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Of Muses and Men

How eccentric can a woman be before she is considered crazy? Not very, is the conclusion of Marta Breen.

The fight for Women's Rights has largely been about breaking the way into the closed rooms of men - in professional life, politics, sports, art or just simply in your typical bar. The women who have made way and kicked in those doors have many times done so at great personal cost.

Using herself as an example, in her life as a writer and debater, Marta Breen tell the story about women in the public, and about the everlasting fight for a Room of Ones Own. She tells us about eccentric "Culture Men" - of both sexes. About Ingmar Bergman, Amalie Skram and Björn Afzelius. About groupies, muses and stalkers. About the male gaze, nipples and the importance of having enough wine in the house.

From the book:

"When us women in culture talk about the privileges of "The Culture Man", it does not mean that we hate him and fantasise about exterminating him. Absolutely not. We buy his books and read what he writes. We listen when he talks. Some times we applaud him, other times we protest against what he is saying. Sometimes we laugh at him. And on occasion, after maybe having a bit too much to drink, we might even go to bed with him. The one thing that never happens though, is that we overlook him – the way he overlooks us."

Of Muses and Men (Muser og menn)

Marta Breen

Marta Breen

B. 1976

is a writer, journalist and one of Norway's most profiled feminists. She made her debut in 2006 with the book *Girls, Wine and Song*, about Norwegian women through times in Music. She has since established her self as a notable non-fiction author. Her book *Women in Battle* (2018), illustrated by Jenny Jordahl, has been sold to over 20 territories.



Other

Sample translation from *Of Muses and Men* by Marta Breen

I.

Sillebotten, Värmland, April 2017: Easter is over. The cress on the windowsill has wilted. People have finished uploading close-ups of slow-cooked legs of lamb, homemade foccacia and medium-boiled eggs with vendace roe to Instagram.

One by one, cars full of Easter visitors pull out of the cabin driveway. Children wave at me from backseats.

‘Did you remember to pack your charger?’ I asked them all in turn.

I loaded my own small family into the Peugeot and drove them to the bus stop in Årjäng.

‘Have a nice trip home! I’ll see you in a few days.’

Earlier the same afternoon I’d driven to a nearby recycling station to dispose of glass and metal, old newspapers and plastic packaging. I got my deposit back for the beer cans as well. All visible traces of the holiday period have been removed. The rag rugs have been shaken out. Cushions and blankets have been arranged nicely on the sofa, and there are new candles in all the holders.

So now here I am, sitting all alone in a tidy house in the forest. I’m going to write, and the conditions are *optimal*.

I have my own space now. A two hundred square metre cottage with almost a hectare of land around it, to be precise. You can get a lot for your money in the Swedish countryside.

I knew this house would be mine as soon as I laid eyes on it. There aren’t any street addresses out in the forests of Värmland, so we struggled to find the place when we were coming to view it. Luckily we made it in time, and as soon as we crossed the threshold, I said to my husband: ‘I want it! I want it!’ Like a small child. I didn’t care that there was another family at the viewing (Norwegian as well, of course).

It was the size I liked, more than anything else. The fact it has so many rooms. So many doors you can open and close. And so many beds! I knew instantly which room would be my office. My study. My imagination ran riot. This could be my Mårbacka! My Bjerkebæk! I could live like Marguerite Duras here!

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Marguerite Duras lived in an old stone house in a village in Northern France for ten years. The house was big, but also charming, with a garden and a view of a pond where the village children went ice-skating in the winter. She wrote some of her best work there. In *Writing*, she says: ‘I finally had a house in which I could hide in order to write books [...] The purchase came before my writing mania, that volcano. I think this house had a lot to do with it.’

Duras was taken with the notion of voluntary solitude, and she considered it an absolute necessity for her to be able to write: ‘When one takes everything from oneself, an entire book, one necessarily enters a particular state of solitude that cannot be shared with anyone.’

She did a bit more than just write in that French village. Duras smoked like a chimney and drank like a fish. At her worst, she apparently drank seven or eight bottles of wine a day. She was also often visited by lovers who were far younger and more beautiful than she was. Put simply, she acted like a “Culture Man”.

