

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Kathleen Rooney is a founding editor of Rose Metal Press, a nonprofit publisher of literary work in hybrid genres, as well as a founding member of Poems While You Wait, a team of poets and their typewriters who compose commissioned poetry on demand. She teaches in the English Department at DePaul University, and her most recent books include the national best-seller, *Lillian Boxfish Takes a Walk* (St. Martin's Press 2017 / Picador 2018) and *The Listening Room: A Novel of Georgette and Loulou Magritte* (Spork Press, 2018). Her new novel, *Cher Ami and Major Whittlesey*, based on a true story of the Great War, will be published by Penguin in August of 2020.

A winner of the Ruth Lilly Fellowship from Poetry magazine, she is the author of nine books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, including the novel *O, Democracy!* (Fifth Star Press, 2014); the novel in poems *Robinson Alone* (Gold Wake Press, 2012), based on the life and work of Weldon Kees; the essay collection *For You, For You I Am Trilling These Songs* (Counterpoint, 2010); and the art modeling memoir *Live Nude Girl: My Life as an Object* (University of Arkansas Press, 2009). Her first book is *Reading with Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America* (University of Arkansas Press, 2005), and her first poetry collection, *Oneiromance* (an epithalamion) won the 2007 Gatewood Prize from the feminist publisher Switchback Books.

With Elisa Gabbert, she is the co-author of the poetry collection *That Tiny Insane Voluptuousness* (Otoliths, 2008) and the chapbook *The Kind of Beauty That Has Nowhere to Go* (Hyacinth Girl Press, 2013).. And with fellow DePaul professor Eric Plattner, she is the co-editor of *Rene Magritte: Selected Writings* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

Her reviews and criticism have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, The Poetry Foundation website, *The New York Times Book Review*, *BITCH*, *Allure*, *The Chicago Review of Books*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Paris Review*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Nation* and elsewhere.

She lives in Chicago with her spouse, the writer Martin Seay.

- Author's website

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do Lillian's feelings regarding her mother compare to her feelings regarding her Aunt Sadie Boxfish? And how do these relationships shape Lillian's ambitions and sense of self?
2. What initially attracts Lillian to poetry and how does it remain significant throughout her life and career, in advertising and otherwise?
3. Why are Lillian and her son Gian's reactions to the Subway Vigilante and his crime so different? Why does Lillian love New York City unconditionally whereas Gian has come to fear it?
4. Have you ever loved a city or a place so much that you never wanted to leave it? Describe saying where and why, or why not.
5. Why are manners and kindness so important to Lillian? How does civility relate to empathy and even to democracy?
6. How do Lillian's achievements and struggles at the office at Macy's—with her boss, Chester; with getting paid as much as her male colleagues; with her friend and rival coworkers, Helen McGoldrick and Olive Dogg—relate to the workplace as we know it today?
7. Why does Artie, Lillian's editor, want to change the title of her debut poetry collection from *Oh, Do Not Ask for Promises to Frequent Wishing on the Gracious Moon*? And why does she refuse? Do you think he was right or wrong, and were you pleased or disappointed when she said no? Explain why.
8. In what ways does walking in the city feed Lillian's poetry, her relationship to walking change over time, as both she and her city get older?
9. Why is Lillian ambivalent toward motherhood, and how does her friendship with Wendy differ from her relationship with her son Gian?
10. Why, after scoffing at love and convention for so long, does Lillian fall so hard for Max? What is it about Max that she finds so irresistible?
11. Were you surprised by all the chance encounters that Lillian has with different people on her walk through the city? Why or why not? Do you also like to strike up conversations with strangers? Why or why not?
12. How worried, if at all, did you feel about Lillian as she made her way across Manhattan? Were you troubled by any of her encounters? Heartened? Both? Which ones and why?
13. Lillian can't stand the new and ugly Penn Station, built in 1968, that replaced the old and beautiful original—are there structures in your past that were torn down that you miss, too? Describe.

- <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/10871-lillian-boxfish-takes-walk-rooney?start=3>

## BOOK REVIEWS

---

### Booklist

Glamorous and ambitious Lillian Boxfish was celebrated in front-page articles in 1931 as "the highest paid advertising woman in America." She was also famous for her best-selling books of wryly irreverent light verse. One secret to her success was her love of New York City and her devotion to daily walks. Now 85 and still venturing out on foot in all seasons and still in full possession of her gift for pithy, droll, and mischievous language ("Solutions of style have a greater moral force than those of obligation"), Lillian decides to celebrate 1984's New Year's Eve by dining as she does every year at a favorite restaurant, then walking through the city to attend a party to which she was invited by a young photographer she met in the park. On this reckless odyssey, mink-clad Lillian is both embraced and accosted by strangers, all while contemplating the changes the years have brought to her and her beloved city. Poet and novelist Rooney (*O, Democracy!* 2014) found sublime inspiration, thanks to a librarian friend, in real-life ad writer and poet Margaret Fishback. Her delectably theatrical fictionalization is laced with strands of tart poetry and emulates the dark sparkle of Dorothy Parker, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Truman Capote. Effervescent with verve, wit, and heart, Rooney's nimble novel celebrates insouciance, creativity, chance, and valor.--Donna Seaman

