

# **The Woman Upstairs Study Guide**

## **The Woman Upstairs by Claire Messud**

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## Plot Summary

Nora Eldridge is a schoolteacher who had always hoped to become an artist, but she got waylaid first by her career as a management consultant and then by her mother's illness. A year after her mother's death, she meets a visiting historian from Lebanon named Skandar, his wife named Sirena, and their son. Nora develops feelings for each one of the three members of the Shahid family, and under their influence, she starts to see herself as the artist she might have been. Sirena, who is an Italian artist, invites Nora to share studio space in Somerville, Nora uses the opportunity to return to making small dioramas of Emily Dickinson, Alice Neel, Virginia Woolf, and Edie Sedgwick.

Nora and Sirena work side by side, and Nora helps Sirena build an installation piece based on Alice in Wonderland. Nora and Sirena develop a profound intimacy—enough so that Nora feels tempted to declare a kind of love for her. At the same time that Nora gets close with Sirena, Skandar visits her in the studio one night, and they make love.

Through the period of Nora's intimacy with the Shahid family, she is so amazed by her own feelings and so delighted to feel so alive that she never asks what might be possible in her intimacies or what might happen to either bring her close to them—or to pull them apart. As Nora gets closer and closer to declaring herself to Sirena, though, Sirena's deadline approaches. Sirena starts to withdraw into the work and the world of famous artists. This leaves Nora feeling left behind, resigned to her role as the Woman Upstairs, the good daughter who always plays by the rules. Sirena and Skandar eventually leave for Paris. Years later, when Nora visits a gallery in Paris, she sees a video that had been shot in the studio she shared with Sirena. The video shows Nora, in a moment of liberation and inspiration, masturbating in the partially built installation. In a single moment, all of Nora's affection for Sirena and Skandar collapses. Finally, she finds that her outrage, anger, and humiliation are powerful enough sensations that she feels confident that she will never feel as though she is not really living.



# Part 1, Chapters 1-6 (pp 1-39)

## Summary

### Part 1, Chapter 1

The narrator says that she is profoundly angry about having been a 'good girl' all her life, making sacrifices to take care of her dying mother and caring for her father. She has always done what she was meant to do, but she says that this made the world a fun house she could not escape. She says that she meant to be a great artist and that she had given that up for so long that she is deeply embittered. At the end of the chapter, she says that she is going "to make my nothingness count."

### Part 1, Chapter 2

When Reza Shahid shows up in Nora Eldridge's third-grade classroom, Nora falls in love with him. She is touched by his foreignness, and then she recognizes him as the boy she had seen at the supermarket a week ago: when she had dropped some apples. He had laughed at her. So, they already had some intimacy before he showed up in her class.

Nora says that she is not sure how she became such a good school teacher. One parent calls her "the Gerber baby of school teachers." She does not have children of her own, but she thinks of herself as an artist whose artwork is still before her. Teaching is just practice, something safe to do till she can start. But, even in spite of her success as a teacher, she still thinks of herself as a failure for not having become an artist.

### Part 1, Chapter 3

Recalling her origins, Nora says that he was born in a town near Boston, into a family with a mother, father, and brother. Her mother was a housewife who tested cookbook recipes and made her own clothing. She once tried, without success to make clothing to sell. Nora was a good student. She skipped ninth grade, so she learned social skills that would help her hide her youth relative to the other students. Nora says that in high school she decided to be an artist. Her art teacher, Dominic Crace, allowed her and a few other students, to have access to art supplies, and he encouraged them to make political banners that they hung around the school.

When Nora took art in her senior year, her first assignment was to draw a bee inside of a violin inside a pear, but instead of drawing, she made a diorama out of papier-mâché. Her teacher's praise for this project was the first confirmation that she had the potential to be an artist.

### Part 1, Chapter 4



Sirena is Reza's mother and an accomplished artist in her own right. She is Italian but has lived in Paris, where she met her husband, Skandar, who is Lebanese. Nora meets Sirena when Reza is bullied by older children, and Sirena comes to the school to confer with Nora and the principal. Nora assures Sirena that everything will be done to discipline the bullies. She is disarmed by her beauty and her foreignness. Nora falls in love with Sirena's skin, which is almost Middle Eastern in color.

#### Part 1, Chapter 5

Nora's principal calls the older boys who bullied Reza to her office and disciplines them, but Sirena nevertheless calls Nora at home to ask about the incident. Nora shares her concern that the older boys will lash out again because of Reza's foreignness. She and Sirena make plans to meet over coffee.

Nora wonders whether she is only attracted to Sirena's foreignness, and she recalls a high school exchange student from London named Hattie. Nora had befriended Hattie when she needed a break from her parents' normalcy and American ways.

Now, looking back at her life, Nora wonders whether she is experiencing her "Lucy Jordan" moment, which is to say the moment when she realizes that life has passed her by and she will never do the things she thought she would do.

#### Part 1, Chapter 6

Sirena does not show up for back to school night, but when she meets Nora at the coffee shop, Sirena tells Nora about her husband Skandar, who has a fellowship at the university for a year. Sirena says that her husband is a historian and she is an artist, working on an installation. Sirena tells Nora that as an only child, Reza has had a difficult transition to America. Nora says that he is learning English quickly, but she changes the topic to ask Sirena about her art. Sirena tells Nora that her installations consist of "lush gardens and jungles made out of household items and refuse."

She has a commission to build Alice's Wonderland, and she tells Nora that she is thinking about renting studio space. Nora says she is very interested in getting back to making art, and the two women make plans to see the studio, and possibly to share it.

Nora says that there comes a time in life when you have to decide whether you're really going to live the life you thought you would live, or whether you are going to settle into some routine and let the years pass you by.

## Analysis

#### Part 1, Chapter 1

Nora's tirade is an exciting way to open the book, although the reader does not know much about what has launched the narrator's anger. Her determination to live makes the reader wonder what she has been doing in the meantime or why she thinks that



being a dutiful daughter was such a mistake. Her frustration is a powerful ingredient for the beginning of the novel, as it begs the question of how this energy will express itself.

#### Part 1, Chapter 2

Nora's success as a school teacher is a surprise to her, but she still holds out for the possibility of artistic greatness—even though it seems remote. She still believes it is in her future as a potential redemption. Apparently, the plot will hinge on whether or not she will achieve her artistic greatness.

#### Part 1, Chapter 3

Nora's background is not an uncommon one, but her desire to become an artist is a rare and difficult aspiration for a child. Her early success in Dominic Crace's art class gives the reader a sense of optimism that she might end up filling her artistic goals after all, but her years as a dutiful daughter make that outcome uncertain.

