

The doctors amputate Kahlo's leg due to gangrene and poor circulation. The loss of a leg is a huge blow to Kahlo's sense of aesthetics. Her sense of identity and self-esteem are heavily linked to her outward appearance and to lose a crucial part of herself depresses her greatly. She does receive an artificial leg and learns to walk short distances with it, hiding it beneath the flowing skirts that she is famous for wearing.

Kahlo starts to lose her grip on life and her illness and wild behavior become more and more erratic. Rivera despairs and tells people that if he were stronger, he would kill her to relieve her suffering. She knows that she is dying and writes as much in her diary. Just days before her death, she writes "I hope the exit is joyful — and I hope never to come back — Frida." The doctors say that she died from pulmonary embolism. Some say that she committed suicide using her drugs, but it is unlikely that she would have given up so lightheartedly after fighting against death for so long.



Chapter 25, Viva la Vida

Chapter 25, Viva la Vida Summary and Analysis

After Kahlo's death, Rivera becomes withdrawn and depressed. Too late, he realizes, the best part of his life was Kahlo. He even starts to doubt that she is really dead. Her veins are cut to see if blood will pour out to prove to him that she has passed away. He places communist symbols on her coffin to detract attention from the international heroine she had become.

The blue house was turned into a Frida Kahlo Museum in 1958 and is open to visitors. Rivera's only request was that he could sometimes cut off visitors when he wanted to recreate her presence by sitting there alone among her things.



Characters

Frida Kahlo

As the main subject of the biography, Kahlo's life and important events are covered. In addition to the personal situations, Kahlo's work and artistic slant are thoroughly explained. The biography does an excellent job of describing life events and tying them in with Kahlo's artistic pieces at the time. Individuals who might be vaguely familiar with Frida Kahlo the person but not familiar with her artistic works (or visa versa) will learn much more about the woman that was intricately defined and connected to her paintings. While other artists could not be said to have biographical works, Kahlo's paintings were personal and biographical in and of themselves.

Frida Kahlo's works were shown in the Louvre, but her impact on the world of painting and especially among Mexican nationalists cannot be underestimated. She was a unique and interesting woman whose life was filled with traumatic events that provided material for Kahlo's paintings, but also simultaneously defined her. The bus accident she suffered as a young adult would be the first of many difficult and painful physical and emotional events in her life. She would always struggle with medical issues, but also deal with being wholly in love with a man she defined as "unpossessable." Diego Rivera's many love affairs took their toll on Kahlo and her life as well. However, the unique character and irresistibility of Kahlo could not be ignored and unlike the traditional Mexican wife who silently stands by suffering as her husband has affairs, Kahlo has many love affairs of her own with both men and women.

Kahlo's works were tremendous, but her vivacity and life force while living cannot be understated. Other people were always drawn to her and she used her artistic talents and connections to help her students, the Fridos, gain more work and influence in the artistic world.

In addition to her art, Kahlo's life was very political. Although she was definitely leaning towards politics before she met Rivera, her relationship with him exacerbated her political interests. They permit Trotsky and his wife to stay in their home during their political exile (and she has an affair with Trotsky); Rivera also stirred up quite a bit of political outrage during their marriage, eventually getting himself banned from the Communist Party.

In the end, Kahlo's life and art had far-reaching influences both for the people of Mexico and the international community. Her life was incredibly interesting and her art will influence people for decades to come.

Diego Rivera

Kahlo's husband and one of the driving artistic forces in her life, Rivera had an incredible impact on Kahlo's life. Diego Rivera first met Kahlo when she was a young



adult when she asked his opinion about her art talents. She wanted a blunt opinion and she received it in Rivera, who later said that he was immediately taken with the young girl. However, when Kahlo first met Rivera, he was known for being a womanizer and having affairs on his then-wife. Even after she married Rivera, Kahlo was well aware that Rivera would not be faithful and she could not contain the "unpossessable" Rivera.

Rivera's artwork as a nationalist muralist played a huge role in the life of Kahlo. His political influence and leanings influenced her daily life, but also where she was to live for a number of years. They spent some time in New York and San Francisco as the political environment changed and Rivera found grants to work on murals in parts of the United States. Kahlo never truly enjoyed living among the "gringos" but stayed in the States to be with her husband. In addition, Rivera was integral in bringing Leon Trotsky to Mexico during his exile from Russia. Kahlo had an explicit affair with Trotsky that Rivera may or may not have found out about. Interestingly, although Rivera was quite public and brutal with his affairs, he would become violently jealous if he found out that Kahlo was having an affair with another man. He was more forgiving when she had affairs with women, however. Kahlo's reaction to many of his women, including some of the women with whom he had the most passionate affairs, was to not only befriend them, but make them one of her innermost circle. She would listen to Rivera's interpretation of these conquests and over time, became less of a wife to him and more of a maternal figure.

