

# LADDERS TO FIRE

Anais Nin

*Introduction by Benjamin Franklin V*

*Foreword by Gunther Stuhlmann*

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# Introduction

*Benjamin Franklin V*

## BIOGRAPHY

Pianist and composer Joaquín Nin abandoned his wife and three children in Arcachon, France, in 1913, shortly after the tenth birthday (21 February) of the eldest child and only daughter, Anaïs (1903–1977). Feeling rejected, she sought his approval, initially by writing him a letter as she sailed with her mother and brothers the next year on the *Montserrat* from Barcelona to New York City. The letter constitutes the beginning of the diary that she wrote for most of the rest of her life and that, when published beginning in the mid-1960s, established her as a writer of significance.

Bookish and dedicated to writing from an early age, Nin withdrew from school at sixteen,

with her mother's permission, because she thought it too mundane. Her only additional formal education occurred in 1921, when she took two classes at Columbia University. The next year she worked as a model, posing for a painting by Neysa McMein that was used on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* (8 July 1922) and for sketches by Charles Dana Gibson that were published in a Cuban newspaper. She wed banker Hugh Guiler in 1923. The marriage endured, despite their tepid physical relationship and her involvement with many men.

The couple moved to Paris when Guiler was transferred there in 1924. She began her extra-marital activities in the City of Light in 1929 with author and professor John Erskine, who had taught Guiler at Columbia University. She was fully introduced to uninhibited sex in 1932 by the impoverished Henry Miller, the publication of whose *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) she would underwrite with her husband's money. Sexually voracious, Nin had affairs in Paris with the Peruvian Marxist Gonzalo Moré and her analysts René Allendy and Otto Rank, among other men. Though she had written fiction (unpublished) in the United States, her commitment to it increased when Miller encouraged her and critiqued her work. Small Paris presses

published her first three books. Following the publication of *D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study* (1932), two volumes of fiction appeared that decade, *The House of Incest* (1936) and *The Winter of Artifice* (1939). Also during this period she was published in little magazines, including *transition*. Guiler and Nin returned to New York in late 1939, when he was reassigned there. Miller and Moré soon followed, though her affair with Miller was then either winding down or concluded.

Unable to interest publishers in her writing after returning to the United States, Nin created the Gemor Press in 1942 to publish it and, later, works by other authors. She set type; Moré operated the press. This enterprise lasted until 1947.<sup>1</sup> Through the efforts of Gore Vidal, of whom she was enamored, she secured, in January 1946, a contract with a major American publisher, E. P. Dutton, for which he worked as editor. After issuing three of her books beginning with *Ladders to Fire* (1946), Dutton rejected her next manuscript, which Duell, Sloan and Pearce released as *The Four-Chambered Heart* (1950).<sup>2</sup> British Book Centre agreed to accept the following novel, *A Spy in the House of Love* (1954), but only if she paid for its publication, which Guiler did. The next year she established

the Anaïs Nin Press, which sold copies of some of her out-of-print books and, late that decade, published four of her titles, including the novel *Solar Barque* (1958) and *Cities of the Interior* (1959), which collects her first five novels.<sup>3</sup> In 1961, she affiliated with Alan Swallow, who ultimately published, in Denver, all the books of fiction she then wished to have in print, as well as her study of D. H. Lawrence.

Though Moré was her primary lover during the first half of the 1940s, Nin had numerous affairs during much of the decade, including with opera singer Edward Graeffe, actor Canada Lee, Haitian diplomat Albert Mangones, and critic Edmund Wilson. She also consorted with young, gay men. Soon after falling in love with the actor and printer Rupert Pole in 1947, her life changed. She motored with him to California, leaving Guiler and Moré behind, Moré permanently. She began spending part of her time with Pole in California and part with Guiler in New York, an arrangement she likened to a trapeze act. She became a United States citizen in 1952 and a bigamist in 1955, when she wed Pole, though because of tax issues they had their marriage annulled in 1966.

