

Colette in male dress,
around 1910.



The anything-but-ordinary life of

Colette

NOT ONLY WAS SHE A FAMOUS FRENCH NOVELIST AND
JOURNALIST, SHE WAS ALSO AN ACTRESS AND MIME ARTIST. IN
EVERYTHING—including love—COLETTE WAS TRULY WILLFUL.

Throughout her life, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873-1954), aka Colette, didn't care much for convention, and preferred to stray from the beaten path. And this not only led to scandals—like when she kissed a woman in a theatrical scene at the Moulin Rouge—but also resulted in a sparkling literary oeuvre. In addition to publishing books about unconventional love affairs, she wrote thousands of articles, essays, reviews and columns. And as well as leading a busy social life full of dinners and soirées, Colette also had an introverted side and longed to be alone. She knew as no other how to live life to the fullest; when she went somewhere, she was present there with all her senses. After she died, her third husband wrote, 'Even if Shakespeare or Goethe were to show up, it would not have distracted Colette from studying a spider as it spun its web'. She wrote about seemingly unassuming subjects, including ash, eggs and snow (a text, incidentally, which has a record number of mentions of colors). 'Most of the time it's something quite quotidian and inconsequential that tickles my imagination and inspires me,' she once wrote. In a text devoted entirely to the sparrow she writes, 'Such big words about a lowly sparrow? Yes, about a sparrow. In love there's no such thing as an undeserving object.'

COLORFUL FAMILY

Originality is a key element of Colette's legacy. She was born in 1873 to an atypical, colorful family, and grew up with two older brothers and a sister in the village Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye in Bourgogne, France. Her parents were 'outsiders' who didn't make much of an effort to adjust to village life. Her mother, Sido, would swing her pocket watch ostentatiously in church when the

sermons droned on for too long, and she took 'impregnated maids' under her wing. Colette was raised very freely; Sido treated children the same as adults. In one of the stories about her childhood, Colette describes how she was like a Little Blue Riding Hood (with a big blue bow in her hair) walking through the woods each morning with a basket on each arm. 'Keep your eyes open and think for yourself' was Sido's life motto. 'If the newspapers predicted a thaw, my mother would simply shrug her shoulders and mock them,' Colette once wrote about Sido. "'Thaw? Parisian meteorologists can't tell me anything! Look at Cat's paws!'" and indeed the cat had folded her little paws and tucked them under her body to keep warm, squeezing her eyes shut. "In the case of a passing chill—one that is not too cold," Sido would continue, "Cat rolls herself up into a turban, with her nose pressed against the base of her tail. When it is bitterly cold, she hides the soles of her front paws and rolls up into a hand muff".' Colette's later sensual writing style, rich in imagery, was influenced by the rich sensory upbringing her mother gave her. Not only did the smell and flavor of freshly baked bread have to be experienced, but also its texture, the popping sounds of food on the grill and the colors of a basket of fruit. "'Look!'" Sido would frequently call while working in the garden. Bowed over a plant, bending over to chase away a mole that had found its way into the lettuce patch [...] when did I ever not see her bending over some miraculous sight or another?'

THE FIRST GIRL TEENAGER

At the age of twenty, for lack of a dowry, Colette married a man fourteen years her senior, Henry Gauthier-Villars (1859-1931), nicknamed Willy, and moved to Paris. >

*'She played the leading role in "La Chair"
with her bosom bared, which was unprecedented
on the French stage'*

Willy was a flamboyant art critic and, with his guidance, Colette began writing music reviews. He introduced her to writers and musicians around the Le Chat Noir entertainment venue and magazine, and one evening, in a sailor's outfit, she made her entrée at the salons that were also visited by authors such as Marcel Proust and composers like Claude Debussy. Colette was popular in those circles, with her fresh provincial perspective and witty repartee. That was when she acquired her nickname Colette: Her father's surname henceforth became her entire name. At her husband's request, Colette wrote several stories based on childhood memories, but Willy didn't find them good enough to publish. Two years later, he published them after all: under his name. The *Claudine* series, about a freethinking and so-called 'first girl teenager' of the 20th century, became an immediate hit, and Willy and Colette took advantage of its success by selling Claudine hats, cigars and ties. Later she would write that being a writer hadn't been her dream when she was younger: 'Born into a family without a fortune, I hadn't been trained for any profession. I was able to climb, whistle and run, but no one was offering me a career as a squirrel, bird or deer.' Willy turned out not only to be unreliable with money (Colette lost her country house to Willy's gambling debts), but also with other women: He had various mistresses and, in 1906 Colette and Willy separated, after thirteen years of marriage. A long fight about finances followed, because, among other things, Willy had sold the copyright to *Claudine* without Colette's knowledge.

TUMULTUOUS THEATER

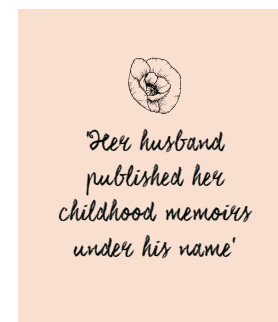
In order to earn her living as a single woman, Colette started working in dance halls as a mime artist. She was not daunted by the prospect of risking her literary reputation (the status of a dance-hall performer at the time was not much different from that of a prostitute); she preferred being financially independent to conforming to reigning moral standards. 'I want to do what I want... I want to be a mime artist, even an actress. I want to dance in the nude, if tights restrict me and spoil my line,' says one of the characters in her novel *Les Vrilles de la Vigne* (The Tendrils of the Vine), a quote that pretty much sums up her whole life.