In the end, however, despite a divorce and remarriage, Rivera was distraught when Kahlo died. They had a tempestuous and highly unusual marriage, but each had a significant impact personally and professionally on the other. Theirs was a life together and yet wholly apart, but it worked for them and they challenged in each in this way. Also, Kahlo was obsessed with her husband and without him, she would not have had the remarkable life that she did — nor have some of the passionate emotion that is conveyed in her paintings.

Lupe Marin

One of Rivera's mistresses when he is married to another woman, Kahlo first knows of Marin when she is a young girl at the Preparatory School. She will witness Rivera and Marin's relationship as he paints a mural for Kahlo's school. Later, Marin will marry Rivera, but he will divorce her before he marries Kahlo. Initially, Marin does not take to Kahlo and accuses her of drinking heavily. However, over time, Marin was taken with Kahlo just like everyone else in her life and even teaches her how to be a more successful wife for Rivera. She attends their wedding reception but is not without her own jealousies.

Guillermo Kahlo

Frida's father, Guillermo is a German immigrant who has a wife who dies before he marries Frida's mother, Matilde. He meets her while working in a jewelry store La Perla,



but soon takes up photography. With commissions to capture Mexican images by the Mexican government, Guillermo provides a good income for this family (four daughters in total) until the Mexican Revolution, which cuts off his income supply. He is an eccentric and misanthropic individual, but has a great deal of respect and love for Frida, perhaps seeing some of his own personality traits in her. His photography skills are passed on in a sense through Frida's unique style of painting.

Alejandro Gomez Arias

Kahlo's first serious boyfriend and the person that she is with when she is the victim of the bus accident, Arias is one of the first strong men that she will have an affair with. Throughout her convalescence after the bus accident, she writes him passionate love letters, but they eventually drift apart.

Nickolaus Muray

A successful photographer, Kahlo has a passionate affair with Muray while in New York for her art exhibit. He will take now-famous pictures of her and they will fall deeply in love and their break-up will have a deep emotional impact on Kahlo.

Leon Trotsky

The famous political guru lived in exile for eight years with his wife Natalia. Thanks to the efforts of Rivera and his political cohorts, Trotsky is granted asylum into Mexico and lives with Rivera and Kahlo. From there, Trotsky will have an affair with Kahlo and be distraught when she ends the relationship.

Cristina Kahlo

Frida's younger sister, Cristina has an affair with Rivera that will play a huge role in the marriage between the two artists. Frida will eventually forgive Cristina and engage her children as though they were her own after she realizes she will be childless due to her physical condition.

Maria Felix

The Mexican beauty that captivates Rivera to the point where he asks her to marry him and promises to leave Kahlo, Felix becomes one of Kahlo's innermost circle during the affair as is typical of Kahlo's response to Rivera's affairs.

Judith Ferreto

Kahlo's personal nurse at the end of her life, she is witness to Kahlo's increasingly erratic behavior due to the pain and drugs she was under.



Objects/Places

Blue House in Coyoacan

Once the house where Kahlo and Rivera lived together, the house now contains many of Kahlo's belongings and is her personal museum. It was donated when Rivera died, but was once a place where Kahlo held court with her close friends, especially when she was too sick to go to them.

Tehuana costume

After Kahlo meets Rivera, she starts to wear the brightly-colored Tehuana costume partly because it appeals to Rivera, but also with its immense amount of symbolism. The Tehuana women are a matriarchal society and exhibit strong independence. No doubt the bright colors and dramatic look also appealed to Kahlo.

Corsets

After the operations on her spine, Kahlo was frequently bedridden and forced to wear very restrictive corsets that limited her movement in an effort to help repair her spine.

The House on San Angel

With two smaller buildings (Rivera's is larger) connected by a single bridge up top, the house on San Angel comes to symbolize Kahlo and Rivera's independence and interdependence between each other.

New York

Where Kahlo has her first art exhibit and successfully sells roughly half of the 25 paintings she displays. She will also meet Nicklaus Muray here and although she does not initially enjoy the city, she will come to enjoy the cosmopolitan lifestyle there.

Henry Ford Hospital

While in Detroit, Kahlo suffers another miscarriage and ends up at the Henry Ford hospital for over a week. She will paint about the event in a painting aptly called Henry Ford Hospital.



A Few Small Nips

The painting that Kahlo created after learning about the affair between Cristina and Rivera, the depiction takes after a news story that Kahlo had heard of a man who was accused of murdering his lover, but countered that he had only given her "a few small nips" with the knife

The Suicide of Dorothy Hale

A beautiful socialite running out of possibilities, Hale threw herself a lovely going away party and then jumped off the top of her apartment in New York. Kahlo paints a piece depicting the event whose realism startles those closest to Hale.