#### Part 1, Chapter 4

Sirena's affect on Nora raises the question of what kind of book this will be: the reader is not certain whether this will be a "fatal attraction"-type love story, or just a harmless crush between a teacher and her student and the student's mother.

#### Part 1, Chapter 5

The story unfolds like a love story in which Nora is fascinated by Sirena and slowly draws closer to her. The bullying incident gives the two women an occasion to meet, at the same time that it puts Nora in a protective position regarding Reza. Nora's apprehension about the possibility that life has passed her by makes the reader more sympathetic to her, and it makes Sirena look a little bit like a redeeming angel in Nora's eyes.

#### Part 1, Chapter 6

Nora's quest to be a well-regarded artist draws the reader into feeling sympathy for her, and her admiration for Sirena makes her—and the reader—a little nervous about how this new relationship will turn out. The possibility that Nora will be effectively courting Sirena by making art turns the novel itself into a kind of courtship. The reader has to ask him or herself whether the novel is having a similar effect, and stirring up something like love.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the role of art in *The Woman Upstairs*? How does the novel itself perform the functions that art performs for Sirena and Nora?



## Discussion Question 2

How does Claire Messud describe her characters? What kinds of language or scenes does she use, to portray them? What are each of their defining characteristics?

## Discussion Question 3

What kind of action does this novel lead you to expect, as a reader? Has the author foreshadowed any coming events? What clues has the author given you to guide your expectations?

## Vocabulary

Brainwashing, hieroglyphics, galaxies, lurched, revolutionary, corridor, perspective, brunette, consensus, in extremis, modicum, resentment, miseries, divorced, subterra, conniving, ventured, illuminated, provoking, dispersed, unmolested, myopia, elucidation, winnowed.



## Part 1, Chapters 7-12 (pp 40-79)

### Summary

#### Part 1, Chapter 7

Nora says that she went to college in Middlebury Vermont. She studied art and planned to live an independent life. Her mother was thirty-one when Nora was born, and Nora thinks about her mother's happiness. She wonders whether her mother was living the life she had wanted to live. When Nora was seven, her mother had a breakdown and made Nora promise that she would never get stuck in an unhappy marriage. Nora says that she has always tried to understand how her mother resigned herself to her life. When her mother was diagnosed with ALS, Nora put her dreams of making art on hold and took care of her for four years. Her mother died.

#### Part 1, Chapter 8

Nora says that her mother took years to die. She says that her parents never asked her to give up her life, but she is afraid that by becoming a 'dutiful daughter,' she gave up her opportunity to live her artistic dream. Nora says that the Shahid family entered her life shortly after her mother's death.

#### Part 1, Chapter 9

Nora meets Sirena at the studio that Sirena found and agrees to split the rent there. She doesn't know what she'll be working on, but she's glad to be back in the studio making art. When Nora meets her friend Didi's adopted baby, Nora says that she does not want her art to be humored as the baby is being humored. She says that she has not wanted to show people her little dioramas, for fear of their reactions. She simply wants to be 'gotten,' or understood, by people close to her.

#### Part 1, Chapter 10

Nora thinks about a woman who visited her school once. The woman was killed by a rocket in the Middle East, and the evening news reported her last words as 'I am alive.' Nora says that her time in the studio makes her feel more alive everyday. She and Sirena work there side by side. Sometimes, Nora is so engrossed in her work that she doesn't even notice that Sirena is gone. While Nora is working on a miniature replica of Emily Dickinson's room—with plans to make miniature rooms for Virginia Woolf, Alice Neel and Edie Sedgwick as well—Sirena is working on her Wonderland. Nora says that she is perfectly delighted to be working on her small rooms, but sometimes when Sirena leaves, she realizes how alone she is in her own room.

#### Part 1, Chapter 11





Once she gets started working at the studio, Nora starts trying to make every excuse to spend time there. She and Sirena start a real friendship as they art drinking wine together from chipped cups. Sirena seems to be happy with the arrangement as well. The time she spends in the studio is her time to hide from her husband and child and their demands.

Nora says that she is somewhat in love with Sirena. She remembers Ben, the man she nearly married. They met on Martha's Vineyard, and they moved to New York together. Nora got a job to pay the bills. In the early 1990s, when art didn't make sense anymore, she started drifting toward a full-time professional life as a management consultant. Then Ben gave up his band and got a job as a full time, white-collar criminal defense lawyer. Nora says that she left Ben because she didn't think that there would ultimately be art in the life they lived together.

#### Part 1, Chapter 12

Two weeks before Christmas on a night when Nora is working alone in the studio, Skandar comes to the studio looking for Sirena. Nora invites him in for tea, and they talk about her art. Skandar says that Sirena is very pleased to be working with an artist who is so serious. He says that Sirena can be sad if she is not productive and creating. Nora says that Sirena rarely speaks about Skandar. When she goes home after the evening is over, she Googles the couple on the computer and finds they are famous in Europe. Shortly thereafter, she dreams that she and Skandar are naked in bed together, and he tells her that Sirena doesn't mind if they have an affair.

## Analysis

#### Part 1, Chapter 7

Nora has been strongly influenced by her mother, whose unhappiness serves as a landmark in her life. She always wonders how her mother could survive her unhappiness because her drinking and her marriage were not enough to fulfill her, in Nora's eyes. When Nora says that she wants to be an artist, it seems as if she wants to redeem her mother's life by living her dreams and purging her disappointments.

#### Part 1, Chapter 8

This chapter connects Nora's childhood and the death of her mother with the time when the Shahid family entered her life. It makes the reader wonder whether the Shahid family would redeem Nora's decision to take care of her mother.

#### Part 1, Chapter 9

Nora doesn't know what she'll be doing in the studio, but she is looking forward to creating. Her creativity is not as focused as Sirena's, but she sees herself in a light tinted by Sirena's devotion to her work. When Nora meets her friend Didi and Didi's new baby, she is afraid of being treated like a child herself, and humored for her art. She



wants to be understood on a fundamental level, and this makes her shy about sharing her work with others.

#### Part 1, Chapter 10

Nora's creative work begins in earnest in this chapter, and she describes her plans for dioramas of women artists in their rooms. Her plans are small and intimate, unlike Sirena's plans to make rooms people can walk through and dance in. Nora's delight in her creativity seems like it should be a high point of the novel, but it comes so early that the reader has to wonder what else will happen next. Nora's fear when Sirena leaves indicates that their relationship might not be balanced and that Nora might be more vulnerable or less stable than she would like.