The year 1907 was one filled with scandal: She played the leading role in *La Chair* (The Flesh) with her bosom bared, which was unprecedented on the French stage. Around the same time, she started a relationship with Mathilde de Morny (1863-1944), nicknamed Missy, the daughter of a duke and a Russian princess. Colette's mother was unperturbed by the lesbian affair and quite liked Missy: 'I'd love to invite Missy to our home, but you know how the imbeciles here in the village would all traipse after you, staring.' Missy and Colette starred together in the play *Rêve d'Égypte* (Dream of Egypt), Colette as a mummy and Missy as an Egyptologist. They caused another scandal with their kissing scene. The audience—including Missy's aristocratic relatives and Willy, to whom Colette was still officially married—erupted in an all-out riot. Bonbon boxes, orange peels and pieces of garlic went flying through the theater. The police evacuated the building and Missy received an official injunction prohibiting the play's further appearance.

EMBATTLED REPUTATION

After her short career as a dance-hall performer, Colette became a journalist. She began writing for various newspapers and magazines, including *La Vie Parisienne* and *Le Matin*. Initially, she wrote under a pseudonym, as her reputation had become controversial after all the scandal. 'You need to look and not fantasize, you need to touch and not make it up, because if you pay attention you will see that the fresh blood on the drenched sheet has a color you could not have imagined,' became her credo as a journalist. Just like in her novels, she relied on her own observations above all, and so saw things other writers missed. Among other things, she reported on a hot-air balloon ride, an airplane trip and the first crossing of the *Normandie* (a ship larger than the *Titanic*) to New York. She began an affair with the editor-in-chief of >

1. Colette as a mime artist in the Bataclan, Paris, France.
2. In 1935 in *Vanity Fair*.
3. Colette and her lover, Missy.
4. Dressed as Claudine, around 1907.
5. Colette with her first husband, Willy.
6. With her parents and her two brothers.
7. 'Gabri', as she was called as a child, at the age of two.





TEXT CAROLINE BUIJS SOURCE DE EERSTE KEER DAT IK MIJN HED VERLOOR, BY KIKI COUMANS PHOTOGRAPHY GETTY IMAGES, SHUTTERSTOCK, ©CENTRE D'ETUDES COLETTE (PAGE 5); PHOTO 3 AND 6 HAND-LETTERING VALESCHA VAN WARENEN



'She placed passion above correct conduct, even when she was punished for it'

Le Matin, baron Henry de Jouvenel (1876-1935), in 1911, and two years later their daughter Colette Renée de Jouvenel (1913-1981) was born. Colette soon found an English nanny to take care of her daughter; she wrote her letters but they only saw each other during holidays. Colette made this choice because she was afraid motherhood would diminish her career as a writer. She once overheard her daughter tell her doll, "You can be glad you don't have a 'great person' as your mother!" Nevertheless, they became closer later in life, and Colette de Jouvenel was always very loyal to her mother.

When Henry was sent to fight at the front in World War I, Colette went incognito and sought him out. She wrote reports of her experiences, and became one of the first female war correspondents. After the war, their relationship soured; like Willy, Henry also had several girlfriends.

When Henry left Colette in 1920, he left her with his sixteen-year-old son, Bertrand (1903-1987). She was 47 years old, but that didn't stop her from starting an affair with the boy that lasted five years. Their relationship had many parallels with the relationship described in the book she published in that time period, *Chéri*, which eventually became one of her most famous books. As always, Colette didn't care much about reigning moral standards and placed passion above correct conduct, even when she was punished for it. And Bertrand? Looking back, he called his time with Colette 'the most beautiful love story of my life'.

PAIN AS INSPIRATION

And then in 1925 Colette met her third husband, Maurice Goudekot (1889-1977), with whom she would stay until her death. They traveled together a great deal

and, when Maurice was forced by the financial crisis of the 1930s to give up his work as a jewel trader, Colette was as inventive as ever. She opened a beauty institute, giving the treatments herself and selling beauty products branded with her name. But her clients were not happy: She never managed to apply make-up to a customer's eyes in the same way, because she would change her mind as she worked.

In the last decade of her life, her reputation as a great writer was firmly established. In 1940, she was diagnosed with arthritis and became gradually more bedridden, but she continued to live with her faculties firing on all cylinders. She described her pain in a remarkably positive manner: 'Above all, there is pain, that always active and youthful pain, which serves as inspiration for amazement, anger, rhythm and challenge, pain that is hoping for a truce but not prepared for the end of life, thank god there is the pain.' She refused to take painkillers, which she said would only dull her senses, and she continued to write until shortly before her death.

'The most famous writer in the world has passed away' read a headline in an American newspaper after Colette died on August 3, 1954. France honored her with a state funeral (the first one ever for a woman) and thousands stood in line to pay her a last tribute. By August 7, her gravestone at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, France, had disappeared under the immense sea of flowers laid there for her. ●

WANT TO READ MORE?

- * 'Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette', by Judith Thurman
- * 'Chéri', by Colette
- * 'The Collected Stories of Colette', by Colette
- * 'The Complete Claudine', by Colette

The film 'Colette', about the life of the French novelist, premiered earlier this year at the Sundance Film Festival. Directed by Wash Westmoreland, it stars Keira Knightly as Colette and Dominic West as Willy