### Publishers Weekly

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Inspired by Margaret Fishback, poet and Macy's ad-writing phenom of the 1930s, Rooney imagines an extraordinary walk through the streets of New York City on the last night of 1984, one that triggers a flood of memories for fictional ad woman Lillian Boxfish. The octogenarian muses on the changing urban landscape as she stops at favorite haunts: an intimate neighborhood bar that's just installed a TV, a restaurant where she's dined every New Year's Eve that's about to change owners, the famed Delmonico's, where she ended her marriage. Further stops include a changing lower Manhattan landscape where she meets a haunted Vietnam veteran and engages him in a "best last-line contest," a detour to a hospital emergency room with a frightened woman about to have her first baby, and a party where she's both scorned and adored by a new generation of artists, followed by a hilarious encounter with three muggers. Meanwhile, Lillian carefully recounts her celebrated career in advertising, her adored husband and son, and her emotional breakdown. Elegantly written, Rooney creates a glorious paean to a distant literary life and time—and an unabashed celebration of human connections that bridge the past and future. Agent: Lisa Bankoff, ICM Partners. (Jan.) --Staff (Reviewed 10/17/2016) (Publishers Weekly, vol 263, issue 42, p)

### Library Journal

*/\* Starred Review \*/* It's New Year's Eve 1984 and indomitable octogenarian Lillian Boxfish has places to go. Manhattan is her playground, and she's not going to let a subway vigilante or the winter chill keep her indoors. Outfitted in her beloved mink coat, which she bought for herself in 1942, Lillian briskly sets off from her Murray Hill apartment, reminiscing about her illustrious career as the highest-paid woman in advertising, her first love, Max, and her darling son, Gian. She joins a family of strangers at Delmonico's for dinner, charms a Filipino convenience store clerk, smartly tells off a boor at a trendy loft party, and unflappably transforms a mugging into a business transaction. Lillian's needle-sharp observations are astute and her unceasing love for New York City shines through. Her life has not always been breezy, but she keeps putting one fashionable foot in front of the

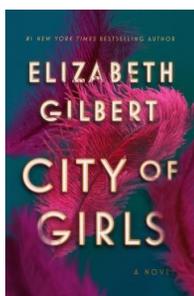
other. VERDICT Rooney (*O, Democracy!*) takes us on a delightful stroll with a colorful character, inspired by the life of poet and ad woman Margaret Fishback, sprinkling just the right details and arch bons mots appropriate to Lillian's reputation as a woman of words. [See Prepub Alert, 8/1/16; Editors' Fall Picks 2016, LJ 9/1/16.] --Christine Perkins (Reviewed 12/01/2016) (*Library Journal*, vol 141, issue 20, p89)

### Kirkus Reviews

A poet and writer of clever, innovative ad copy, Margaret Fishback was admired in her time—the pre–Mad Men era—but is mostly forgotten now. Rooney (*O, Democracy!*, 2014, etc.) has written a lively, fictionalized version of Fishback’s story, drawing on real milestones but imagining her subject’s inner life. Rooney’s Lillian Boxfish comes to Manhattan in 1926 to make her mark. A smart, stylish, independent young woman, she lands a job at R.H. Macy’s, where she turns out witty rhymes that promote the department store; on her own, she writes light verse, eventually published in several volumes. Though a self-styled “scoffer at love,” Lillian falls hard for Max Caputo, the head rug buyer at Macy’s. They marry, but when she becomes pregnant with their son, Johnny, she's forced to quit her job—maternity leave being a thing of the future. The marriage eventually fractures, and Lillian suffers a mental breakdown. Intercut with this narrative is the more fanciful story of Lillian’s adventures on New Year’s Eve 1984. An old woman now, she roams the streets of Manhattan alone, passing landmarks public as well as private and befriending several New York characters (all too benevolent to be believed) along the way. The city is in decline—the Subway Vigilante is on the loose—which Lillian seems to equate with her own fall from grace. But the chance encounters lift her spirits, helping her come to terms with her past. While the book effectively underscores the fierce struggles of career women like Lillian in a pre-feminist time, it can also feel schematic. And Lillian’s dialogue is sometimes too arch, too written, to be credible. There is plenty of charm and occasional poignance here even if the novel makes you long for a proper biography of the real woman who inspired it. (Kirkus Reviews, October 15, 2016)

## READALIKES

---



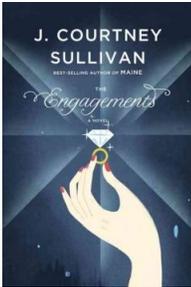
### ***City of Girls* by Elizabeth Gilbert**

Eighty-nine-year-old Vivian recounts her life after being kicked out of Vassar College, living in Manhattan with her Aunt Peg and the personal mistake that resulted in a professional scandal.



***Three Martini Lunch* by Suzanne Rindell**

In 1958 Greenwich Village, three ambitious young people—Cliff, the son of a successful book editor; Eden, who dreams of being an editor; and Miles, a talented black writer from Harlem—will do anything to succeed in the competitive world of book publishing and learn that they must live with the consequences of their choices.



***The Engagements* by J. Courtney Sullivan**

The story of four couples linked over several decades by one diamond ring, and the woman who launched the most famous diamond campaign in the world