



BOOK CLUB KIT

# Sirens & Muses

Antonia Angress



Dear Reader,

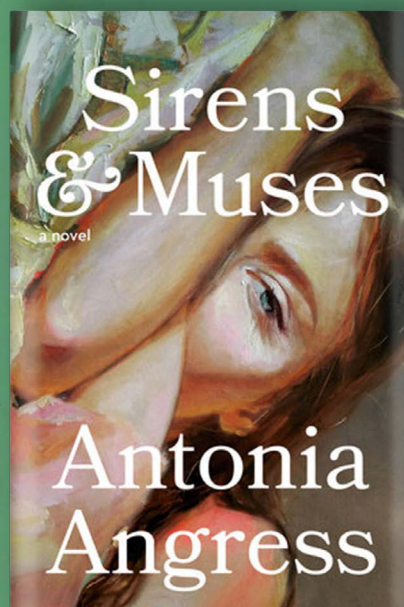
Thank you for picking up *Sirens & Muses*. I began writing this novel eight years ago, when I was 23, but I've been thinking about its themes and ideas for most of my life.

Though I'm not a visual artist, I'm the daughter of one. My mother has made art since she was a child. She doesn't sell her work, but art is and always will be at the center of her life. When I was younger, I often wondered why. Why make art when it's so hard and so lonely, and when the world isn't interested in what you have to say? As I got older and began writing fiction, I asked myself this question, too. And when I met my future husband, a painter who sometimes used me as his muse, I asked it of him.

Why make art? This novel is in part an attempt to answer this question. Through its four main characters, I explore many different relationships to art and creativity—money and ambition, love and desire, egoism and idealism—and yet Louisa, Karina, Robert, and Preston are, like all of us, united in their longing for relevance and connection. The book begins as a campus novel about artists, but it explodes into an exploration of our shared humanity—our struggles for independence and identity, and the undeniable fact that none of us can do it alone.

I hope you'll see glimmers of yourself in my characters if you've ever pursued a creative endeavor, or been in love, or felt consumed by aching regret. But like every other artist, I've had to make peace with the fact that my work here is done; what happens next, when you and this novel encounter each other, is ultimately out of my hands.

With gratitude,  
Antonia



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Karina, Louisa, Preston, and Robert are all artists. Discuss the different ways in which they use art to see the world.
2. Did you have a favorite character? If so, who? Did a particular character capture your interest? If so, why?
3. Discuss the following quote: "The Internet has revealed the ugliness of the human condition more clearly than art or literature." Do you agree or disagree?
4. The human, flawed characters of *Sirens & Muses* at times bruise each other emotionally. What are examples of characters ignoring the feelings of others? How do intention and instinct play into their hurtful actions?
5. In what ways were Karina, Louisa, Preston, and Robert each different at the end of the book than they were at the beginning? In what ways did they remain the same?
6. What do you think lies at the core of Karina and Louisa's relationship? Do you consider it a healthy relationship? Why or why not? How does this book compare to others you've read in portraying the realities of female friendship and love?
7. Discuss Louisa's first impression of Karina. How accurate is it? Based on Louisa's comparisons of herself to her new roommate, what is your first impression of Louisa? What do you think they find appealing in one another?
8. How did Karina and Louisa's relationship change throughout the novel? Do you think they became closer over time, or less so? Why do you think they were able to remain close, even as their lives and perceptions of one another changed?
9. How does the novel play with and subvert female stereotypes and archetypes?
10. The author has chosen to tell this story through alternating perspectives and in the third person. How does this affect your reading? How do you relate to each character and see them differently than (perhaps) they are able to see each other?
11. Discuss the novel's title. Did your understanding of it shift throughout the book?
12. Imagine you get to see Karina, Louisa, Preston, and Robert five years into the future. Where do you think they are now?



# PLAYLIST

1. Campus by Vampire Weekend
2. We Are Young by Fun. Ft. Janelle Monáe (mentioned in book)
3. Alejandro by Lady Gaga (mentioned in the book)
4. The Socialites by Dirty Projectors
5. The Beigeness by Kae Tempest
6. Stay Soft by Mitski
7. Helplessness Blues by Fleet Foxes
8. Closer by Tegan and Sara (band mentioned in the book)
9. Bad Guy by Billie Eilish
10. Ultimatum by Sweet Crude  
(band based in South Louisiana, the area Louisa is from)
11. Venice by The Books
12. New York by St. Vincent
13. Me & My Dog by Phoebe Bridgers, Julien Baker & Lucy Dacus
14. Wolf like Me by TV on the Radio
15. New York, I Love You but You're Bringing Me Down  
by LCD Soundsystem
16. Forget by Twin Shadow
17. 1950 by King Princess
18. Deep Blue by Arcade Fire
19. Vincent by Don McLean, performed by James Blake
20. The Nothing Pt. 2 by Lady Lamb

[Click here to listen to the playlist on Spotify](#)

# THE ARTIST'S MUSE



## INGREDIENTS:

- 1 oz. pisco
- 1 oz. Suze
- 0.5 oz. crème de pêche
- 0.76 oz. lemon juice
- 0.338 oz. sugar syrup
- 1 egg white

## INSTRUCTIONS:

Shake all ingredients with ice and strain back into the shaker.  
Then dry-shake and fine-strain into a chilled cocktail glass.