Despite trying from the 1930s to have her diary published, Nin did not succeed until 1966,

when *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1931–1934* appeared under the joint imprint of Swallow and Harcourt, Brace & World. This and subsequent volumes brought her fame, not only because of their depiction of her life, which included intriguing relationships and memorable personalities, but also because their publication coincided with the emergence of second-wave feminism: many women admired her apparent economic independence, an impression she created by not mentioning her husband in the diary. Beginning in 1986, diary volumes presented as unexpurgated reveal that she was married to Guiler, who financed her activities, and detail her affairs omitted from the diary as originally published, including adult, consenting incest with her father.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the perception of Nin the person has changed significantly since the 1960s and 1970s. Yet as is the case with any author, her life, however considered, should not influence the evaluation of her art.

#### LONG FICTION

Though the diary is well known, Nin's serious, noncommercial fiction is not. Nin wrote four kinds: a so-called prose poem, *The House of Incest*; novellas, some published initially in *The*

*Winter of Artifice*; short stories first collected in *Under a Glass Bell* (1944); and six novels, starting with *Ladders to Fire*. She remained satisfied with the text of the prose poem, but altered the contents of the story collection in editions published after 1944. The novellas caused her problems. She was disappointed with the early ones and uncertain where to place those she wrote later.

Nin began writing novellas by 1933. The six-year delay between conception and their publication in *The Winter of Artifice* occurred for several reasons: some of the events on which she based her fiction were still unfolding (such as her relationship with Henry Miller); she needed to finesse incidents that might cause her apparently unsuspecting husband to doubt her faithfulness (she based much of her fiction on experiences detailed in the diary, including those involving Miller); and she struggled with her prose because, after Spanish and French, English was her third language. She also needed to ponder the unwelcomed but constructive criticism of her writing by Miller, Lawrence Durrell, and Guiler. Despite the long gestation period, the three novellas as published in *The Winter of Artifice* displeased Nin, primarily because one of them, "Djuna," describes events involving Djuna (Nin), Hans (Henry Miller), and Johanna (Miller's wife,

June, to whom Nin was also attracted) that might reveal too much about her personal life; because she found them too artless (too much unfiltered diary material); and because her writing was too strongly influenced by Miller. As a result, she revised two of the novellas, "Lilith" and "The Voice," and published them, but not "Djuna," in *Winter of Artifice* (1942), the first book from the Gemor Press.<sup>5</sup>

Nin also wrote long fiction in the early 1940s, possibly intending to publish it as a series of books—a continuous novel—dealing with the nature of women and featuring recurring characters.<sup>6</sup> The Gemor Press published what amounted to a dry run: *This Hunger* (1945), which consists of the novellas "Lillian and Djuna" and "Stella," as well as the short story "Hejda." Yet as happened following the publication of *The Winter of Artifice*, Nin had second thoughts about the contents of her most recent book. Specifically, she reconsidered the selections in *This Hunger* when she needed to provide a manuscript to Dutton in early 1946. She faced a problem: How could she, on short deadline, honor her contractual commitment when she had nothing to submit? She solved it by creating a text consisting of "Lillian and Djuna" and "Stella" from *This Hunger*, plus the new "Bread and the Wafer." Dutton published

these three works as *Ladders to Fire*. Sometime after publication, again dissatisfied with a work of long fiction, she decided that “Stella” was insufficiently connected to the other novellas but self-contained enough to stand on its own. She removed it from *Ladders to Fire* when, in 1959, she published the novel in *Cities of the Interior* (with “Lillian and Djuna” titled “This Hunger”) as the first part of the continuous novel. After years of struggling with novellas—as published in *The Winter of Artifice* (1939), *Winter of Artifice* (1942), *This Hunger* (1945), and *Ladders to Fire* (1946)—Nin finally became satisfied with them when, in 1961, she placed “Stella” in the Swallow edition of *Winter of Artifice*. Ultimately, she concluded the five-part continuous novel by writing a lengthy addendum to her fifth novel, *Solar Barque*. Swallow published *Solar Barque* and the addendum as *Seduction of the Minotaur* (1961).

