



★ **The Mad Women's Ball**

Victoria Mas

Frank Wynne, Translator

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A spirited young spiritualist rejects confinement in Victoria Mas's electrifying historical novel *The Mad Women's Ball*.

At the end of the nineteenth century, otherwise fast-modernizing France still considers anomalous women to be an embarrassment. For those unlucky enough to fall from social graces, the Salpêtrière awaits—an asylum for the depressed, the wounded, and the simply inconvenient.

Eugénie is committed to Salpêtrière by her rigid father days before the asylum opens its doors for its annual ball, when Paris's wealthy class, craving spectacles and scandals, is set to mingle among the costumed mad. There, she meets fragile Louise, a favorite among the seedy men who observe the asylum's hypnotism practices, and Thérèse, a long time resident who regards Salpêtrière as a refuge. And she seeks an unlikely ally in Geneviève, the cold head nurse who recognizes that Eugénie is not mad—though she can speak to ghosts.

Over the course of a week, balances shift at Salpêtrière. Geneviève, who's spent twenty years mourning her sister's loss and placing her trust in Salpêtrière's daring medical practices, reconsiders her allegiances: even as Eugénie channels her sister, offering her peace, the men who run the asylum prove quick to dismiss her, though it's she who holds their world together.

Though the promise of the ball—and the opened gates—jolts the novel forward, the interned women command attention more. They are survivors of rape, trafficking, and other unwanted attentions and afflictions that warrant compassion and treatment; because they are women, they are met instead with bars, electrodes, and voyeurs. As the indignities they're subjected to pile up, rage builds—a feminist force that no walls can contain. *The Mad Women's Ball* is a magnetic historical novel.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September / October 2021)

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