# THE INSPIRATION



*She Sits, She Waits*, 2018, oil on canvas  
(image provided by the artist)

## CAYLA ZEEK

Cayla Zeek is an artist from Lafayette, LA, whose work explores mythology, Louisiana flora and fauna, and the body. When I first encountered her paintings, I'd been working on *Sirens & Muses* for a few years, and I'd hit an impasse with Louisa's character. I knew her back-story and the general contours of her personality, but I couldn't seem to figure out what her art looked like. As soon as I saw Zeek's work, I thought, this is what Louisa would paint. It was a moment of pure artistic kismet. The painting "She Sits, She Waits" ultimately informed pivotal elements of the novel's plot.



## HANNAH LUTZ WINKLER

*Bower*, 2013, multimedia installation  
(image provided by the artist)

Hannah Lutz Winkler is a New York-based multimedia artist whose work investigates economies of attention, care, labor, and play in a human-animal context. I went to college with Hannah; for her senior thesis show, she built a bowerbird nest, exploring the parallels between human artmaking and the Australian bowerbird's process of obsession, collection, and display. *Bower* made a deep impression on me, and eventually it seeped into my novel: for a time, the working title of *Sirens & Muses* was *Bowerbird*.





*Untitled, 2013, Acrylic, oil, Flashe, and resin on linen*

## LAURA OWENS

Laura Owens, an artist, L.A. gallery owner, and educator, makes paintings that are wide-ranging and inventive, drawing on a huge variety of techniques and tropes—from Japanese landscape painting to embroidery to screen-printing to Photoshop, and more. At once virtuosic and playful, bold and humorous, her work served as an important source of inspiration for Karina's paintings.

## LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE



*A Passion Like No Other, 2012, oil on canvas*

I've always been interested in portraiture, a fascination that deepened when I began exploring it as a theme in *Sirens & Muses*. One of my favorite portraitists is Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, a British painter and writer known for her enigmatic, large-scale figurative canvases. Unlike most portraitists, however, Yiadom-Boakye paints people who don't exist, summoning their faces and bodies from her own imagination. I'm drawn to figurative painting because I love telling myself stories about the people depicted—it's the same impulse that drives me to write fiction—and Yiadom-Boakye's sumptuous paintings of imaginary subjects have always struck me as novels rendered on canvas.





*Pleasantly, Intentionally Ajar*, 2021, oil on linen

## JENNA GRIBBON

Like many artists, New York-based painter Jenna Gribbon is interested in the female form; unlike her mostly male forebears, she brings a distinctly queer and feminist sensibility to her portraits and domestic scenes. Hovering somewhere between intimacy and voyeurism and capturing the feeling both of seeing and being seen, Gribbon's lush, textured depictions of her partner were a touchstone as I was writing Louisa and Karina's relationship.



## DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

*Untitled*, 1987, gelatin silver print

An activist and artist, Wojnarowicz's career spanned many mediums, from painting and performance to film and photography. His deathbed images of Peter Hujar, his friend, mentor, and former lover, were one of my inspirations for Robert's portrait of Vince. "[Hujar's] death is now as if it's printed on celluloid on the backs of my eyes," Wojnarowicz wrote in his memoir *Close to the Knives*. He died of AIDS at the age of 37 in 1992.





*Space2, Providence, Rhode Island,  
1976, gelatin silver print*

## FRANCESCA WOODMAN

I had Francesca Woodman in mind when I envisioned Ines' photography show. Woodman is best known for her haunting black and white photographs of herself or other nude female models, her slow exposures often blurring the figures into a ghostly presence. Despite a short career—she died by suicide at 22 in 1981—she produced over 800 prints and has been the subject of many exhibitions since her death.



## ANDREA FRASER

*Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk, 1989*

Preston is an artist of the Internet age, but in crafting his character I drew on the distinctly analogue work of Andrea Fraser, who since the 1980s has staged performances challenging the precepts, ethics, and contradictions of the art world. In one performance, Fraser posed as a docent at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, offering over-the-top praise of the institution's cafeteria, cloakroom, and bathrooms (pointing at an exit sign, she claimed, "this picture is a brilliant example of a brilliant school"). In another, she filmed herself having sex with an art collector, who paid an undisclosed sum for the privilege.