#### Part 1, Chapter 11

Nora seems touchy on the question of love, and this chapter justifies her experiences as a lover. Her relationship with Ben seems to confirm her seriousness about art, although her jobs as a management consultant and then as a school teacher seem to say that she has yet to live up to the artistic potential she foresaw. The delight she feels in working alongside Sirena offers the reader the possibility that she might finally find fulfillment in her work.

#### Part 1, Chapter 12

Nora's involvement with Sirena and Skandar is getting deeper in this chapter, and Nora is starting to feel like she has to explain her feelings. She is anxious about herself as a lover and recalls her engagement to Ben, which only ended because she wanted to be an artist. The reader has to wonder whether Nora will find her fulfillment in love or art or both.

### **Discussion Question 1**

How is Nora changing as she returns to the studio and creativity on account of Sirena's influence? How has Messud's characterization of her changed?

### **Discussion Question 2**

Describe Nora's experiences in love and explain what it means when she says that she is in love with Sirena. Is this a new kind of love for her, or is there a precedent for it?

### **Discussion Question 3**

What is Nora afraid of, and how does she protect herself against her fears?

## Vocabulary

Dilemma, intermittent, embroidered, disavowed, diploma, squandered, Frankensteinian, gussied up, festooned, liberated, forlorn, harebrained, ambitious, sallow, indulgent, mascara, nostalgia, synthetic, adequately, murmured, unconsummated, diagnosis, ignoble, competent, abutted.



# Part 1, Chapter 13, Part 2, chapters 1-2 (80-120)

## Summary

### Part 1, Chapter 13

Nora says that Reza is attacked again by bullies in a snowball fight. One of the snowballs was packed with rocks. He is cut near the eye and needs stitches. Nora says that she will take him to the hospital. She calls Sirena, and holds Reza while he receives stitches. This incident shakes Sirena and Skandar, making them aware of their outsider status in America. It also makes them anxious to return home. Reza doesn't come to school for the next two days, and Nora is not sure whether they will come back. Sirena had told Nora that she was a true friend at the hospital, but Nora is not quick to believe in their friendship. She still sees herself as a school teacher and studio co-renter. She does not believe in their friendship entirely.

The boy who hurt Reza is expelled, but Nora does not have any contact with Sirena or Reza. She visits with her father for the holidays and then visits her friend Didi, who elicits the story of Nora's affection for Sirena and her son. Nora says that only she feels worse for talking about her feelings. Her hope is that they will be true friends. Didi tries to make Nora feel better by making light of the situation, and Didi convinces her to make up a good story to explain why she hasn't heard from Sirena or Reza.

### Part 2, Chapter 1

When school starts again, Nora has finished Emily Dickinson's room, and Reza has returned to her classroom. She says that Sirena reminds her of the Black Monk in a story of Chekhov's: Sirena is a surreal figure who makes her feel more inspired and artistic, but she seems so unreal that Nora is afraid she might just be a delusion, which would make her own creativity a delusion as well.

When Nora sees Sirena again, Sirena is overjoyed to see her and invites her for dinner. Nora doesn't know whether to trust her when she says how much she has missed her, but she tells her about her Christmas. Then, the two of them resolve to get to work. "Au travail" becomes a kind of watchword between them.

### Part 2, Chapter 2

Nora is afraid that Sirena only pities her when she invites her to dinner at the house, but she accepts the invitation, nonetheless. Sirena and Skandar talk about the difficulties of being foreigners in America. They don't feel that they can escape from their histories or the history of conflicts in Europe and the Middle East.



At the end of the night, Skandar walks Nora home, and when she hears about this later, Nora's friend Didi supposes that this means that he wants to make love with her. But Nora suspects that the reality is more complicated than that, and she remains afraid of rejection at the same time that she dreams about some kind of unprecedented intimacy.

## Analysis

### Part 1, Chapter 13

The final chapter of Part 1 finds Nora feeling more intimate with Sirena and also more distant from her than ever. She wants desperately to hear from Sirena and her son, but gets no news after the attack. Her hopes of being in love seem more precarious than ever, but they also motivate her to work more fiercely than she has.

### Part 2, Chapter 1

In the second part of this novel, Nora is more distrustful of Sirena and more independent in her own creativity. At the same time, Sirena is more forthcoming about her feelings for Nora, so the reader is left to wonder whether their intimacy will continue or whether they will invest themselves in art instead. It is still, of course, possible that they might enjoy some kind of unprecedented artistic friendship.

### Part 2, Chapter 2

The dinner party scene is another fulfillment for Nora, as she is effectively in love with each member of the Shahid family. By the end of the chapter, she is already processing the night with her friend and neither one of them knows what to make of the Shahid family's place in Nora's life.

## Discussion Question 1

How is Part 2 different from Part 1? What new information or themes have been introduced? How is Part 2 elaborating on themes that were introduced in Part 1?

## Discussion Question 2

What clues does the author give you, as a reader, about the Shahid family's intentions toward Nora? She seems to be in love with each of them, but how does the author convey their feelings for her?



## Discussion Question 3

What contribution does Nora's friend Didi make to Nora's understanding of the Shahid family? How are Didi's values different from Nora's? How are their strategies for engaging with the Shahid family different?

## Vocabulary

Feckless, dyslexia, tympani, spore, misfortune, bafflement, compresses, coagulate, biscuits, reminiscent, exhaustion, vintage, melodrama, cavalierly, tenuous, behoove, inane, discreetly, discretely, gusto, forthcoming, usurped, hypochondriacal, postnasal, immortalized.



## Part 2, Chapters 3-7 (pp 120-159)

### Summary

#### Part 2, Chapter 3

Sirena and Skandar ask Nora to babysit for Reza. They say that it is an honor reserved for family, and this makes it easier for Nora to accept a job she would normally have refused because it would jeopardize her authority and dignity as a teacher. She is nervous about serving her student's family this way, but Sirena portrays the invitation as a kind of intimacy. Sirena offers to pay her, but Nora declines. She says she is either family, or she is not family. When Sirena embraces her, Nora is not sure whether she is becoming part of the family or just being taken advantage of.

Nora babysits for Reza numerous times in the next few months and she describes her intimacy with Sirena and Reza as a "prolonged cranial multiple orgasm." Nora says that she can see the possibility that she was just being flattered, but she also says that she knows that the Shahids loved her.

