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*Kathleen O'Connor of Paris, Amanda Curtin (Fremantle Press)*

## Summary

Artist Kathleen (Kate) O'Connor left conservative Perth in 1906 to pursue a life as an artist in Paris. She was a contemporary of Madame Curie, Lucien Simon and Isaac Israels, and Amanda Curtin's work of narrative non-fiction reveals her as a woman ahead of her time. Part travel narrative and part biography, this book is a recovery and resurrection of this elusive woman whose father was the engineer C.Y. O'Connor. Kathleen O'Connor was a prolific artist who received accolades and a comprehensive exhibition in Perth only towards the end of her life. She never married and gave away a lot of her paintings, mostly to family. She is thought to have thrown some of her paintings into the harbour built by her father after being asked, on her return to Perth, to pay duty on them. "Art does not change, but we do," says Curtin in this brilliantly researched narrative, and that statement also honours the legacy of Kathleen O'Connor.

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## About the author

Amanda Curtin is the author of two novels, *Elemental* and *The Sinkings*, and a collection of short stories titled *Inherited*. She has been shortlisted for and won awards for her fiction and has been published internationally. She has also won several writing residencies around the world, including at the Tyrone

Guthrie Centre in Ireland. Amanda Curtin is an accredited editor with the Institute of Professional Editors and holds a PhD in Writing. She lives in an old house in a Perth suburb with her husband and an opinionated Siamese cat.

### Questions for discussion

- Amanda Curtin says “art” (she includes writing in this statement) “does not change, but we do.” How is this notion carried through the narrative and what do you think it means in the context of the book?
- The book opens with a lyrical exploration of loss. Amanda Curtin describes returning to Perth after the funeral of her artist friend and writes, “Four weeks from now I will sign a contract to write this book. That these things are connected is something I don’t know then”. How does the biography explore this connection?
- What is the portrait of Kathleen O’Connor that emerges through this recreation? What kind of woman do you think she was? Consider the myths that surround her, including the one about her throwing her paintings into the sea; the scene recreated in Amanda Curtin’s short story, ‘Paris Bled into the Indian Ocean’ (in *Inherited*, UWA Publishing, 2011).
- Kathleen O’Connor’s determination to make a life for herself as an artist in Paris is unflinching. Do you think all great art requires great sacrifice?
- Kathleen O’Connor is revealed as an enigmatic, sometimes frustrating woman. Although she was a prolific artist and letter writer, she is silent about the big things in her life: war; poverty; her father’s suicide; her romantic life or lack thereof. Why do you think that is?
- How does the writer reveal her own preoccupations with “loss and redemption” in this narrative?
- If you consider this book as a palimpsest – the biographer visiting the places where her subject lived; modern Paris superimposed over 1920s Paris; notes written by the artist and the writer a hundred years apart; paintings under other paintings – how do these ideas swirl and revolve and reveal themselves?
- Financial success eluded Kathleen O’Connor in her lifetime but she remains an inspiration to artists today – a curiously modern figure, someone we would now recognise as feisty, brave and uncompromising. Do you know of any modern writers or artists you can compare her with?

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*Inherited, Elemental* and *The Sinkings*, Amanda Curtin, (all UWA Publishing)

*The Magnificent Life of Miss May Holman*, Lekkie Hopkins, (Fremantle Press)

*The Life and Loves of Lena Gaunt*, Tracy Farr, (Fremantle Press)