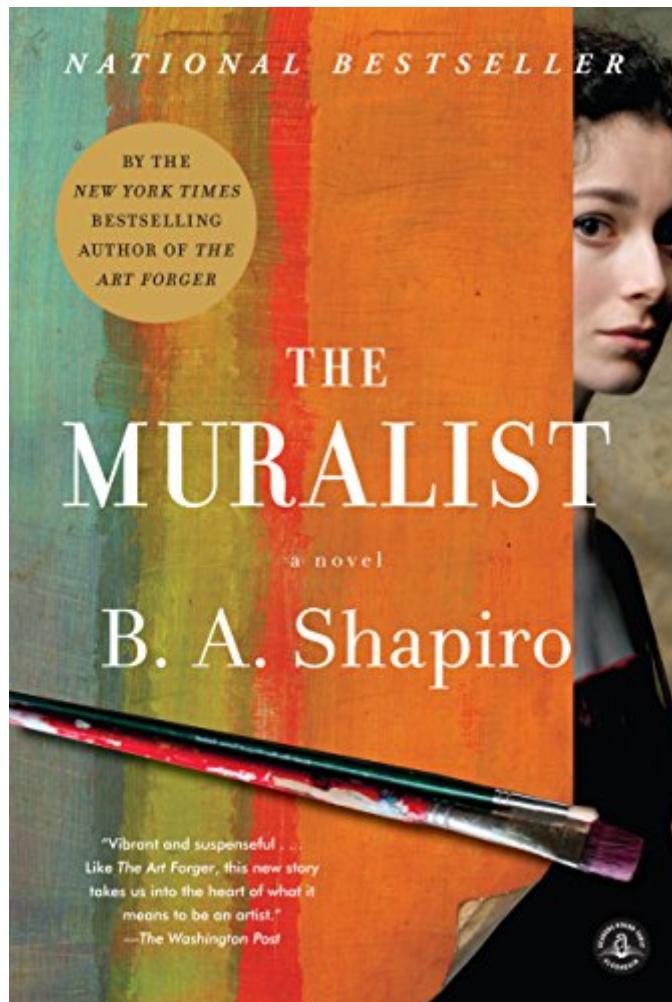


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The Muralist: A Novel



Synopsis

“Vibrant and suspenseful . . . Like *The Art Forger*, this new story takes us into the heart of what it means to be an artist.” The Washington Post *B. A. Shapiro* captivated us in 2012 with her “addictive” novel *The Art Forger*. Now, she’s back with another thrilling tale from the art world. When Alizé Benoit, an American painter working for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), vanishes in New York City in 1940, no one knows what happened to her. Not her Jewish family living in German-occupied France. Not her artistic patron and political compatriot, Eleanor Roosevelt. Not her close-knit group of friends, including Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Lee Krasner. And, some seventy years later, not her great-niece, Danielle Abrams, who while working at Christie’s auction house uncovers enigmatic paintings hidden behind works by those now-famous Abstract Expressionist artists. Do they hold answers to the questions surrounding her missing aunt? A