#### Part 2, Chapter 4

Sirena begins to build Wonderland in earnest. She shows Nora her blueprint, and Nora admires her all the more. She says that Sirena "opens doors to possibility, to the barely imagined."

Nora says that Sirena has the chief quality of the artist: ruthlessness. Sirena is going to build her installation in the studio, and she asks for Nora's help. Again Nora feels as though she is being taken advantage of at the same time that she feels included in a creative partnership.

In a roundabout way, Nora asks Sirena whether there are people she doesn't like. Sirena says that when people become irritating, she has to reject them. This implies that Nora has not become irritating, so she has not been rejected yet. Nora and Sirena keep getting closer. They find an Italian restaurant to eat in together periodically. One night Nora is terrified by how strongly she wants Sirena for herself.

#### Part 2, Chapter 5

When Nora tells her friend Didi about her affection for Sirena, Didi and her friend are skeptical. They think Nora just has a crush on Sirena, and they are certain that she does not feel a full-fledged lesbian desire. Nora says that "I knew it was potential rather than actual, but I didn't understand then that it wasn't real. I didn't see that I made it up."

#### Part 2, Chapter 6



Nora says that she is very happy in love. She says the world is filled with light. She described love is an itch, and she could scratch it only by going studio or being with the Shahids. She and Sirena take turns bringing lunch to the studio, and Nora says that she discovers new facets of Sirena's personality. As Wonderland comes together, Nora says that Sirena becomes an artist in front of her eyes. Nora finishes Emily Dickinson's room and starts on Alice Neel's and Edie Sedgwick's. She says that making the rooms is something she does for herself. One night while listening to music as she works, she says that she becomes Edie Sedgwick, and she dances through the parts of Wonderland that are finished. She even takes off her shirt and takes Polaroid photographs of herself in her bra. She says that she no longer needs to sleep as much. She spends hours at the studio before going home to shower and show up ready to teach at school in the morning.

#### Part 2, Chapter 7

Nora says that every time she babysits for Reza, Skandar walks her home afterwards. One night after Valentine's Day, he tells her about the Prime Minister of Lebanon, who was assassinated. Skandar and Nora talk about what it means to be American, and Skandar tells her what it is like to be Lebanese. At home, Nora Googles "Lebanon war." She learns about what Skandar's people have been through. Nora says that her walks with Skandar get longer as spring comes, and sometimes they just circle Nora's block while Skandar talks and talks. He tells her stories about Lebanon and his experiences in the war. He complains to Nora that Americans know only the biggest, and worst facts about foreign countries. In the case of Germany, for instance, they know more about Hitler than about German artists such as Brahms, Beethoven, Bach, Hegel, or Schopenhauer. Nora says that Skandar's stories make her feel like she lives in the actual world, "a world of wonders the existence of which caused me to marvel and dream."

## Analysis

#### Part 2, Chapter 3

Nora continues to oscillate between intimacy and fear of being foolish. When she starts to babysit, the situation becomes more complicated. She wonders where her intimacy is leading. The stereotype of the single teacher, or spinster, haunts Nora and makes her feel that she is out of place inside of the Shahid family.

#### Part 2, Chapter 4

The intimacy between Sirena and Nora continues to deepen, until Nora is finally terrified by her desire. She has no guarantee that Sirena feels the same degree of desire, and she has no courage to raise the question. This would only disturb her intimacy with the Shahids, but Nora is playing it safe.





### Part 2, Chapter 5

Didi's skepticism is hard for Nora to bear, but Didi speaks for the reader and probably for Nora's conscience by expressing doubts about Nora's feelings. This sharpens the question of Nora's relationship and drives the plot toward the statements or actions that will answer the questions of what kind of desire Nora really feels and what kind of response she can expect from Sirena.

### Part 2, Chapter 6

While the deliriousness of love carries Nora along, she enjoys the experience of heightened sensations, to the point where she feels as if she were Edie Sedgwick herself. Love has not disrupted her routine, though, so much that she cannot still teach. For now, it seems that she can be both a teacher and an artist. All the years when she was a good girl are finally paying off.

### Part 2, Chapter 7

If the previous chapter marked a high point in Nora's relationship with Sirena, this chapter moves to her relationship with Skandar. Skandar makes Nora feel just as alive as Sirena makes her feel, and in his presence, Nora says that she has finally been invited to the banquet of life. Neither this chapter nor the previous chapter give any real clues about where this sense of fulfillment will lead.

## Discussion Question 1

How is the quality of ruthlessness defined and what is the value of ruthlessness in the novel? Why does Nora say that Sirena is more ruthless than she is?

## Discussion Question 2

How is Nora's intimacy with Sirena different from her intimacy with Skandar? How does she describe them differently? How is she different with either of them?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Skandar's foreignness important to Nora? What does she feel she is learning from him? What is she offering him in turn?

## Vocabulary

Mirth, aggressive, trajectory, proposal, vertiginous, magnificence, tentacle, wanton, disinhibition, cosmos, titillation, cranial, blanched, remedial, purview, languished, miniature, eschew, fakery, purveyor, ruthless, penumbra, spiritualism, clarity, relativism.



## Part 2, Chapters 8-13, (pp 159-215)

### Summary

#### Part 2, Chapter 8

Nora says that she remembers every moment of the two weeks when her mother was dying. She says that her walks with Skandar became just as distinctive in her memory. One night, he tells her that she needs to find a way to feed herself. She describes herself as a ravenous wolf move, and Skandar is surprised but he tells her that she must ask for what she needs. Nora tells Skandar that she has always been afraid of trying to create her own satisfaction, so it has always been easier to care for others.

Nora says that after speaking with Skandar, she feels like she has to speak to Sirena and declare her feelings. Filled with apprehension, she goes to the studio, ready to declare herself, but Sirena is not there. At school the next day, Nora asks Reza about his mother, but he says that she has gone away. When Sirena comes back to the studio, she tells Nora that she went to New York, where representatives of two different galleries asked to carry her art. She and Nora discuss the pros and cons of working with either agent, but Nora never declares herself before they get back to work. Sirena finally tells Nora the date for her Paris opening, and Nora is disconcerted to find that the opening is only two months away. Suddenly she is terrified of losing Sirena and their friendship. On Friday when Nora knows that Sirena will not be coming to the studio, she drinks wine and takes more Polaroid photos of herself. She goes so far as to tiptoe into the Wonderland forest and masturbate, which makes her feel “for that brief unashamed, unhidden time,” free.