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Our house in Sweden is an old colour sergeant’s estate. That means it was originally a gift from the Swedish state to a member of the military. We just call it “the croft”, though it’s not really. Our closest neighbour is over a kilometre away and I am surrounded by absolute silence. Silence is very in vogue, as you well know. The new luxury. Mine is only occasionally interrupted by the cries of the cranes behind the barn. So here I am, with a substantial writer’s grant in my bank account, to write about *women’s lack of space*.

It’s something of a paradox.

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The lack of space given over to women is a classic image within feminist literature, one dealt with in great detail by everyone from Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir to Marilyn French and Caitlin Moran. I myself explored the metaphor in my book *Født feminist (Born Feminist)* (2014), where I posed a theory that the renowned glass ceiling is actually a box: that it may be the case that the scope of women’s freedom and capacity to take action remains constant. It seems that every time we women gain ground through new rights or political provisions, our space is restricted in some other way. Among other things, I highlighted the increasing demand for perfection, whether in relation to our bodies and appearance, role as mothers or general degree of happiness in our home lives.

This thought was so dark that I left it hanging, but the image of the box has troubled me ever since.

The struggle for women’s liberation is largely about breaking into the space reserved for men – be it in working life, politics, sport or art. The women who lead the way and kick down the doors often do this at great personal cost. One rarely makes friends by turning up at parties uninvited. And as Virginia Woolf pointed out: ‘*The history of men’s* opposition to women’s emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself.’

The main message in her classic essay *A Room of One’s Own* from 1929 is that a woman needs both her own physical space and her own money if she is to be able to write literature. Woolf goes through the bookshelves of history and thinks about all the books that are *not* there. All the nameless women who were never able to develop their writing due to society’s lack of acceptance for writing as a female pursuit. She also studies the novels written by woman who were published against all odds, and considers whether their literature might have been *different* if they had had more freedom and peace to work. If the people around her had better understood that she as a woman might have the urge to close the door behind her. Or the urge to *create* something – and not necessarily just in her womb.

Virginia Woolf had a considerable amount of space available to her. She and her husband had no children and lived in a large house, making it easy for Woolf to withdraw when she needed peace to write. The success of her gender political novel *Orlando* also rendered her somewhat well-to-do, and the first thing she invested in was an extension of their summer house so that she had a bedroom connected to her study. She was thereby able to work constantly.

When we talk about space as a specific room, the closed door functions as physical protection from the noise, presence and demands of other people. Being able to remove oneself from life's many trivialities might be considered the key to space of one's own, and it is of course *here* that the issue of gender comes to the fore. Throughout history, it has been almost impossible for women to take such liberties. Among other things, Woolf writes about her astonishment that Jane Austen managed to do most of her work in her family's day room, subjected to all kinds of random interruptions. Her novels were more or less a secret. If anyone visited the family's home, Austen immediately hid her manuscript, picked up her needlework from its basket and started embroidering with the other women in the room.

Most people who write or express their creativity through other means have a preoccupation with such external conditions: studies, desks and notebooks. Authors often talk to each other about *where* they do their best work. We are obsessed with what we need to achieve the right frame of mind. To find our flow. Some are like me and can only work in tidy spaces, while others seem to thrive on chaos. Some dream of absolute silence, others manage, unbelievably enough, to listen to the *radio* while writing. Some have to travel. Some need wine.

The American book *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* looks at the work habits of a hundred and sixty world-famous artists, authors and scientists. It is a fascinating read. Many of them developed absurd and almost compulsive peculiarities – after all, we are talking about *geniuses*. While Truman Capote preferred to write while lying on the sofa, Thomas Wolfe preferred to work standing up. The latter often massaged his testicles while writing since this triggered a 'good male feeling' that apparently stoked his creativity. Crime writer Patricia Highsmith felt more relaxed and creative when she was around animals rather than people, doing her best work in the company of her many pet snails. She kept the slimy molluscs in her bag at cocktail parties or hidden in her bra when she was travelling.