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Customer Reviews

Arlene Miller YedidMany contemporary authors weave time, place, and characters to create a story that interests, teases, and sometimes requires patience. The Muralist contains two stories that shift from present times to the chaotic time of pre-WWII. The novel begins with Danielle Abrams, while working at Christies' auction house finds paintings hidden behind works by famous Abstract Expressionistic artists. The style of these hidden paintings resemble that of Danielle's Aunt, Alize Benoit, who mysteriously vanished during World War Two. The most interesting element of The Muralist is that it is populated with significant real people. Historical figures enhance this novel's plot. You read about three of the founders of Abstract Expressionism—Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Lee Krasner. My goodness, Eleanor Roosevelt is shown to be the compassionate, thoughtful person revealed by historians. A significant element of the plot is the terrible plight of the European Jews in pre-war Europe. Regardless of European Jews being rounded up and disappearing, the world turned a blind eye. Shapiro selected another real character from the 1940s—the U.S. Undersecretary of State, Breckinridge Long. Indifferent to the refugees' plight, Long's influence on President Roosevelt was instrumental in turning away the Jewish refugees, even though returning to their homelands meant almost certain death. Alize's story is of being one of many American artists working for the WPA, which brings in Rothko, Pollock, and Krasner. Artists were employed by the government as a result of the depression. The invasion of France created fear for her family. She searched for a means to obtain visas for them, but her efforts were in vain. As the reports from France became more and more dire, Alize was consumed with worry and anxiety, becoming mentally unstable. Finally she snapped and was admitted to a mental facility, from where she vanished. Her niece, Danielle, seventy years later embarked on a difficult search for this woman who disappeared never to be seen again..I really enjoyed reading this novel. The story was complex, but was a great read. I wonder how an author can keep track of such a complex plot. My book group invited B.A. Shapiro, who lives in Naples, Florida, to speak about The Art Forger and The Muralist. She gave a great, humorous talk on the evolution of her writing career. These two books are New York Times best sellers, yet her first novels were not well received. B.A. Shapiro has hit the literary world big time.

An interesting novel that uses American modernist artists in 1939 to explore American attitudes of isolationism regarding WWII. Although I don't believe this to be the intent of the author, I was struck by how these voices from 1939/40 so vividly described conversations and attitudes found in

America today. For me, they served as the catalyst for exploring current attitudes toward refugees and cultural stereotyping. Thoroughly thought provoking and eerily reminiscent of political hyperbole bantered about today as argument to restrict assistance to Syrian refugees.

I wasn't sure I'd like this book at first, but since I enjoy reading books about that terrible time in history (1940-45) I decided to try it. I was so richly rewarded. The book takes the unusual perspective of an ordinary Jewish American in 1940, a woman with all her relatives still in France, Belgium, and on the run from Hitler. It shines a light on our infamous isolationism, our unwillingness to get involved or to welcome refugees fleeing for their lives. It names names, something that must be done regardless of our discomfort, because we must never let this happen again. Finally, the story is written from the perspective of young American artists of the time, and I learned a lot about the emerging styles and artists of the day. Definitely recommend to book clubs, art aficionados, anyone who loves good writing that reaches your soul.

For me, this was a thoughtful read that took me back to the era of WWII and the world of artists, politicians and tyrants. In Europe, Hitler's megalomania and fear were wrecking havoc and, In Washington D.C., Roosevelt's administration was implementing programs for recovery from The Great Depression and trying desperately to stay out of the European conflict. One of the programs in force was a WPA project employing artists to paint murals for public buildings. Ms. Shapiro's knowledge of art and artists and the art world makes this a fascinating fusion of politics, emotions, creativity and suspense.

I gave *The Muralist* a 5-star rating because I found B.A. Shapiro's writing crisp and eloquent. Initially, I was concerned its plot would be too similar to that of *The Art Forger*, which I really enjoyed, even though in both cases the quest to solve an art-related mystery is what drew me in. Both stories open with a contemporary character that is compelled to explore the lives of characters in years past. *The Muralist*, however, turns out to be a very different novel from Ms. Shapiro's earlier one. I learned new aspects of American Abstract Expressionism from the point of view of the protagonist, Jewish American artist Alizée Benoit, and her friend circle of WPA artists. Central to the story, as well, is the author's sobering exploration of the US role in the early days of World War II and the impact it had on young Alizée and her art. Readers interested in suspense fiction related to modern art and the Holocaust might like this novel.

I was enthralled by and found very interesting "The Art Thief" by B.A. Shapiro. But "The Muralist" was a huge disappointment. The book started off slow. I kept reading on the theory that it would pick up, but it never did. The characters were basically one dimensional and never fully developed except perhaps for the primary imaginary character Alizee, but that is a gift. Shapiro's interjection of an imaginary artist who supposedly shaped the careers of Mark Rothko ,Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner and the American school of Abstract Expressionist, not to mention being friends with and influencing Eleanor Roosevelt, was totally unbelievable. This book was, unfortunately, just boring, boring, boring.

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