La Esmeralda

The School of Painting and Sculpture where Kahlo will teach her students.

Themes

Intimacy

For Kahlo, the theme of intimacy is abundant throughout her life. For her, intimacy takes on a variety of forms and styles. With her many love affairs with men and women, she is both physically and emotionally connected to them. She gets different benefits from the different lovers she has over the years, but she is inextricably drawn to "great" people. Her very first boyfriend in Preparatory School becomes a government leader and is the leader of her clique in school. From there, she marries the internationally famous Diego Rivera, has an affair with Leon Trotsky and Isamu Noguchi, among many, many other men and women. Even Rivera himself warns men before they meet Kahlo that they will be drawn to her right away and to be careful. Kahlo's presence and exuberance of life makes her an attraction to all people and her natural intimacy with them follows suit.

Kahlo's intimacy with Rivera is an interesting part of their relationship. Their marriage is tempestuous and volatile, but they both gain a great deal from it. However, they both have private and public affairs with other people, yet do not divorce after Rivera's affairs become public. Although they do divorce and eventually remarry, Kahlo and Rivera have their own unique definition of intimacy and what it means in their relationship. They have a house together, but in reality, it is two buildings that are connected by a bridge. The house symbolizes their relationship itself as two very individual people who have tentatively erected a bridge to live together. After their remarriage, Kahlo and Rivera's marriage will change; Kahlo becomes more of a maternal figure to Rivera as his affairs with other women rage on. She even becomes intimate with his lovers, enclosing them as part of her close circle.

Finally, Kahlo expresses herself most intimately through her paintings. All of her subjects and topics are either portraits or persons that are closely connected in her life. In this way, her paintings become her public expression of her pain, suffering and communication with the outside world as she endures surgeries and pain (such as Rivera's unfaithfulness). She connects with her audience and speaks to them in a visual way as if the audience can read her diary and innermost thoughts.

Pain

Pain is an obvious central theme in the life of Kahlo. However, Kahlo chooses to use her physical, emotional and psychological pain in ways that prove to benefit her and her state. When she suffers a bus accident at 18, physicians don't believe she will survive. She does, however, and for some Mexicans, they believe that it was her destiny to not only survive, but survive and be in a state of pain throughout her life. As the biography writes, from that point on, she was in a constant fight against decay.



While most of the world lives daily unaware of extreme pain, Kahlo was finely in tune with it. Perhaps this would account for her over-exuberance in life and her overall magnetism. No doubt she possessed such qualities before her accident, but in contrast to the physical pain she often felt, this vivacity seemed all the more ethereal. She was resilient in the face of her surgeries, bound in her corsets and bed-ridden for weeks at a time. Yet rather than give up and be depressed, she continued to dress herself in bright colors and paint her life as she was experiencing it — to the delight of her multitude of admirers. Her paintings are an obvious mirror into her life at the time and the pain that she experiences is both the motivation behind and source of her passionate artwork.

Kahlo's pain is not purely physical from the sickness and accidents she suffers throughout her life. Rivera plays a large role in the emotional and psychological trauma that Kahlo experiences in her lifetime. Even Rivera acknowledges his impact on her in his own autobiography, saying that he would often hurt the woman most close to him — Kahlo. In the initial parts of their marriage, she won him over by being a pillar in his life but after his affair with her sister Cristina, her paintings reflect the deep pain that she was in. She will take the pain of being married to the "unpossessable" Rivera and channel it into her work. Her increasing independence from the man will also give her art career a boost as she paints to support herself and makes a strong name for her work in the art community internationally.

Death

When you live so intimately with pain for the majority of your life, Death is a natural theme and accompaniment. For Kahlo, Death as a symbol and its possibility were always around her. She contracted polio at a young age and survived, although many other children her age did not make it through. From then, she felt as if it might come to find her at any moment. When she was in a very serious bus accident at age 18, again the doctors did not believe she would survive. She did, albeit with a much changed physical appearance and outlook.

To fight Death and embrace her life and vivacity, Kahlo painted. When she was bedridden, her parents created the ideal painting environment for her and from there, Kahlo was able to express herself with her paintbrush. Since it was so often nearby, Death worked its way into her paintings and its presence could be deeply felt. For a woman who had over 35 operations, she was a walking miracle whose very presence was a rebellion against death.

Death was also a topic in her paintings. She painted her own miscarriages and the pain that she felt after these instances. In addition, she painted the suicide of Dorothy Hale, who was a very beautiful socialite. With her sugar skulls and Day of the Dead memorabilia, Kahlo approached the subject of death with a kind of lightheartedness that only someone who had been in her physical situation could afford to do. While many people are fearful of death, she took its presence in stride, reflecting it in her paintings and teasing about it in her life's approach.