#### LADDERS TO FIRE

In a 1946 advertisement in the *New York Times*, E. P. Dutton characterized Nin’s new book with these words: “LADDERS TO FIRE brings out with daring honesty the frustrations and ecstasies of today’s woman as she whirls toward self-destruction. Miss Nin’s prose soars with

a freedom and precision that makes her work stimulating and alive.”<sup>7</sup> Commenting on it in the *New York Times Book Review* three weeks earlier, Herbert Lyons expressed a different opinion. He likened the author’s technique to that of “some modern painters” whose abstractions are “murky, meaningless and too often in bad taste.”<sup>8</sup> Though such an objection might then have been expected from readers unfamiliar with the works of such authors as Djuna Barnes and Nathanael West, for example, someone like Lyons, later briefly editor of the *Book Review*, should have been aware of the emerging movement called postmodernism, which valued undeveloped characters, scenes that change without transition, and other techniques that Nin uses in *Ladders to Fire*. She did not compose the contents of this book or her other fictions carelessly or artlessly: she wrote according to her theory of writing. She discusses it in three documents published in the mid-1940s: the prologue to *This Hunger*, which, revised, became the prologue to *Ladders to Fire* (1946 edition only); *Realism and Reality* (1946); and *On Writing* (1947).<sup>9</sup> In these short pieces, she identifies as the subject of her fiction women who are conflicted over their nature but who strive for wholeness, a condition she defines as the successful merging of their nonrational feminine qualities with

the rational qualities of men.<sup>10</sup> She presents this struggle impressionistically – revealing little, implying much, especially about the characters' inner selves, where emotional dramas form a structure that may be discerned and used as the structure of a novel. She uses facts as symbols.

How successfully does Nin implement this theory? *Ladders to Fire* helps provide an answer. In the prologue, she states that in order to write about “women’s development . . . it is necessary to return to the origin of confusion, which is woman’s struggle to understand her own nature.” This book “deals with the negative pole, the pole of confused and twisted nature,” by showing “woman at war with herself.”<sup>11</sup> In the novel, Nin indicates that neurosis keeps the female characters from becoming complete human beings. She emphasizes their fragmented nature by using only their given names. These women include Lillian, whose self-doubt causes her overbearingness; timid Djuna, who yearns for love but misses much of life because of her inability to live in the present; guilt-ridden Helen, who cannot attain the freedom she expected when abandoning her husband and children long ago; Sabina, whose broken internal compass makes her life chaotic; and Stella, whose distrust of others keeps her from revealing her true self.

Though *Ladders to Fire* lacks a strong plot and, especially in its final form, fully drawn characters, it depicts the women's inner turmoil and its influence on their lives, precisely as Nin intended.

Nin concludes the two parts of the final version of *Ladders to Fire* with among the most memorable scenes in all her long fiction, ones that convey much of the book's meaning. Looking through a window while attending Lillian's private piano concert in "This Hunger," Djuna observes three mirrors in a garden, an image that suggests an ability to appreciate nature only obliquely, through reflections.<sup>12</sup> This shortcoming is analogous to neurosis preventing women from living comfortably with themselves and functioning affirmatively in life. "Bread and the Wafer" ends with a surrealistic party hosted by Lillian and Jay, her lover.<sup>13</sup> The major female characters remain troubled. Two of them commit spiritual suicide: self-critical Lillian and becalmed Sabina. Stella continues revealing too little of her real self. The scene ends with the manipulative Chess Player urging Djuna to interact with Jay's friends. Uneasy doing so, she removes herself emotionally from the party and turns inward, an action she knows is tantamount to dying because living within herself — in her city of the interior — isolates her from life.

Dealing mainly with characters introduced in *Ladders to Fire*, Nin's next four novels also focus on women's inner struggles. Yet readers missed the connections among these works because each segment was published separately. Not until the 1959 appearance of *Cities of the Interior* were they able to purchase Nin's first five novels in one book and easily chart the characters' problems and actions. Still, though, Nin had not written about women's positive pole, as she implied she would do when stating that *Ladders to Fire* deals with the negative pole. She finally presented a balanced woman in the new material published in *Seduction of the Minotaur*. Here, Lillian, benefiting from experiences in Mexico, overcomes neurosis and attains what amounts to emotional wholeness, as indicated early in the novel when her surname is revealed. Having a full name (Lillian Beye) suggests her completeness. At the end of the novel, Lillian returns to her family in White Plains, New York, now emotionally secure enough to help her husband with his own problems. The tormented main character in *Ladders to Fire* and the stable one at the end of *Seduction of the Minotaur*, Lillian frames Nin's continuous novel.

