



You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin

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In 1902, Rainer Maria Rilke—then a struggling poet in Germany—went to Paris to research and write a short book about the sculptor Auguste Rodin. The two were almost polar opposites: Rilke in his twenties, delicate and unknown; Rodin in his sixties, carnal and revered. Yet they fell into an instantaneous friendship. Transporting readers to early twentieth-century Paris, Rachel Corbett's *You Must Change Your Life* is a vibrant portrait of Rilke and Rodin and their circle, revealing how deeply Rodin's ideas about art and creativity influenced Rilke's classic *Letters to a Young Poet*.

You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin Details

Date : Published October 10th 2017 by W. W. Norton Company

ISBN : 9780393354928

Author : Rachel Corbett

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Art, Nonfiction, Biography, History, Poetry, Philosophy



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Audrey Babkirk Wellons says

I have a weakness for stories about relationships between famous artists and/or writers; this one definitely delivered. I think Rachel Corbett did an excellent job of creating a narrative out of two lives (and many relationships) that hardly follow a straight line. And, like any good book in this genre, the author gave us enough information about the times they lived in without getting sidetracked in extraneous details or making it feel like a scholarly history.

When I was 50 or so pages into it I was worried that the book was going to make me lose all the admiration I had for Rilke--it focused on his younger years and frankly he sounds pretty annoying--but by the end the author put those early days context of his work and later life so that I felt that his early wandering was essential for the person he became.

Ann says

This was totally all-consuming. The storytelling and writing are exceptional. Corbett manages to write prose that supports, illuminates, and complements Rilke while also maintaining her own voice and controlling the narrative. Wonderful, perfect, A+. This is not just up my alley, this is literally everything my alley is made of.

It's also sent me headfirst into a dormant obsession with Rilke, and now I find myself thinking of him and reading his poetry nearly constantly. Sometimes I even have trouble falling asleep at night because I'm tossing and turning thinking about a poet who's been dead 90 years.

Ryan says

Who would have ever known that one of the world's greatest sculptor's would mentor and guide one of its greatest poets. Reading this story - their fruitful yet volatile relationship - inspired me to write the following - I hope it serves as both a review and a reminder of how I might live.

"Gone are the days of reflection and silence. So interrupted by the multitude of life's distractions that one cannot experience the world. To look into its vast beauty and proclaim and celebrate life. Rilke and Rodin remind us not how we ought to relate or treat ones we love, but how to take time to absorb the world. To breathe the life we were created to live. Perhaps with different balance, but with equal fervor and passion. To record the moments that shape us and define our trajectories toward something more. Something with joy and love and peace and wisdom. That we would not seek every fleeting thought, but be diligent and focused, intentional and discerning. I may never find the fame and recognition of these two icons of their craft; however, I hope to live with grace and balance and passion and rigor. Full of grit and perseverance – unmoved by trials and obstacles, but strengthen by them with wisdom and understanding. That my life may serve those around me – not as a model – but as a set of lessons that are available to those whom are interested.

I remain hopeful that the life I have been called into tells a story that is far greater than I could ever ask or imagine – not for my own glory, but for His alone."

Auriea says

Excellence

Heartfelt. The description of their lives touches you. In this book there is nowhere you don't see yourself. You must change your life, indeed.

Ellen says

It's been a big year for the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) in museums. Sadly, I missed "Séraphin Soudbinine: From Rodin's Assistant to Ceramic Artist" and "Klimt & Rodin: An Artistic Encounter," both of which were at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. "Kiefer – Rodin" closes at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia in a few weeks.

When I noticed "You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin" (W. W. Norton & Company, 2016) by Rachel Corbett, which won the Marburg Prize, I thought, "Hmmmm, that looks interesting." Rodin's art is prominent in my modern art course.; I have visited the Rodin Museum in Paris, at least four times since I was eighteen, when I developed a crush on his small figure, "Celle qui fut la belle Heaulmière" (She who was the beautiful helmet-maker's wife.) I think that was about the same time I read a reference to that sculpture in Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. I knew less about Rilke (1875-1926), only that his poems inspired by the paintings by the post-impressionist Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) offer marvelous insight and that he was a key influence on the painter Balthus (1908-2001) whose work I find distasteful.

I annotated it. I loved it.

