



Conversations
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Reviews

The Light Above: A Memoir with Margaret Fuller

Maria Dintino

Shanti Arts, 2022, 182 pp.

Lisa West, *Financial and Membership Officer*

Maria Dintino's preface to [*The Light Above: A Memoir with Margaret Fuller*](#) opens with a series of questions. What was she to do with "all the information and my infatuation with this woman, Margaret Fuller," since she had read "everything written by her—her books, columns, and letters"—and much about her written by others? "I was at a loss. I had unburied this person and didn't know what to do with her" (11).

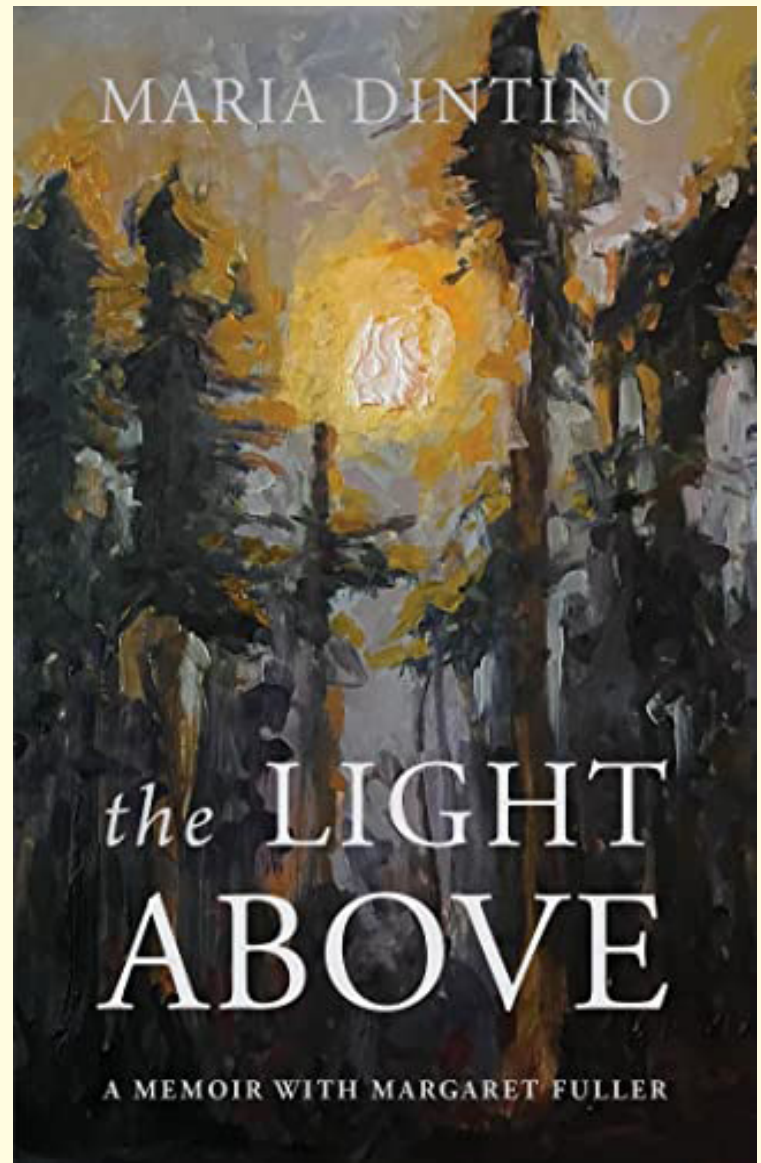
These sentiments echo what we have heard from the Phyllis Cole Award-winner Christina Asquith, as well as others outside academic circles: How encountering Fuller is transformative and how readers see her writing and life as a call to "do" something, whether it is to engage in activism or literary recovery, or to share her with others.

Dintino decides to "write from the heart" and recognizes her writing became "a story about me too": "I was not allowed to write her story without writing my own because I had unburied two women" (11). The book thus engages the process of reading Fuller "from the inside out" (11), considering how her challenges can be likened to one's own, taking seriously the value both of reading and of sharing knowledge, and recognizing that some forms of scholarship are meant not to just stay on the page but to come to life.

This unusual memoir alternates between chapters focused on each woman, all told in first person. "Maria's chapters are about me as I remember my life. Margaret's are my interpretation of her and her life. They are not her words; they are not her thoughts. They are my interpretation of her words and thoughts, my interpretation of who she was and is, my interpretation of her feelings and experiences based on what I learned of her" (11).

