

D. H. LAWRENCE : The Story of a Marriage - by Brenda Maddox
FRIEDA LAWRENCE - by Rosie Jackson

D. H. Lawrence just might be the most misunderstood of major modern authors. He has been reviled or adored as a sadistic misogynist, empathetic portrayer of women's feelings, proto-fascist, mystical pantheist, latent (and on at least one occasion overt) homosexual and pornographer. An early biographer dubbed him "The Priest of Love," as apt an epithet as there may be for this enigmatic and charismatic being.

Brenda Maddox is the latest literary sleuth to confront the mystery of who—really—David Herbert Lawrence was. She brings formidable credentials to a complex biographical case, most particularly a thorough grounding of her subject's time and place. She also thoroughly mines new Lawrence scholarship in the form of many previously unpublished letters and a key memoir by a little-known innamorata to bolster her critical views.

Maddox's previous book, the widely acclaimed "Nora," studied Lawrence's brilliant coeval, James Joyce, through the prism of his marriage. In her biography of Lawrence she again chooses to illuminate a biographical subject in the light of his conjugal relationship.

The union of Lawrence and the Baroness Frieda von Richthofen Weekley was an unlikely one. The biographer quips: "It was a mismatch made in heaven." Yet despite compelling differences of ethnicity, class and sensibility that frequently found them at each other's throats (literally, at times), the embattled couple endured in uneasy but vital symbiosis.

Frieda and Lawrence were wed in the early part of the 20th Century, a time when the English were unencumbering themselves from Victorian constraints. On the face of it, Lawrence was overmatched by a Rubenesque, sexually liberated mate. Nonetheless, he was emboldened in an early poem to apotheosize his own bedroom performance as "all my best/Soul's naked lightning." Frieda must have loved that. She was ever-proud of the literary genius who immortalized their love to the world. She was also apt to seduce the nearest man when her freedom-loving mood so dictated, dalliances Lawrence largely chose to ignore.

Maddox emphasizes the Lawrences' lives through a psychosexual dimension designed to reveal the author's inner life. Frieda championed her husband's literary genius yet challenged his

opinions in public, acts that Lawrence found infuriatingly disloyal. He idealized her as Venus incarnate in his books, but due to the ambivalences in their relationship could not satisfactorily communicate the importance he assigned to his sexual role in his novels. As a result, he fixed on the experiences of friends, which, in marginally disguised form, found their way into his fiction.

Maddox's biography is laced with Freudian thought—the good, not the sticky, babbly kind. She argues persuasively that Lawrence created prodigiously and at a feverish pace in unthinking denial of the lifelong tuberculosis that would ravage his frail frame and leave him dead at the tender age of 44, weighing just 85 pounds. She is equally convincing in relating Lawrence's wanderlust to a quest for the restoration of his health.

Most important, she posits that the refined and doting Midlands mother, whom he so lovingly limned in "Sons and Lovers," was in fact a stifling presence in her son's formative years at the expense of his rough-hewn coal miner father. In "Sons and Lovers," Lawrence's protagonist, Paul Morel, dilutes the milk nourishing his terminally ill mother and at a late stage pours in a lethal dose of morphine to release her from worldly pain. The underlying suggestion is that the son is freeing himself in the process, a neat psychic reversal of Lydia Lawrence's years of smothering.

In a devil-may-care autobiography, written after her husband's death, Frieda, whose opinion was augmented by the authority of personal experience, reflected that, for all his sympathies toward them, Lawrence "dreaded women, felt that in the end they were more powerful than men." It is such subterranean truths that Maddox digs in search of and largely succeeds in locating.

Early on, Maddox theorizes that Lawrence "gives to the sexual act a weight it will not bear." This may be so but then polemical overkill is an important component of D. H. Lawrence's power. When the scales settle, it is clear that Maddox has accomplished what any serious biographer hopes to: to bring her subject into the light of understanding. This modern biography, in the best sense of that phrase, lets us see Lawrence and his astonishing body of work more clearly than ever.

"Frieda Lawrence," by Rosie Jackson, does not concern itself with D. H. Lawrence's literary output, focusing on the author's life only to explore that of his wife. This study means to dispel the scholarly consensus of Frieda as an obtuse and bickering mate who thwarted the progress of Lawrence's genius.

Jackson sees her subject as an independent-minded woman who bravely left her first husband for Lawrence at a time when it was anathema to do so. She sees Frieda's extramarital affairs not as betrayal of trust but as a larger-than-lifeness that invigorated those around her. Much of the evidence for such a view comes from Frieda's daughter, who is quoted at length in the book.

Jackson's account portrays her subject as an extraordinary woman for whom living, not the creation of art, was paramount. The biographer attempts to buttress her views by including an abridgement of Frieda's published autobiography which was composed after Lawrence's death, along with previously unavailable memoirs that are transparent fictions of her love affairs. Jackson gamely tries to make a case for Frieda's abilities as a writer, but a reading of the last two sections shows that Frieda's authorial misgivings were well-founded.

San Francisco Chronicle, 1994