Just as the title suggests, the writer offers intertwined biographies and lays out the complicated dance they performed in each other's life.

Rodin was originally the mentor, the giant of modern art in Paris at the turn of the 19th century into the 20th. Corbett limns a wonderful tale, not so much of the genius who challenges artistic dogma but of the maker, the artisan driven by carnal appetites who invented his own genius. Rilke was the neurasthenic child of the waning years of the Austro-Hungarian empire. His identity was shaped by a mother thwarted in her own social ambitions and his poetry had to unknot itself from the sticky bonds of Romantic lyricism.

Both men loved many women, maintaining long relationships that seem to have had little reciprocity. I knew, for instance, that Rodin married his longtime, long-suffering mistress only months before he died; I had not realized that Beuret died less than a month following the wedding from pneumonia. Their relationship had lasted fifty years. Rilke married the sculptor Clara Westhoff (1878-1954); she, in fact, provided the introduction to Rodin with whom she had studied. They lived most of their lives apart. Rodin's son, Auguste, existed in French law only as Beuret's son. Rodin alternately ignored and abused his son; when Rodin died

intestate, his son inherited nothing of the massive and invaluable estate that went to the French government as the Musée Rodin. Rilke had a daughter with Westhoff, Ruth. The child was passed around from mother to grandparents. When she married, Rilke did not find it convenient to attend her wedding.

The book feels timely in this #MeToo moment. Rodin was a sexual predator of the first order—although to be fair he was also the target of ambitious females. Rilke's involvements were more emotionally twisted. Corbett, who wrote this book before any of the scandals of the past year broke, does a fine job telling truths that don't cloud her deep appreciation of the artists' accomplishments and her empathy for them as human beings.

This story is not so much a narrative that connects two discrete threads, it is a structure that brings together clusters of artists. There is the artist's colony at Worpswede in northern Germany where Westhoff and the painter Paula Becker became friends, where Rilke comes to be with Westhoff, having met her in Paris. Worpswede becomes a minor character of its own as part of the story of turn-of-the-century modernism. There is Munich and the ideas of philosophers like Theodor Lipps and Wilhelm Worringer that evolved into the concept of "empathy." There is even the serendipitous discovery of the Hôtel Biron in Paris, an ancient but glorious heap the French government wanted to sell but which became housing for the painter Henri Matisse, Westhoff, the dancer Isadora Duncan, the future Surrealist Jean Cocteau, and others—and, of course, Rodin and Rilke. The Hôtel Biron is today better known as the Musée Rodin.

"You Must Change Your Life" does what a great biography or memoir always does for me: it provides context, it makes sense of the facts of art history, the objects and movements and breakthroughs. The book is a wonderful look at the highways, byways and crossroads of those thirty crucial years between the waning of Impressionism and the emergence of Surrealism—while getting mired in none of that arbitrary and artificial compartmentalization.

Merilee says

Really 3.5 stars. While learning a fair amount I had not known about the lives of both Rilke and Rodin, I never found this book to be totally engaging and writing often somewhat clunky.

Carolyn says

Very absorbing, well written and packed full. Corbett vividly describes each artist's evolution prior to their intersection in Paris in 1902 when Rodin is a mature recognized sculptor in his 60s and Rilke is an aspiring, if somewhat fragile, young poet in his 20s. From then on it's a psychological journey of two brilliant men and the fascinating environments in which they lived, and how they responded and made sense of some pretty crazy tumultuous times. For me it was a connecting of many dots of art and political history, personalities, landscape, and language. I'm coming away with admiration for the network of support that these artists gave and received from each other, and for their pursuit of authenticity and empathy at great personal anguish.

Midway I stopped to read Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet, translated and foreword by Stephen Mitchell. So glad I did. Pulled a lot together, and important to see all those popular quotations from the letters within their original context. It was easy to see how Rilke was working out his own issues as he funneled Rodin wisdom

on to the young poet. Mitchell's foreword was especially helpful to understanding Rilke.

Layla (Between the Lines) says

For fans of Rilke, for lovers of poetry, for artists and spectators of art, for those who constantly question the meaning of life, *this book is for you.*

Earl says

You Must Change Your Life is a fascinating biography of a friendship beautifully written by Rachel Corbett. While we learn about the lives of Rilke and Rodin it is in the telling of the friendship where this book truly shines.