Despite having to cobble together a text to satisfy the terms of her contract with E. P. Dutton

in 1946 and though she later altered the contents of *Ladders to Fire* by omitting the novella “Stella,” Nin was able, in the shortened text, to create a novel that reflects her theory of fiction. Because it deals with issues she addresses in her next four novels and introduces all the major female characters who appear in these works, it is her indispensable book of long fiction.

#### NOTES

1. See Philip K. Jason, “The Gemor Press,” *Anaïs: An International Journal* 2 (1984): 24–39.

2. Dutton also published Nin’s novel *Children of the Albatross* (1947) and *Under a Glass Bell and Other Stories* (1948).

3. See Benjamin Franklin V, “Advertisements for Herself: The Anaïs Nin Press,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 91 (June 1997): 159–90. The Anaïs Nin Press also published *Under a Glass Bell and Other Stories* (probably 1957) and *House of Incest* (1958).

4. As of early 2014, sixteen volumes of the diary have been published, with at least one more volume forthcoming. The unexpurgated diaries are *Henry and June: From the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986); *Incest: From “A Journal of Love,” the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1932–1934* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992); *Fire: From “A Journal of Love,” the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1934–1937* (New York: Harcourt

Brace, 1995); *Nearer the Moon: From "A Journal of Love," the Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1937–1939* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996); and *Mirages: The Unexpurgated Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1939–1947*, ed. Paul Herron (Athens: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2013).

5. Named for Djuna Barnes, Djuna appears in many of Nin's fictions. In Nin's last novel, *Collages* (1964), the character Judith Sands is based on her. Wishing to develop a friendship, Nin wrote to Barnes, who did not respond. Nin's relationship with the Millers, as portrayed in *Henry and June*, is depicted in the movie *Henry & June* (1990). "Lilith" is untitled in *Winter of Artifice*.

6. In the prologue to the 1963 edition of *Ladders to Fire* published by Peter Owen in London, Nin expressed her intention in this manner: "My original concept was a *Roman Fleuve*, a series of novels on various aspects of relationships, portraying four women in a continuous symphony of experience. All the characters are presented fully in the first volume, *Ladders to Fire*. They are developed later in the succeeding volumes, *Children of the Albatross*, *The Four-Chambered Heart*, *Spy in the House of Love*, and *Seduction of the Minotaur*" (*The Portable Anaïs Nin*, ed. Benjamin Franklin V [San Antonio: Sky Blue Press, 2011], 193). She reinforced this point in the preface to the Swallow Press edition of *Cities of the Interior* published in Chicago in 1974: "When *Ladders to Fire* was accepted by E. P. Dutton, I explained that it was part of a larger design, and that other novels would follow and round out the characters" (*The Portable Anaïs Nin*, 194). Writing about *Ladders to Fire* in the late 1960s, however, she stated: "I did not realize at the time that the novel would be continuous, that the habit of following

characters for years in the diary would influence my novels, and that I would want to develop them through long periods and many incidents" (Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future* [New York: Macmillan, 1968], 134). I cannot resolve this apparent contradiction. Because *Collages* differs significantly from the other novels (all the major characters from the previous novels are absent), it is not part of the continuous novel and is therefore not included in *Cities of the Interior*.

7. E. P. Dutton advertisement, *New York Times*, 10 November 1946, G36.

8. Herbert Lyons, "Surrealist Soap Opera," *New York Times Book Review*, 20 October 1946, 9.

9. The *Ladders to Fire* prologue, *Realism and Reality*, and *On Writing* are available in *The Portable Anaïs Nin*. Nin wrote more comprehensively about the art of fiction in *The Novel of the Future*.

10. Nin does not focus on the psychological problems of her male characters.

11. *The Portable Anaïs Nin*, 191.

12. *Ladders to Fire* is published in France as *Les miroirs dans le jardin*.

13. Nin intended bread to symbolize "physical hunger" and wafer to suggest "an answer to metaphysical hunger" (*The Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1944–1947*, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971], 28).