#### Part 2, Chapter 9

Energized by her creative work, Nora says that she takes her father out to brunch. Nora’s father surprises her by saying that her mother was very much in control of her life and his because Nora thought that she never had been. Nora says that she decides not to go to the studio all weekend. When she calls Sirena, Sirena does not pick up. All week, Sirena does not return Nora’s call, which leaves Nora on tenterhooks. When she goes to the studio on Thursday, Sirena is there with a number of other artists, who are listening to music, drinking, and dancing. Nora is not sure whether they saw the Polaroids she took of herself, and she is irritated not to have been included. One woman is a dancer who will twirl like a dervish through Wonderland while the others film her. Nora says that there is no question now of her doing her work, while Sirena is surrounded by other artists. Suddenly she feels like a teacher and not an artist, and the gulf between her and Sirena is forbidding. When she sees the Polaroids on her table again as she is leaving, Nora says that she is filled with shame.

#### Part 2, Chapter 10



The next time Nora goes to the studio, Sirena's fellow artists have all left. They have sent her a video of dancing in Wonderland, and Sirena tells Nora how the video will be used in the installation. Sirena says there will be different stations in the installation with headphones. Each will play different music. Sirena shows Nora photographs of seven different women whose images will be printed on large canvases as part of the installation to represent the seven stages of life. As Nora gives Sirena her opinion about the images, she feels both irritated and elated. Some of the photos are of Sirena herself, and Nora is disconcerted by these images. When Sirena draws the distinction between herself and Nora by saying that Nora's creation does not have deadlines, the implication is once again that Nora is not an artist like Sirena. In the end, Nora only feels like one among many of Sirena's admirers. She gives Sirena her admiration, but that seems to be the only thing Sirena wants from her.

#### Part 2, Chapter 11

Sirena goes to New York to meet with the gallery owners who are courting her. In the meantime, Nora feels that Sirena has already left. She has to reassure herself about the value of her work, since Sirena is not there to do it for her. One Friday night, Skandar comes to the studio looking for Sirena, but Sirena is not there. Nora shows Skandar her work, and he asks her why her rooms are so small. In his eyes her dioramas seem merely like little boxes. Nora says that joy is represented in each of the rooms, but Skandar asks her why joy does not take up more space. When he puts his hands on her, Nora says that she no longer cares whether she is an artist like Sirena or not, she is just a hungry person who wants to be accepted for who she is.

#### Part 2, Chapter 12

Nora says that she and Skandar talk about what happened and agree that it could not continue. Nora says that she is shocked to see Sirena again. For Sirena nothing has changed. She is still herself, totally wrapped up in the Wonderland project. The next time Nora babysits for Reza, Skandar is not there, and any sense of increasing intimacy is destroyed by his absence. Sirena is distracted, before she leaves for the night, and Nora is afraid that she has upset her. Sirena says "of course not" and leaves for the night, but this does not entirely console Nora. When Sirena comes home, Skandar is not with her. So, he does not walk Nora home.

Sirena flies to Paris in advance of the installation, and Nora and her students start to get excited about coming to the Wonderland installation. Sirena and Nora thought that this would be good for the children. At the same time that it would give Sirena good video footage of children enjoying the Wonderland installation—which she could use in the installation itself. When the kids arrive, Sirena gives them instructions to make themselves comfortable and explore the installation as if they were Alice. The installation is too small for all the students, so one group makes papier-mâché masks with Nora while the other group explores. Nora sees Reza punch another student. When she yells for them to stop, she is suddenly no longer Nora, Sirena's fellow artist. She is Nora, Ms. Eldridge, school teacher. She has to discipline Sirena's child, and any familiarity between them seems to evaporate. Nora apologizes to Sirena at the end of



the afternoon. When Sirena says that soon she will be gone to Paris, there is a new gulf between them. The next time Nora goes to the studio, she still has to clean up from the children's visit. She recalls her intimacy with Skandar. Even though she still wants him, she knows that it is impossible for them to be together.

### Part 2, Chapter 13

Nora spends Christmas with her father and Aunt Baby in Rockport. Nora finds herself being snappish with her father and aunt. She calls Skandar, looking for some kind of intimacy. She also wants to see whether Sirena suspects anything. He tells her he doesn't think so, and she asks him what he thinks the installation means. He says that such a question is meaningless, as each person will have their own interpretation. She asks him whether there are meanings that are strictly wrong. By asking this question she seems to be changing the topic away from their intimacy to something more simply intellectual. Nora says that Skandar was her Black Monk, "the one who could convince me of my substance, of my genius, of the significance of my thoughts and efforts." When you are the Woman Upstairs, she says, "no one thinks of you first." Nora says that she felt forsaken by hope. She goes to bed at her Aunt Baby's Rockport home grieving for the loss of what she thought she had in the Shahid family.

## Analysis

### Part 2, Chapter 8

There is a tragic irony in the fact that as soon as Skandar tells Nora to find a way to fulfill herself, Sirena arrives with news of the world far beyond Nora's. Even though Nora had worked up the courage to declare herself, Sirena's news about representation in New York and the Paris opening seems to whisk her away. Even though she doesn't confess her feelings to Sirena, Nora enjoys an unprecedented moment of liberation in the Wonderland forest. Making love to herself there is as much consummation as she can manage.

### Part 2, Chapter 9

If it seemed that Nora was about to enjoy an unprecedented intimacy with Sirena, this chapter destroys her illusion. She never confesses her feelings to Sirena. Instead of finding opportunities to talk about her feelings, she is left behind as Sirena approaches the launch of her installation. It is not clear that Sirena is at fault in this, but Nora's sense of deflation and shame are powerful, nonetheless.

### Part 2, Chapter 10

Nora's sense of hope that she might ever confess her feelings to Sirena is dashed in this chapter. Sirena is clearly caught up in her own work, without much loyalty to Nora as a fellow artist. It would seem that all Nora can offer to Sirena is admiration, but everyone else can offer this as well. At the same time, it is still not clear what Nora will offer to Sirena or take away from her intimacy with her.



### Part 2, Chapter 11

This chapter is difficult for Nora's self-esteem, as Skandar asks her why joy does not take up more space in her work and in her life. When he makes love to her, the potential intimacy Nora has been dreaming about turns into more commonplace infidelity to Sirena.

### Part 2, Chapter 12

What began to unravel in the previous chapter continues to unravel here. Sirena is already being pulled into another world, and Nora is fast losing courage to describe herself as Sirena's equal. When the children come to visit the studio, Nora is back in the position of teacher, not friend. Any familiarity she shared with Sirena will need to be rekindled if it is going to exist at all. When she thinks about her intimacy with Skandar, she thinks that her body can want what it wants, but the mind must have what is true and possible.

