Women's Studies

Eve: A Biography
Pamela Norris
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Women partake of knowledge and look what happens. Eve eats the forbidden fruit. Pandora opens the box. The world comes tumbling down.

From the Bible to Greek mythology, Victorian-era novels and twentieth century science fiction, Norris analyses how women have been portrayed in literature and art since Eve became Western culture's premiere example of sinner, troublemaker and temptress.

Norris focuses largely on the period from early Judaism and Christianity to the early twentieth century, with only a token analysis of more recent works, such as Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale. Always she finds the shadow of Eve and the "second Eve," the Virgin Mary, and symbolism of serpents and forbidden fruits that have found their way into literature over the last 3,000 years. She recounts male interpretations of the fall such as Milton's Paradise Lost. She also tells, however, riveting tales of Christian heroines who risked all for their faith while at the same time breaking the rules of acceptable behavior for women. She examines Charlotte Bronte's 1849 novel Shirley in which Caroline asks, "What am I created for, I wonder?" and shows how writings by women as far back as the twelfth century challenged the prevailing worldview. More than forty illustrations show the hold the Eden story has had on artists through the ages, along with Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, Psyche, Pandora and Lilith, Adam's legendary first, rebellious wife.

The book is both scholarly and entertaining, no small feat. Learn the words attributed to an early sage that “sin began with a woman and thanks to her we all must die.” Ponder the Biblical parallels in the Pandora story that was popular, according to Norris, in the first and second centuries AD as an alternative creation myth to the account in Genesis. Consider the cultural thought of various eras that shaped literature and was shaped by it. In the fifth and fourth centuries BC, for example, medical authorities believed women’s wombs might wander around the body, causing fainting fits. Aristotle saw the female as a “deformed male.”

Norris? feminism is clear. Still, the book is not permeated with commentary. Instead, she lets her research from across the centuries speak
for itself, providing a fascinating, rich glimpse into history. She cautions more than once against assuming “wholesale prejudice against women” in early religious attitudes, pointing out other complexities of the day.

Norris has taught English in London, Paris and Zagreb. Her work has included an anthology of Victorian women poets and collections of medieval and Renaissance poetry.

Diane Conners