

## I Am Dynamite! A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche

Sue Prideaux. 2018. London: Faber & Faber.

Sue Prideaux is an Anglo-Norwegian art historian. Her first biography, which was of Edvard Munch led to a second about Munch's friend August Strindberg. Asked on BBC Radio 4's *From Übermensch to Superman* about her motivation for writing this book, she said Strindberg corresponded with Nietzsche in his last sane year and introduced Munch to Nietzsche's work, soon after Munch painted *The Scream*. Discovering these connections reignited her teenage fascination with Zarathustra and a desire this time round to investigate and understand better the man and his work.

She found her opening for this biography when she came across a letter written in 1868 by twenty-four-year-old Nietzsche regaling his friend Erwin Rohde with a tale involving a tailor, an unpaid bill and wearing the wrong trousers for what his to be first meeting with his hero, the fifty-two-year-old Wagner. In choosing this unusual beginning Prideaux is highlighting that Nietzsche was often funny, a theme she continues with further examples such as 'it would be the most extreme vulgarity to be related to your parents' (p 316) – the *cri de coeur* of every rebel!

Prideaux provides an engaging and sympathetic portrayal of Nietzsche, setting his life in the context of his century and its zeitgeist, while telling his personal story through the significant relationships, bereavements, disappointments and setbacks he experienced and his lifelong battle with severe ill health. She traces the development of his philosophy and the books, which for most of his life sold in only small numbers and had little impact. He greatly feared obscurity and, by 1886, he was attacking prevailing moral and intellectual traditions 'with all the fury of the neglected prophet' (p 266). It was a time when his generation was 'negotiating the shaky ground between science and faith' (p 42) and it was in this context that Nietzsche declared in *Ecce Homo* 'I am not a man, I am dynamite' (p 317) – a typically provocative challenge.

She suggests the meeting with Wagner in 1868 marks the beginning of probably the most important friendship of his life. Nietzsche was in thrall to Wagner and his wife Cosima, entranced by his innovative operatic works and their high-flown exotic life. He loved music and had nursed hopes of becoming a musician, but his highly academic schooling led him instead to the classics and philology. So it was painful to read that while Wagner and Cosima were secretly laughing at his compositions Nietzsche was writing his first book *The Birth of Tragedy* in part an homage to Wagner's epic musical achievements. Wagner was not the only leading musician to react this way. Nietzsche's response to his critics was both touching and at times witty. There is a more generous review of his music on BBC Radio

3, *Friedrich Nietzsche's Horrible Music*, which concludes that while his musical compositions lacked the brilliance of his philosophy they were competent and heartfelt.

Prideaux says the intense relationship with Wagner ended not because of his dismissal of Nietzsche's music but when he wrote in 1876 to Nietzsche's doctor saying the cause of all his illness was simply too much masturbation. This was made public and Nietzsche's humiliation and dismay must have been deeply felt. Perhaps also it was time for him to grow up and away from this father figure (his own father died insane in 1849 aged thirty-six when he was four). This marked a musical split too – a dive from the magical world of giants, gods and heroes into Bizet's *Carmen*, a 'tabloid tale of lust among the lower classes' (p 194).

Three weeks after meeting Wagner and while still a student, he was offered Chair of Philology at Basle. He accepted and resigned eleven years later in 1879, citing ill health. He left with a small pension that enabled him to wander round Europe, a semi invalid, moving to locations most propitious for his health and fragile eyesight. Hence, winter in the Mediterranean, summer in the Alps and Turin as his 'inter-season place' (p 296).

Although she describes in detail the appalling ill health he suffered, Prideaux seems to underrate its relevance to his work. Curiosity led to finding this interview with Prideaux on BBC Radio 3's *What Nietzsche Teaches Us*, where, asked about the impact of his illness, she demurred and said she thought the significant event was the madness and death of his father. While Nietzsche certainly feared a similar fate, I think the severe migraines (vomiting, blinding headaches, mental confusion) which had him laid up and incapacitated for days or weeks on end, plus the serious and painful eye condition necessitating smoked glasses (and that eventually led to near blindness), likely to be equally significant.

Some of his most well-known aphorisms regarding overcoming oneself, learning to love one's fate, adversity making you stronger and so on could have been inspired by his struggles with devastating illness as well as his fear of madness. Prideaux notes that while reviewing what he had written in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche was surprised at recognizing the vitriol aimed at friends who had let him down (like Lou Salomé and Paul Rée – depicted as the tarantulas) which led him to conclude that all philosophy is autobiography. So he might agree that his illness was inspirational and that his 'dynamite' was aimed not only at society but also at his family because of their pious religiosity and stultifying way of life.