### Part 2, Chapter 13

This chapter concludes the intimacy that has been developing between Nora and the Shahid family. Her only role for Skandar is as an intellectual for talking. Her only role with Sirena is as a helper; and her only role with Reza is as a teacher and babysitter. Anything extra has been her own fantasy, and she cannot get any of the Shahids to confirm the reality of what she felt existed. At the same time that this is depressing and she is sad to be disillusioned, she has become rich with the genuine experience, which has come from her own actual desires, nonetheless.

## Discussion Question 1

Sirena's Wonderland installation uses video of students enjoying the Wonderland installation itself. In what way does this novel reflect on its own existence as a novel in the life of the reader? Or does it explicitly refuse to reflect on that role?

## Discussion Question 2

Is the collapse of Nora's intimacy with the Shahids surprising? How has Messud prepared the reader for fulfillment or frustration on Nora's part?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the novel handle the question of blame, responsibility or fault, in Nora's feelings? Is the author concerned with who is responsible for her feeling disappointed or forsaken? What would you say is the author's feeling about the relative importance of this question? What other aspects of Nora's feelings seem important?



## Vocabulary

Consequence, intuitively, spree, inadequate, disconsolate, scudding, magnanimous, ravenous, resignation, innards, fragmentation, schmoozing, resolution, precedence, conspiratorially, shawl, exhibition, SoHo, commitment, passion, spontaneous, intractable, Jabberwock, unashamed, exorcism.



## Part 3, Chapters 1-5 (pp. 215-253)

### Summary

#### Part 3, Chapter 1

Moving some time into the future, Nora says that Sirena never came back to Cambridge. She says that as the deadline approaches, Sirena tells her that she has only been playing at making the installation, but now it is time to begin in earnest. Sirena takes Reza out of school, and after a short period of packing, Sirena and Reza are gone. Nora says that she does not go to the airport to see them off, she just gets a text from Sirena, as the plane is about to take off, with a brief invitation to Paris.

#### Part 3, Chapter 2

Nora says that she sees Skandar two weeks later. When she sees him, he realizes that their affair was very brief and not very deep. He offers her a gift and a few things from their apartment. They part on the sidewalk with a brief, close embrace. As he walks away, she sees him as an older man.

The gift Skandar gives her contains a copy of his book, a picture Reza had made in Nora's class, and a heavy silver chain with a cross inlaid with turquoise and a blood red stone. Nora says that she loses the gifts when she leaves them at a Kinko's where she is making copies for school.

#### Part 3, Chapter 3

Nora sees Sirena in New York years later. They meet for drinks when Sirena comes to New York for an opening, and Sirena's career has really taken off. Nora says that she is ashamed to still be a schoolteacher—she has been following Sirena and Skandar in the news and she has felt that her life has gotten further and further away from theirs. Sitting down over drinks, Sirena remembers her year in Cambridge as a hard, dark time, although she tells Nora that her postcard of Alice in Wonderland is still on their fridge at home.

Nora says that after seeing Sirena, she goes to the Brooklyn Museum to see the Wonderland installation. It makes her feel all of her love for Sirena again. She feels alive the way that she felt when she was working alongside Sirena. She addresses the reader with wonder about the fact that she still held her high idea of Sirena throughout those two years. She has continued to work on their dioramas, but she says that in her heart, she has still been in love with the Shahids.

Nora says that the Woman Upstairs is a character who is not disappointed when she finds out that her ex-lover has visited her city without contacting her. She says this with a certain ruefulness and with resignation. She searches for signs of what she had meant to them. She only has her memories.



### Part 3, Chapter 4

Nora says that Aunt Baby died before Christmas last year. After her condo is sold, Nora takes a leave from her position and enrolls in classes in pottery and photography before she travels in Europe.

Nora says that her trip is organized around Paris, which she had visited years before she had started teaching. Nora says that she has seen enough of the sights to know which ones to rave about, but the trip really only becomes personal for her when she returns to Paris after traveling on the continent. Sirena and Skandar invite her for dinner, and she says that they make her feel welcome, warm, and part of the family again.

### Part 3, Chapter 5

Nora says that she sees the sights in Paris, and does all the things that a tourist would expect to do. One day, after she visits the Musee d'Orsay, she visits a gallery where six videos from Wonderland are on display. The videos themselves are art objects, and are for sale. In the last video Nora looks at, she recognizes herself in the Wonderland that was not quite finished when she got drunk and masturbated in the flowers. Nora says that she blacked out when she sees the video, and the assistant at the gallery has to help her.

Nora is reeling from this discovery: the Woman Upstairs is revealed in her most intimate, humiliating moment. She thinks back about the time when she and Sirena had set up the cameras that took this footage, and wonders whether she should have known that she was being filmed. Nevertheless, she is furious that Sirena is used the footage as part of her installation. She has to wonder as well whether Sirena showed the video to Skandar.

Nora says that she never got in touch with the Shahid family after that. She says that the incident has made her so murderously furious that she no longer has a question about what is to feel alive. "My anger is a colossus," she says. She pledges to the reader and also to herself that she is going to live in the fullest meaning of the term now.

## Analysis

### Part 3, Chapter 1

When Sirena leaves for Paris, she makes Nora feel as if their time together in the studio has not been legitimate or real. The previous few chapters have prepared Nora for this feeling, but she and the reader are both saddened by the loss of what seemed possible for a time.

### Part 3, Chapter 2

Nora's farewell with Skandar is not as touching as she might have hoped. He holds her in an embrace for a long time, but he sends her away with a gift she only loses,





emphasizing the imaginary effect of the relationship for her. She has nothing, no evidence to show her that her friendship with the Shahid family was real.

### Part 3, Chapter 3

As Nora's life continues after the Shahid family returns to Europe, the period when she was in love with Sirena and Skandar, and their son seems to harden and take up a permanent place in her heart. She herself is somewhat sad about this fact, but even two years later she can still lapse right back into the love she felt. She does express some amazement about this fact, but it is not yet clear what has changed that allows her an ironic distance to look at her feelings.

### Part 3, Chapter 4

When Nora says that Sirena and Skandar's love is like "a shawl against an evening breeze, useless in a gale," the reader is not quite sure what the gale is. In the meantime, years after the Shahid family was in Cambridge, Nora still remembers them warmly and with love. Only, there is a certain irony in her voice that indicates that she feels different in the time in which she is writing than she felt in the time she is writing about. She has an ironic detachment in which her feelings seem less than legitimate and more pathetic than real.