Kahlo was very ill a year before she passed away. Although the official cause of death was a pulmonary embolism, others have suspected that she committed suicide due to her actions the nights previous. Since she was so intimately connected with Death and its possibilities, it's not unusual to think that she would have recognized its face at her door long before it actually took over her body. However, for friends closely intimate with Kahlo, it seems unlikely that someone who had fought Death so many times in the past would have given up so easily with suicide and thus the official diagnosis seems more appropriate for a woman who always lived life to her utmost. As she wrote in her diary a few days before she died, "I hope the exit is joyful — and I hope never to return."



Style

Perspective

The point of view of the entire biography is through the narrative interpretations of the author. Supplementing her personal interpretations of Kahlo's paintings are the accounts from Kahlo's friends and associates. In addition and most importantly, Kahlo's numerous letters are reprinted in full in order for the reader to gain a better perspective on how Kahlo saw her situation and talked to those she loved. The letters that are provided are frequent and with these letters, it is as though Kahlo herself has written the biography. Of course, Kahlo would have been able to supplement additional details, but the letters to her lovers and friends show her passion and give her blunt, honest approach to various situations, such as her true feelings on Gringolandia, Detroit and Paris.

Noticeably, there are some communications that are not included, including some of Kahlo's personal account of specific instances, such as Rivera's affair with Felix. However, overall, the letters provide the reader the greatest insight into the painter and how she saw things. With the inclusion of the painting analysis, the reader can gain a strong perspective into different events in Kahlo's life. In particular, her approach towards the pain she was feeling and enduring in various settings is covered thoroughly.

Many biographies fall short because they do not have enough of the subject's voice in the novel. With Frida, the reader gets a good sense of the artist through her friends' depictions and the interpretations of her paintings. Also, Kahlo's own diary are also included to help supplement more details to situations and give a glimpse of Kahlo's love of the chaotic and madness that she adored.

Tone

The tone of the book is generally objective and neutral. It is meant to be a biography of Frieda's life and does not attempt to take any particular partisan view about it. The writer seems to be more concerned with being informative than taking sides. It is colorfully written, giving lush views of her work, and of course also occasionally dips into other tones due to the use of the points of view of Kahlo's friends and loved ones. The tone also changes when entries from her diaries are used, as of course this involves a personal, less objective view on the events of Kahlo's life and world.

Structure

The structure of the book is linear. The events of the biography take place as they happened in Kahlo's life. The final chapter neatly ties up what happened to Rivera and Kahlo's things long after she had passed. There are no surprises or jumps ahead to the future in the entire structure of the novel.



Quotes

"I hope the exit is joyful — and I hope never to come back — Frida." Chapter 24, p.431

"But Frida's real cuates (pals) were the Cachuchas, named after the caps they all wore and famous at the Preparatoria for their brains and their mischief." Chapter 2, p. 27

"Frida in particular was moved to mischief by Rivera." Chapter 2, p.31

"It was one of those accidents that make a person, even one separated by years from the actual fact, wince in horror." Chapter 4, p. 47

"Whenever Frida herself told the story of her initiation into painting ... she was careful not to promote the familiar artists' myth of being born with a pencil in hand or to imply that an 'innate genius' had drawn her irresistibly to art from the age of three." Chapter 5, p.63

"To convey the loneliness of physical and emotional suffering, Frida has painted herself isolated against an immense and barren plain." Chapter 5, p. 77

"... had he been more sentimental, however, she probably would have treated him as salt treats an oyster — one of Frida's sardonic withering looks would have been enough to make a sentimental man shrivel." Chapter 6, p. 94

"Frida's body is divided into light and dark halves, as if to reveal the light and dark halves of her psyche, the presence within her of life and death." Chapter 10, p.146

"As for Rivera, though he knew he would keep on deceiving her, he regretted wounding her." Chapter 12, p. 186

"A few weeks after the end of the Dewey Commission sessions, the coy flirtation had become a full-fledged love affair. The couple met at Cristina's house on Aguayo Street." Chapter 13, p. 210

"But for all the amusements ... Frida found Paris decadent; most of all she hated what she saw as the empty posturing of the Boheme." Chapter 15, p.245

"By the second half of the decade, Frida's work was well enough regarded in her native country to be included in most major group exhibitions." Chapter 19, p. 319



Topics for Discussion

How does Frida express herself throughout her life?

What role does pain and prolonged suffering — be it personal or physical — have on Kahlo's life?

What unique characteristics of Kahlo's make her so attractive to Rivera and others around her?

How do Kahlo's paintings also serve as her own autobiography?

Name the biggest sources of pain in Kahlo's life and how she manages them.

Why do you believe that Kahlo's popularity in painting took years after her marriage to Diego?

What role did politics play in Kahlo's personal and professional life?