The main impression you are left with after reading the book is nevertheless that what most creative and prolific people have in common is a great need for peace and predictability. Quite simply, they are creatures of habit. Those with fixed routines don't have to waste time making decisions every day. When you *know* exactly what you're going to do every morning, this saves time and energy – energy you can use for your creative work instead.

However, writing mothers have little choice but to adapt to their family's rhythm and routines. For example, the American poet Sylvia Plath, who had to get up at four in the morning to write her poems:

‘that still, blue, almost eternal hour [...] before the glassy music of the milkman, settling his bottles’

Something he presumably did in an unnecessarily clumsy and noisy manner, waking the baby every single time.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the classic *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was already bemoaning the lack of peace to write in the mid-nineteenth century. It is difficult to sit down to write in the evening when you are 'weary with teaching the children, and tending the baby, and buying provisions, and mending dresses, and darning stockings,' she wrote. However, sometimes a good friend would take on her work around the house so that she could have an entire day to complete one of her stories.

Finnish writer Märta Tikkanen often wrote her books by hand so that the clatter of the typewriter would not disturb her children and alcoholic husband.

Sigrid Undset is said to have ruined her health by staying up to write at night since this was the only time of the day that a busy mother of small children had to herself. Undset and her husband had six children, two of whom were disabled.

Halldis Moren Vesaas wrote her poems in an eternal dance between kitchen counter and changing table. Halldis did not even get her own study when the family farm underwent major renovation in the 1950s.

Hulda Garborg was forty-eight years old before she had her own *desk*.

Even Queen Sonja has experienced this specific lack of space. Twenty-two years passed from when she took over the male-dominated household until she was given her own study. During that time, she restlessly wandered the venerable halls until finally plucking up the courage to confront her father-in-law, Olav. He responded: ‘Why do *you* need a study? And where would we put it?’

Traditionally, the male artist has had better access to space of his own. Regardless of his finances, he has mysteriously managed to procure the necessary space, whether it be a well furnished study with a Chesterfield sofa and whiskey in a globe drinks cabinet or a small shed in the garden. And perhaps even more crucially: he has managed to impart that this is *father’s* space to which no one else has access because father is *writing*. Consider, for example, author and father-of-three Henrik Langeland, who has installed a practical light outside the door to his study. It lights up red when he wants peace and quiet.

While Halldis spent years moving her books and papers around the house, her husband, Tarjei, had his own little study on the first floor where he preferred not to be disturbed. If there was too much noise or too many visitors – and there often was – he would walk to the fisherman’s cottage on the other side of the lake to write.

One of the most famous writer’s studies in history belonged to Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. Towards the end of the 1940s he achieved near rock star status in the USA by virtue of his poetry readings. He wrote his poems in a charming writing shed set in the cliff above his family’s home in rural Wales. When he wasn’t there, writing and drinking with a panoramic view, he travelled the world, writing and drinking and sleeping with women who were not his wife, Caitlin. In her autobiography, *Life with Dylan Thomas*, she writes that her husband went to the pub *every single day* – and was even there during the births of all three of his children. Caitlin Thomas also loved writing and drinking, but unlike her husband she had to deal with life’s trivialities. Because of this, her books were only published after her husband had drunk himself to death.

As mentioned, the term “the male gaze” was coined to describe a particular view of women in films. Woody Allen is among the directors who have received the harshest criticism for this in the last couple of years. Many of his films are about young, attractive women who fall for much older men, often played by the director himself earlier in his career. This classic trope also formed the backbone of the film *Café Society*, which he presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016. During the press conference, Allen was flanked by lead actresses Kristen Stewart and Blake Lively, and when he was asked why these two actresses in particular had been cast, his response was a lexical definition of the male gaze:

‘Blake Lively is a fantastic beauty, like Grace Kelly. She’s tall and beautiful and looks a million bucks. Kristen Stewart is darker, but still a real beauty. She’s beautiful, like a classic film star, like Liz Taylor.’

A female British journalist in the room wanted to know whether Woody Allen had ever considered making a film about a *woman* in her fifties in a relationship with a man in his early twenties. The director responded that he didn’t ‘have a lot of experience to draw on for material’ to make such a film.