### Part 3, Chapter 5

Nora's sense of betrayal at finding that her intimate moment has been used in a video installation by her close friend pulls away the façade of the polite Woman Upstairs, the daughter who helps her mother when she is dying and visits her father. The person who is revealed is the ruthless artist whose appetite for life is so strong that it won't matter any longer whether other people get hurt as she makes her art and lives her life.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the Shahid family change in Nora's eyes as time goes on?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the role of dramatic irony The Woman Upstairs? How does the narrator balance her knowledge of her betrayal in the end—which she has from the beginning—against the story itself as it unfolds?

## Discussion Question 3

What kind of art do you think Nora Eldridge is about to make, at the end of The Woman Upstairs?

## Vocabulary

Incandescent, canopy, perforce, remnants, demeaning, dismantled, forestalled, exuberance, melancholy, temerity, sustenance, turquoise, inaugural, hyperbole, interventions, critics, unwittingly, de rigeur, feminist, translucent, beige, meniscus, antithesis, splayed.



# Characters

## Nora Eldridge

This person is a third-grade teacher and artist who helps another artist with an installation. This person falls in love with other characters, but then feels she has exposed yourself more than she would like.

## Sirena Shahid

This person is an artist who makes large, room-size installations. She draws others into helping her with her project, but raises the question of whether or not she is exploiting them.

## Skandar Shahid

This person is a lecturer in history who comes to Cambridge for a year with his family.

## Reza Shahid

This person is an eight-year-old boy who is a student in the third-grade teacher's class.

## Didi

This is a friend of the narrator's, a lesbian who offers her advice about relationships.

## Bella Eldridge

This person is the narrator's mother.

## Ben Souter

This is the man Nora almost married when she lived in New York. When he became a corporate lawyer, Nora felt that she no longer recognized him.

## Sana

This person is the whirling dervish who dances through Wonderland when the artist is having a film made of the installation.

## **Dominic Crace**

This person is an art teacher who allowed students to use art materials to paint slogans admonishing other students to really live their lives.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Wonderland

This is an art installation that recreates a setting out of a children's book.

## Snowball

This is an object packed with rocks that resulted in a trip to an emergency room for one character.

## Emily Dickinson's room

This is the diorama Nora is working on in the studio while Sirena is working on her installation.

## Edie Sedgwick's room

This is a diorama Nora plans to make of the room of an artist who worked with Andy Warhol.

## Black Monk

This is a figure in a short story by Anton Chekhov. It symbolizes both artistic inspiration and artistic insecurity.

## Videos at Galerie Werther

These art objects gave Nora Eldridge proof of the fact that she had been exploited by her friend Sirena.

# Settings

## The Studio

This is the place where Sirena and Nora make their art work together.

## The Shahid Household

This is where Nora takes care of Reza and also visits as a dinner party guest.

## Paris

This is where the Shahid family lives. It is also where Nora Eldridge visits a gallery and recognizes that Sirena betrayed her.



# Themes and Motifs

## Experiencing things first-hand

Nora Eldridge is a woman who feels she has not experienced an authentic life for herself. She has done what she was supposed to do, nursing her sick mother while she was dying for four years, but she has not done the things she wanted to do. She describes herself as a ravenous wolf, and she is working on a miniature world which she is reticent about showing to anyone. It is like she is only working for herself, but her work is not integrated with the world, so she is still immature and curious about what will happen when she finally gets out of her own room. In her eyes, the Shahid family represents worldliness and experience, war and history. None of this is personal to her, until she falls in love and lowers the wall that keeps her separate from the world. Having opened herself to experience through love, she is alert to everything's existence, and while she is intent on preserving this feeling, she realizes that her openness has only allowed her to be exploited. Nevertheless, overall this experience is a boon for Nora, as she now has a rock-solid experience to base her future art on.

## Foreignness

Sirena and Skandar represent a world far beyond the safe world of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the instruction of children. Nora meets them first through their son, Reza, who disarms her first at the supermarket, then when he comes to school. As an outsider—and someone who is bullied by the other children, Reza is vulnerable and endearing from the start, and everything Nora experiences of his parents is endearing and precious to her as well. She wants to protect them, originally, even though they ultimately symbolize a much larger world than the world she comes from, of family relationships and personal aspirations. While Nora was originally still trapped in her family, and the duty and necessity of taking care of parents, when she meets Sirena and Skandar, she is ready to experience the bittersweetness of an impossible love between people who will never merge the way family can merge. In this sense, Sirena and Skandar will remain forever outside of Nora's world, but her brush with them raises feelings that she can claim as her own.

## Ruthlessness

Nora says that ruthlessness is the key quality of an artist. In the context of *The Woman Upstairs*, this means that Sirena is willing to betray her friendship with Nora in order to make art and also to make it powerful. Nora herself learns to be ruthless from Sirena, as her sense of humiliation and anger is so powerful that she knows that she will not rely on other people any longer. She herself has something inside that will carry her through her art. There is a degree of revenge that is hinted at, but not realized, in Nora's art. The art she is about to make at the end of the novel will be different from the art she has

made up till now. Instead of being theoretical or merely safe or cute, she will make something that asserts herself against her own experiences.

## **Creativity**

The Woman Upstairs is a novel about art and its origins in personal relationships. As Nora gets to know Sirena and Skandar and their son, she is called to herself, called to create things that she has experience working on, but has not worked on for a long time. She is effectively called to a confrontation with herself and her own desires. While this begins in love and good sensations, it concludes in experience, the constitutive events that makes a person's personality and identity real and solid in the world. Nora starts out making a miniature version of her heart, and learns to make art that will carry her anger and humiliation into the actual world. The novel itself does not seem to be the thing she creates, so much as it is the story of her love and humiliation, told in her own voice. The author does not assert herself, and the 'after' Nora does not assert herself in her 'before' experiences. Nora's creativity remains outside the novel. However, because of her experience with the foreign family, she can have now have a relationship with her own creative fire.



# Styles

## Point of View

The *Woman Upstairs* is told from Nora Eldridge's point of view. She is a school teacher who never thought she would be a teacher, and she is full of regret for the life she feels she should have been living as an artist. The novel starts after the conclusion of all the events that are contained in the novel, so the end is in sight—at least for the narrator herself—even as the novel itself is beginning. Nora's point of view changes as she gets closer and closer to Sirena and Skandar, and then as she feels taken advantage of. She learns to see with new eyes over the course of the novel, which means being fundamentally divorced from herself, and able to then reconcile her own conscious self with her inherited self or her social self, the self that was open to betrayal by Sirena. There is one Nora who is naïve and trusting and endearing, and there is another who is filled with rage over her naiveté.