The chapters, each about one to two pages long, are mostly but not entirely in biographical order. Through linked accounts of Fuller, Dintino recounts in detail how she herself grew up in a large New England family, daughter of a first-generation Italian American father, and how she navigated between her father's traditions

and ways of interacting and those of her mother's New Hampshire family. Her experiences make Fuller's seem more current, a little less confined to the nineteenth century. Paired chapters cover similar experiences in life—such as the deaths of their fathers, or a new work experience, or the sickness of an infant—even when not occurring at precisely the same age.



Walking plays a central role for each woman, with comments not only on the connection between walking and thinking but also awareness of the meaning of walking in particular places, whether the schoolyard, Cambridge, a neighborhood, or the beach. Educational experiences and travel also create connections across the two women's most important memories.

There are differences, of course, between the two women's lives. For example, Dintino discusses how sheltered her family was: "The monthly *National Geographic* and

our *World Book Encyclopedia* set were my means to peek at the rest of the world” (47). And yet the memoir shows similar issues related to speaking up, claiming one’s own identity, finding one’s way amidst family expectations, encountering a world broader than one knew about, and pondering the significance of beauty and truth.

For me the greatest pleasure in reading this “Memoir with Margaret Fuller” is the resonance that happens across the paired sections. The “Margaret” sections are not a fictionalized autobiography but rather sometimes retell known biographical events in first person and in other times venture into how Margaret might have felt about those events. The “Maria” sections delve into more intimate territory and anecdotal detail, whether the emotional pull of a difficult relationship or health obstacles like callouses on vocal chords that impede speech. The interconnections are illuminating. For instance, “Maria” shares, “All my health issues centered on my ears and throat, listening and speaking. I’d be a fool not to consider the significance of such clustered maladies” (95), while “Margaret” confides, when discussing a bout of headaches and low energy that made her take to her bed, “Once I’d resigned myself to where I would be spending the next hours and even days, once I understood that this was bigger and stronger than the other parts of me, I settled in for the excursion. When thoughts came, I examined them patiently and thoroughly. When feelings came, some strong, I let the tears flow” (95).

There are several longer back-and-forth sections, where paired chapters expand into a series of interconnected chapters. For example, they discuss role models, with “Margaret” beginning with a discussion of figures from her classical reading, then “Maria” considering if a colleague would be an effective mentor, then back to “Margaret” discussing Lydia Maria Francis and others—and yearning to meet Harriet Martineau.

“Maria” interweaves her own professional challenges into these references to historic figures, which not only shows how the need for role models continues into the present but also asks the reader to consider how we might think of female figures in our lives in juxtaposition to those wonderful women whose past lives we savor. The textual organization leads to numerous such connections.

Never does it feel as if the memoir is all about Dintino or that it uses Fuller flippantly; instead, the joint memoir is thought-provoking in its connections and desire for a fuller self.

If we take Dintino at her word in the preface, this mem-

oir is indeed a home run. Drawing on the opening epigraph which quotes Fuller—“If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it”—she states: “You knowing who Margaret Fuller is after reading this is success. You telling others about this remarkable woman surpasses my mission. And you discovering anything about yourself through reading this memoir hits it right out of the park” (11).

This is a lovely book that reminds us that the value of reading Fuller lies, perhaps, in how she makes us reflect on ourselves. It also reminds us of a kind of intimacy—between women’s lives, between reading and living—that emerges in ventures like the MFS that seek to make Fuller’s life present.

Concord: A Novel

Don Zancanella

Serving House, 2021, 360 pp.

Lisa West, Financial and Membership Officer

The newsletter is timely in its inclusion of this book review. Summer reading is about to begin, and *Concord: A Novel* (South Orange, NJ: Serving House Books, 2021) is a fun, light read that will likely not have any surprises for this readership. But it will bring the lighthearted pleasure of recognizing familiar literary moments recast as fiction—and of considering highly regarded literary figures orbiting as characters in someone else’s literary creation. Zancanella calls it “historical fiction,” but the book feels more like a blend of novel manners, letters, journals, and excerpts from biographical works, told in third person and focusing on the characters of Margaret (Fuller), Henry (Thoreau), and Sophia (Peabody) through alternating chapters. This combination reminds me of adaptations or montages of classics, and while there is little action *per se* in the novel, which focuses instead on interpersonal relations and internal musings, it is easy to visualize and have it overlap in my mind with *Little Women* movies and filmic revisitations of nineteenth-century texts.

Zancanella writes: “*Concord* is an imagined version of what might have happened rather than a scrupulous record of historical events” (355). He not only uses letters and journals as resources, but he also sometimes uses textual quotes in dialogue or as internal dialogue (355). Readers familiar with these literary figures thus will see familiar phrases presented in unfamiliar modalities. He also alters “the rate at which time passes” (355), changes