Perhaps he was already tired of the gender trope. Before the festival he was criticised for an interview with industry magazine *The Hollywood Reporter* in which he boasted unrestrainedly about how he had “saved” his far younger wife, Soon-Yi Previn: ‘I provided her with enormous opportunities, and she has sparked to them. She’s educated herself and has tons of friends and children and got a college degree and went to graduate school, and she has travelled all over with me now. She’s very sophisticated and has been to all the great capitals of Europe. She has just become a different person.’

Twice during the interview, the journalist asks Allen whether his wife has also changed *him* in any way during their long marriage, but the director doesn’t seem to understand the question: ‘Changed me? I don’t know if you could say she changed me. I don’t know if I’ve changed. I might be the same person I was when I was twenty.’

When the #metoo movement started, Woody Allen called it ‘a witch hunt atmosphere [...] where every guy in an office who winks at a woman is suddenly having to call a lawyer to defend himself’. Other celebrities saw it as an opportunity to air their dirty laundry. For example, Swedish actor Mikael Persbrandt, whose autobiography, *Så som jag minns det (As I Remember It)*, was published in the autumn of 2017. In it, he describes a life of fighting, groping, drink-driving, crashed Porches, cocaine, pregnant lovers and parties with prostitutes in shabby apartments. But although his many confessions would be a hard pill to swallow for your average Joe, both reviewers and readers praised the book. There was still plenty of boyish charm in his blue-eyed, macho gaze, so instead of being condemned, the shamefaced sinner was once again embraced.

Only six months later, 79-year-old director and actor Tommy Berggren published *his* autobiography. In it, he described a long life on the Swedish stage – from his debut at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in an Ingmar Bergman production, to his major breakthrough as August Strindberg himself in a popular television series in the 1980s, and his success as director of a much talked about production of *Miss Julie* with Maria Bonnevie and Persbrandt in the lead roles.

For large parts of his career, Tommy Berggren drank so much that it is a wonder he was not fired. He was always getting into fights and was thrown out of a number of bars in Stockholm. Sometimes he was so hungover at work that he had to throw up before going on stage. For some reason, he also had to use the staff toilet at the theatre to ‘get in the right mood’. Despite this, he was still popular with women, and in his book he describes being unfaithful to his wife with ‘two promiscuous women’ while filming in Rio de Janeiro and having ‘a bit of a flirt’ with sixteen-year-old Sonja. When he was asked about his

association with prostitutes during a radio interview, he replied: ‘I know a lot of whores I respect more than the old bags in politics’.

Mikael Persbrandt and Tommy Berggren represent two different generations in the Swedish theatre scene, but their stories are strikingly similar. Both of them have lived lives where they have been idolised by many people, most things have been free and few limits have been set for them. Both of them take up a lot of space and exude a lot of self-confidence, and they both seem to take themselves quite seriously. But what I think is most interesting about these books is that even when these adult men are summarising their lives and trying to scrutinise themselves in great detail, they do not at any point try to view themselves or the situations they describe from the point of view of the *women*. The women are just *there*. At the parties, in the dressing rooms, at the hotels or waiting at home. Women are props, they’re spices, they’re something in which to indulge. Like a line of cocaine. After all, what’s a party without liquor, canapés and women? They hardly touch on who the women surrounding them *are*. They’re simply not interested.

This narrative is familiar to us from countless films, television series and music videos depicting decadent parties and nightclubs that are always crawling with scantily clad female extras. How many times have we been shown scenes in American bars with strippers throwing themselves at men showing them varying degrees of interest? These bars are often just a random meeting place – the strippers rarely have anything to do with the story or the dialogue between the men. The women are decoration intended to set the mood. And the fact that these women’s own stories are so rarely told colours our view of them. As viewers – or readers – we simply don’t care about them because we know they’re not essential to the actual story.