His determination to keep going involved a lifetime of searching for cures including leeches, cupping, enemas and Spanish fly. Prideaux describes him shuffling from spa to spa, seeking relief while voraciously reading medical texts. He also self-prescribed chloral hydrate to relieve insomnia, which probably exacerbated some of his symptoms.

As his eyesight worsened, he increasingly spent many hours walking alone, thinking out his ideas. As he could no longer read or write much himself, he enlisted support from loyal friends to read to him and take dictation. This is how he developed his aphoristic style, it was a necessity. Prideaux notes that *Human, All Too Human* marks the ‘beginning of his emergence as a truly original stylist, and thinker’ (p 175).

His relationship with his sister Elisabeth was affectionate during their childhood. It deteriorated later, not least because of her growing anti-Semitism (shared by Wagner and particularly Cosima) and her eventual marriage to a fanatical anti-Semite. Until then she had spent several stretches of time with Nietzsche, helping during periods of illness. Prideaux suggests she was both escaping from her mother and hoping to find a husband amongst Nietzsche’s friends until, at thirty-nine, she realized this was not going to happen. It is also possible that she was fond of her brother, at least until her marriage.

Prideaux relates in some detail the later appalling and undoubted perfidy of Elisabeth. After his death, she seized control of Nietzsche’s estate and for the next forty years edited his writing to suggest he shared her views, which led to an unmerited link to the Nazis who took up ideas like ‘the will to power...as sanctioning violence and ruthlessness’ (p 369). Whereas Nietzsche had long since become disgusted by the anti-Semites’ delight in *The Ring*’s ‘crude blueprint for racial struggle...between the misshapen dwarves of the underworld and Wotan’s blond-haired progeny’ (p 150).

He collapsed in 1889 and sank rapidly into total insanity. It was suggested he had syphilis but his doctors were uncertain and an internet search shows how this remains controversial. It seems that when writing *Ecce Homo* he was already oscillating between lucidity and delusion. Eventually a stroke left him with total physical dependence in his mother’s care. Reading Prideaux’s account of his final years until his death in 1900 aged fifty-five, was achingly sad.

When he could no longer appreciate what was happening his works started selling as his reputation grew, in no small part thanks to Strindberg, Lou Salomé and other influential friends and admirers who seized on and promoted his ideas, which now had become a central inspiration to the new zeitgeist as the century turned. Nietzsche had recognized the distress likely to result from loss of meaning and direction if God is no longer there. His solution to avoiding nihilism and despair was that we must have courage to accept and find joy in ‘what is’ in spite of its limitations and burdens. In this he prefigures Camus and could be the inspiration for *The Myth of Sisyphus* – happy because he has accepted his situation and realizes the struggle itself is enough to fill a man’s heart.

Apart from mentioning the early influence of Kant and Schopenhauer on Nietzsche’s thinking, there is little else about his place in the development

of philosophical thought. Prideaux makes no mention of his importance to the world of psychotherapy. Nonetheless, it was an entertaining and worthwhile read that stimulated new insights for me and provoked many interesting explorations.

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## References

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## **The Existentialist's Survival Guide: How to Live Authentically in an Inauthentic Age**

Dr. Gordon Marino. 2018. New York: HarperOne.

Dr. Gordon Marino may not be well known to existential phenomenological practitioners, but he is *bona fide* expert on the writings and life of Søren Kierkegaard and holds an academic position that will sound oddly familiar. Almost anyone who has read one of the many volumes of Kierkegaard's sprawling oeuvre may well have used an edition translated and/or edited by Howard and Edna Hong, and published by Princeton University Press in their familiar two-tone black and colored jackets with a decal of a thumbnail sketch of Kierkegaard in profile in the centre. Marino is the Director of the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf's College, a liberal arts college in Minnesota in the United States. He is the author and editor of several other more scholarly books about Kierkegaard and existential philosophy, as well as being a veteran amateur boxer and writer on boxing – this latter factoid has some relevance to the book and the review. He is not, however, a psychotherapist or counsellor.

In this highly readable book, Marino combines his years of Kierkegaard scholarship with the pacier and more vivid style of writing that he doubtless employs for his boxing journalism. One imagines that this is a winning combination of styles for the students in his classroom at St. Olaf's and can be helpful in the present age, one that Marino dubs as an Age of Inauthenticity. He employs it in a neatly structured way to explore how the writings of Kierkegaard and other writers, thinkers and philosophers bear the label of 'existential'. Although the likes of Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger and even Tillich, May and Yalom are all mentioned, either substantially or in passing, Kierkegaard is very much centre stage here.