Corbett gives both biographies of the two men as well as an elaborate portrayal of the friendship and mentorship they established. These difficult men are presented in all of their grandeur as well as all of their pettiness, which serves to make them ever more human and real.

One aspect in which I was particularly impressed was Corbett's ability to explain the basics of aesthetics and art history without getting bogged down in terminology. For instance, her explanation of the intellectual atmosphere of the time, a section in chapter 2, is as clear and concise an explanation one will find on aesthetics and the development of the modern concept of empathy. This sets up the rationale for both artists' reception in their own time yet does not derail the flow of the biography.

Highly recommended for those interested in the arts in general and particularly where different forms meet. Also for those who enjoy interesting biographies of people we have all heard of yet may only know a small bit about.

Reviewed from a copy made available through Goodreads First Reads.

Mark Valentine says

It becomes clear in the early pages that Rodin intends to teach the younger artist and poet, Rilke, the difference between observation and seeing, the difference between presenting perfection in art and presenting the truth in art. Empathy from the seer levels the playing field on which to face art. Fronting art, our response, in all genuineness, must exist in a sense of humility that whatever gets seen, it will mandate changing my life. Simple but not easy.

Corbett writes more than two biographies in one book; she has also written about the relationship between the two artists--artists completely different in character and in expression. They were as Dionysus and Apollo, as Pollack and Rothko, as Melville and Hawthorne, as Whitman and Emerson. Reading about their agreements and their clashes--which were seismic--made this a fascinating biography of Art.

Philippe says

This book was mildly interesting, in a gossipy sort of way. But Corbett's 'honeyed prose' (from a dustjacket blurb) aroused a persistent feeling that I was taken for a ride by an author who wanted to spin a good yarn at all costs. This feeling of suspicion was reinforced by the fact that the story hardly seemed to resonate with Wolfgang Leppmann's classic but more soberly narrated Rilke biography which I read only a year ago. In addition in 'You Must Change Your Life' there are inaccuracies and overstatements that left me wondering about the seriousness of it all (just to give two examples: Nietzsche didn't write his 'Zarathustra' in ten days, but only the first of four parts (p. 25); it's unlikely that Rilke, as Rodin's secretary, wrote 'hundreds of letters' in a single day (p. 136)). Furthermore, there is very little meat on the bone in terms of critical and aesthetic assessment of Rilke's work. Corbett curiously relies on the notion of empathy and related turn-of-the-century psychological lore as a motto theme to shed light on the deeper layers of Rilke's poetic inspiration but I feel she overstretches her case. Partly as a result of the author's failure to make Rilke's poetic project intelligible, the poet as a man doesn't really come to life (Rodin, in almost caricatural way, fares better in this regard). Second-line personalities - including Rilke's wife Clara Westhoff, his friend Paula Becker and his muse Lou Salomé - remain even more one-dimensional. All in all, the book didn't convince me as a serious artist biography.

Jimmy says

Knowing Rilke first through his poetry is odd, in that it is his most intensely intimate side. He almost does not seem human, but like one of his angels, outside of time and the physical realm. This book shed light on that physical realm: his actual likeness, his long coming of age, as well as on Rodin, his mentor. And for him, how Rodin was this almost godlike figure, representing Art.

Though the two men worked in different mediums and had entirely different tendencies, one earthy and visceral, the other ethereal and metaphysical, they seemed to have a great relationship. For Rilke, especially, I think the mentorship helped him find his way precisely because Rodin was so grounding. He needed a tether.

Surprisingly or maybe not so surprisingly, these men are very much men with all their imperfections. There are passages that had me cracking up or wincing in pain because I related so much to their odd quirks. Young Rilke's fanboyishness and naivety. His utter earnestness and sincerity in the face of a cold world. And Rodin's unlikely rise in the art world, and his painful demise as increasingly he became an embarrassment to his earlier ideals.

It's like seeing a cat slip and fall, it's not something you expect. But there is so much of that here, so much human striving within all its doubts and mysteries, that yes only the greatness ended up in the art, but the struggle to get there is so real. I loved seeing that behind the scenes shit.

Many famous names crop up. Freud, Matisse, Tolstoy. And women too, smart and brilliant women, though (sadly) most of them fell into the same fate: motherhood, domesticity, and responsibilities so that the men could pursue their dreams. Rilke looked up to so many women, and truly wanted them to succeed as artists, and yet he was not willing to give up any of his own freedom (like taking care of his daughter) in order for

that to happen.