Director and scriptwriter Martina Montelius called the theatre scene Persbrandt and Berggren belong to ‘an industry marinated in female disdain’ in evening newspaper *Expressen* in the autumn of 2017. She claimed that male theatre stars are pandered to like combination ‘kings and three-year-olds’ and asked whether we would be as understanding if a *woman* were to behave in such a manner:

‘Imagine an admired female actor getting wasted and pissing outside the theatre where she is working. A female director who is so addicted to drugs that she steals wallets from her colleagues at the theatre and bottles of wine from the theatre restaurant. Imagine a renowned actress demanding sex with younger colleagues and flying into a rage if she does not get her way, or hurling abuse at theatre staff. Would her talent or ability to pull in big crowds mean she was allowed to keep working? No, it would not. She would be signed off work and sent for treatment immediately – or simply fired.’

Maybe it’s Ingmar Bergman’s fault. The playboy to rival all playboys. In connection with the hundredth anniversary of Bergman’s birth in 2018, he was accused of laying the *foundation* for the sexist culture of the Swedish film and theatre scene. It was his biographer, Thomas Sjöberg, who asserted this. He also claimed that the Bergman Foundation had denied him access to the filmmaker’s archives because they did not want anyone criticising him during the anniversary celebrations.

For decades, the Swedish director pursued many of the young women with whom he worked. He is said to have given his colleague, Tomas Alfredson, the following advice: ‘Choose an actress who makes your dick twitch’. Bergman was married five times and had nine children with six different women. He started dating Norwegian Liv Ullman in the summer of 1965 while filming *Persona*. At that time he was a middle-aged, already legendary filmmaker, and she was a twenty-year-old actress. The new couple moved into a house on the Swedish island of Fårö, north of Gotland. In the documentary *Liv & Ingmar*, we learn about the many challenges they soon faced. Ingmar didn’t like social gatherings, and

he was jealous and didn't like people visiting Liv from home. He soon had a wall built around the house to screen them from unwelcome guests. The great director often sat at the breakfast table with his head in his hands and said he wanted to be left in peace that day. His mood was changeable, and he didn't like anyone in his family or on his film sets contradicting him. During rehearsals in theatres, he preferred to sit in a purpose-built booth so he would not be disturbed. He would sometimes throw a furious look sideways if one of the actors coughed or made any other noise.

One of the saddest stories Ullman tells concerns a trip the couple made to Rome. She was excited and looking forward to seeing the city, but Bergman was grumpy and irritable for most of the trip. He wanted to eat at the same restaurant every day and stayed in their room the rest of the time. One evening they were invited to dinner by Federico Fellini – Italy's most famous director – but when Bergman found out that other people had been invited as well, he turned and left. Liv says she came to feel like a prisoner on Fårö. After five years, she took her daughter, Linn, and left.

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As a creative genius, it was only natural for Ingmar Bergman to consider his young girlfriend his “muse”. He called her “his Stradivarius” – implying he could play her like a violin.

The so-called muses are an essential part of the mythology surrounding male geniuses, and there are more than a few artists who have put their young lovers on this somewhat shaky pedestal. The concept originates from Greek mythology, where the muses are goddesses who inspire the creation of great art. The muses were Zeus' daughters and embodied various art forms such as writing, dance and drama. Their role is not unrelated to that of nymphs, sirens, geishas, concubines and courtesans. The purpose of the muses was to invoke strong emotions and spirituality in the artist. In the real world, male artists have not showed as much interest in the spiritual dimension – as far as they are concerned, inspiration can just as easily strike in bed. Women who have been referred to as muses have often been talented artists in their own right, as was the case with Liv Ullman, but being “acclaimed” is far from required. All that seems set in stone is that the muse has to be a young and beautiful woman. Ugly old ladies don't inspire anyone.

Director Vibeke Løkkeberg experienced what it was like to be called a muse when she acted in her then husband Pål Løkkeberg's films in the late sixties. Even though she participated in both the production and scriptwriting side of things, the press reduced her to the director's *source of inspiration*. In one instance, a journalist approached her husband and asked whether they might be permitted to photograph her naked – with only rolls of film protecting her modesty. Apparently, asking the young actress herself seemed unnecessary. Vibeke Løkkeberg quickly tired of this passive role and seized control of her own career.

The 1960s became the heyday of muses and so-called it girls, featuring pop culture names such as Edie Sedgwick, Jane Birkin, Marianne Faithfull and, not least, our very own Marianne Ihlen.