## Language and Meaning

The *Woman Upstairs* is narrated in a highly literary language that is full of allusion and symbolism and additional meanings beyond the literal. She references 20th-century poetry and art and makes free reference to the events of European and American history. The Black Monk is one figure who comes up a number of times, from a story of Chekhov's, but *Alice in Wonderland* is also a constant echo for the events taking place in the novel. Out of these numerous references, Claire Messud creates a well-educated narrator who is nevertheless naïve in personal experience. Sirena, of course, invokes the Sirens who lure Odysseus astray in the *Odyssey*. This kind of additional meaning is common throughout *The Woman Upstairs*.

## Structure

The *Woman Upstairs* begins with the outrage that comes about as a result of the action of the novel, so it works forward to its beginning. The knowledge that is gained throughout the novel is not, however, present throughout the novel, so there is a split between the 'after' Nora and the 'before' Nora: if Nora begins the story in anger, she tells it in tenderness and wonder up to the point of her betrayal by Sirena.



## Quotes

I'm not exactly an artist, and I don't exactly not have children.  
-- Nora Eldridge (Part 1, Chapter 2 paragraph 14)

**Importance:** Nora means that her teaching is a creative activity and that she has children in her students, without having children of her own.

I wanted her [to be] ignoble, irresponsible, unreasonable, petty, grasping, greedy for the lot of it, jostling and spitting and clawing for every grain of life.  
-- Nora Eldridge (Part 1, Chapter 7 paragraph 49)

**Importance:** As Nora watches her mother decline, she sympathizes with what she thinks of as her mother's unhappiness and wishes that her mother were hungrier for her life.

I didn't particularly want anyone to tell me it was good. I just wanted to be got, And I didn't trust that I would be.  
-- Nora Eldridge (Part, Chapter 9 paragraph 57)

**Importance:** Nora has rarely shown her art to people because she is afraid of not being understood. This reticence will become important in later chapters.

I want—I wanted—for Reza to have a childhood like I did, where all you have to know is how to be a child. No rage, no hatred, no cry for vengeance. No stone throwing.  
-- Sirena (Part 1, Chapter 13 paragraph 86)

**Importance:** In this quote, Sirena expresses her frustration with the American children who are bullying Reza. This incident brings Nora and Sirena closer at the same time that it makes Nora nervous that Sirena and her family will leave.

The desire to be [a Purveyor of Dreams]—to be the fittest at artistic survival—requires ruthlessness. Maybe that is as good a definition as any of an artist in the world: A ruthless person.  
-- Nora Eldridge (Part 1, Chapter 4 paragraph 127)

**Importance:** In this quote, Nora admires Sirena's ability to set everything aside for her art. She says that she does not make the cut, but by the end of the book, she will, because her anger will make her ruthless as well.

You know those moments, at school or college, when suddenly the cosmos seems like one vast plan after all, patterned in such a way that the novel you are reading at bedtime connects to your astronomy lecture, connects to what you heard on NPR, connects to what your friend discusses in the cafeteria at lunch—and then briefly it's as if the lid has come off the world, as if the world were a dollhouse, and you can glimpse what it would be like to see it whole, from above—a vertiginous magnificence.



-- Nora Eldridge (Part 2, Chapter 3 paragraph 123)

**Importance:** Nora's elation over her intimacy with Sirena and her family makes her feel connected with everything. This love is like a drug for Nora, and she is exhilarated at the same time that she is afraid. At the same time, everything feels connected, and that feeling is so new that she is willing to follow wherever it takes her.

I was happy enough to know that I was happy...to dare the thought 'Imagine—imagine if each Saturday morning could be like this' and in the middle of the singing I blushed... because even just having it I knew that there was something wrong about the thought.

-- Nora Eldridge (Part 2, Chapter 4 paragraph 131)

**Importance:** Nora says that she is ready to dive into an unnamed and probably unnamable intimacy with Sirena, but she realizes that there is something impossible about loving a married woman. The love she feels for Sirena and Skandar and Reza is part of her that cannot be fulfilled. It is only her own idea, and none of the actual people could have an actual relationship with her in the real world.

I was happy. I was Happy, indeed. I was in love with love and every lucky parking spot or particularly tasty melon or unexpectedly abbreviated staff meeting seemed to me not chance but an inevitable manifestation of the beauty of life, a beauty that I had, on account of my lack of self-knowledge, been up till now unable to see.

-- Nora Eldridge (Part 2, Chapter 6 paragraph 141)

**Importance:** Having denied herself artistic satisfaction for the years when she was taking care of her mother and then teaching, Nora is delirious in her newfound happiness. Love makes everything worthwhile, although it raises the question of what Nora should do with her happiness. Will it be its own fulfillment or will she have to fulfill it in her art? And how will it involve Sirena and Skandar?

You're so generous to everyone—to your school, to Reza, to Sirena—even to me. You don't look like a ravenous wolf?

-- Skandar (Part 2, Chapter 8 paragraph 161)

**Importance:** Skandar comments on the disparity between the restrained and satisfied woman Nora seems to be and the profoundly unsettled artist she is within herself. By pushing her to find her own fulfillment, Skandar is setting the stage for some conclusion that will make something out of Nora's love for art and for the Shahids.

When his hands rest, warm, even, like hot stones upon my back, just to be nakedly Nora Eldridge seemed, briefly, as though it could be forgiven; as though it could even be enough.

-- Nora Eldridge (Part 2, Chapter 11 paragraph 195)

**Importance:** When Skandar makes love to Nora, much of the art in the book is replaced with something much more common. Their lovemaking has the potential to be redemptive and filled with forgiveness. However, considering that Skandar is married to



Sirena, it also carries a certain note of danger for Nora and the novel. A novel about creativity is easy to wrap up, but bringing closure to a novel about infidelity can be complicated.

I'm angry enough to set fire to a house. It can't be contained, stored away with the recycling. I'm done staying quietly upstairs. My anger is not a little person's, sweet girl's, a dutiful daughter's. My anger is prodigious.

-- Nora Eldridge (Part 3, chapter 5 paragraph 253)

**Importance:** Nora has finally ceased being the Woman Upstairs, and is preparing to turn into the artist she always thought she would be. Apparently she needed to be humiliated and angry. Then, she could be divorced from her life and use her own experience as raw material.