You must change your life, Rilke says, but Rilke did not just do that once. It seemed like his entire life was one long striving to go deeper, to seek and to experience and become more human, to turn and turn and turn within himself so that he can see and be seen.

Geri Degrugy says

I am such a fan of Rilke and this book filled in many details about his life that I didn't know, especially that he had this complicated relationship with Rodin. The author expertly told the tale of these 2 artists, their lives, families, environs, and of course their relationship with one another. There is also an ongoing narrative about the challenges of being an artist, seen through the eyes of these masters. Good read.

Nancy says

I was excited to receive an ARC of *You Must Change Your Life: The Story of Rainer Maria Rilke and Auguste Rodin* by Rachel Corbett in the mail. I was clamouring to read it, entering give-a-ways and requesting it on Edelweiss, then it arrived unannounced in the mail. Thank you, W. W. Norton!

I was in my twenties and living in Philadelphia when browsing in a Center City bookstore I happened upon *Letters to a Young Poet*. Later I bought the *Duino Elegies*-which I read on vacation camping at Acadia National Park-and collected poems in several translations.

I first encountered Rodin in a high school art history class, learning about *The Burghers of Calais*. Later we visited the marvelous Rodin Museum in Philadelphia.

Corbett's book follows the lives of both poet and artist, concentrating on their friendship and how Rodin influenced Rilke's view of the artistic life and appreciation of art, in context of their contemporary society and artist communities.

As a young man Rilke traveled to visit his idols but it was Rodin who took him into his home and confidence.

The poet served as Rodin's personal secretary, living with him at Meudon. In a writing slump, Rodin directed Rilke to the zoo to observe the animals, altering the trajectory of his work culminating in his famous poem *The Panther*.

Rilke took to heart Rodin's admonition that the artist must dedicate their life to their art; seeking solitude Rilke abandoned his wife and child to fend for themselves.

Rilke wrote a monograph on Rodin in which he wrote, "and he labors incessantly. His life is like a single workday" in which "therein lay a kind of renunciation of life." Rilke stressed Rodin as "solitary": "Rodin was solitary before his fame"; he lived "in the country solitude of his dwelling"; he learned his craft "alone within itself" until "Finally, after years of solitary labor, he attempted to come out with one of his works." That work was rejected and he "locked himself away again for thirteen years."

Rilke's perception of the artist influenced his own artistic philosophy, evident in the letters he wrote to a young student, Franz Xaver Kappus, who published them in 1929 as Letters To A Young Poet. In the letters Rilke advises the aspiring poet that no outsider can affirm one's own artistic worth, that it must come from within. He tells Kappus to "look to Nature," the "little things that hardly anyone sees." Rilke praises solitude, "it is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be a reason the more for us to do it."

Neither man was a paragon. Rodin lived with a commonlaw wife who had to tolerate his series of mistresses, including his art student Camille Claudel. He was sensitive and irascible and after nine months he threw Rilke out over a perceived breech of trust: in Rodin's absence Rilke had written a letter to a friend he'd introduced to Rodin, and Rodin had not approved his writing the letter.

The world in the early 20th c. was rapidly changing. Rodin's art became repetitive and was considered too representational. Rilke's work was in keeping with the new movements of Existentialism, Abstract Art, and Depth Psychology. Rilke's poetry continued to show growth during his brief 51 years, but Rodin, over twenty years older, in old age realized how serialized his work had become and felt the irony that only as he neared the end of his life did he realize the purpose of his work.

Toward the end of Rodin's life Rilke realized Rodin had failed to live up to his own advice, which Rilke had taken to heart: work, only work.

"You must change your life" is the last line in Rilke's poem Archaic Torso of Apollo which I first read translated by Stephen Mitchell. Rilke responds to a sculpture of the god Apollo, sans head, arms, and legs, but which still holds a transformative power so that "you must change your life" upon encountering it.

I received an ARC from W. W. Norton in exchange for a fair and unbiased review.

Ana says

Such a pleasure to read. This was really beautifully done. I felt enriched and was so sad to have it end. I was going to give 4 stars and then realized my vague sense of disappointment was only because it was over.
