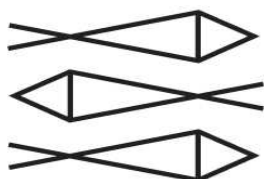


# BIOGRAPHY OF X

A NOVEL

CATHERINE LACEY





BIOGRAPHY OF  
X

*A Novel*

CATHERINE  
LACEY



FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX  
NEW YORK



[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[A Note about the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

## Work in Progress

The Latest from the Front Lines of Literature.

*Presented by* FARRAR, STRAUS *and* GIROUX

Sign up to receive original essays, excerpts, and interviews from Farrar, Straus & Giroux's leading authors.

[SIGN ME UP](#)

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: [us.macmillanusa.com/piracy](http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy).**

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

The endnotes of this book contain attributions not mentioned in the text.

# BIOGRAPHY OF X

---

C. M. LUCCA

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX  
NEW YORK



Farrar, Straus and Giroux  
19 Union Square West, New York 10003

Copyright © 2005 by C. M. Lucca  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America  
First edition, 2005

The first winter she was dead it seemed every day for months on end was damp and bright—it had always just rained, but I could never remember the rain—and I took the train down to the city a few days a week, searching (it seemed) for a building I might enter and fall from, a task about which I could never quite determine my own sincerity, as it seemed to me the seriousness of anyone looking for such a thing could not be understood until a body needed to be scraped from the sidewalk. With all the recent attacks, of course, security had tightened everywhere, and you had to have permission or an invitation to enter any building, and I never had such things, as I was no one in particular, uncalled for. One and a half people kill themselves in the city each day, and I looked for them—the one person or the half person—but I never saw the one and I never saw the half, no matter how much I looked and waited, patiently, so patiently, and after some time I wondered if I could not find them because I was one of them, either the one or the half.

★ ★ ★

One evening, still alive at Penn Station to catch an upstate train, I asked a serious-looking man if he had the time. He had the time, he said, but not the place, as he'd been exiled from Istanbul years earlier but never had the nerve to change his watch, and looking into this stranger's face I saw my own eyes staring back at me, as I, too, could not un-locate myself from the site of my banishment. We parted immediately, but I have never forgotten him.

★ ★ ★

It wasn't a will to live that kept me alive then, but rather a curiosity about who else might come forward with a story about my wife. Who else might call to tell me something almost unfathomable? And might I—despite how much I had deified and worshipped X and believed her to be pure genius—might I now accept the truth of her terrible, raw anger and boundless cruelty? It was the ongoing death of a story, dozens of second deaths, the death of all those delicate stories I lived in with her.

Or maybe what kept me alive was all the secretarial work I had to do, as I'd become X's secretary by necessity—she kept firing the others. I sometimes found a strange energy to shuffle through her mail in the middle of the night—signing contracts I barely understood, reviewing the amendments made “in the event of the artist's death,” filing away royalty statements in the manner that X had instructed, and shredding the aggravating amount of interview requests addressed to me, the widow. The Brennan Foundation had invited me to come receive the Lifetime Achievement Award on X's behalf, not knowing that she'd planned to boycott the ceremony in resentment for how long it had taken them to recognize her. There was also an appeal from a museum that had been eagerly anticipating X's contractual obligation to make one of her rare public appearances at the opening of her retrospective that spring; by overnighted letter, they asked whether I, as a representative of whatever was left of her, might fly over to London in her stead? I sent back my regrets—*I am currently unable to explain how unable I am to undertake such a task.*

★ ★ ★

Tom called, despite a thirty-year silence between us. He'd learned of my wife's death in the papers and wanted to tell me that he had been thinking about me lately, about our strained and ugly childhood as siblings. His own wife, he said (it was news to me that he'd married), had been given another few months to live, maybe less. His daughter (also news to me) was fourteen now, and there was a part of him that wished she were younger, that believed she might be less damaged by grief if she were protected by the abstraction of early childhood. *What an awful thing, he said, to wish my daughter could have known her mother for fewer years.*

But I did not find this so awful. Grief has a warring logic; it always wants something impossible, something worse and something better.

When Tom was fourteen and I was seven we lived in a clapboard house on a dead-end with our mother and assorted others, and that summer as we were eating spaghetti in the kitchen Tom stopped moving, and sat there with his mouth open and the noodles unraveling from his poised fork as he stared into nothing, everything gone from his eyes, and he kept staring, unblinking and frozen as our mother shouted, *Tom! Stop it! Tom!* His eyes kept draining, nothing and nothing, then even less than nothing as Mother shouted for him to stop, to stop this horrible prank, until she finally slapped him hard in the face, which still did not bring him back but freed his fork from his hand and sent it into my lap. That night, slowly, he did start to come back, and later a neurologist was excited to diagnose him with a rare kind of epilepsy, which was treated with a huge pink pill, daily, and for months after my wife died I'd often find myself in some abject, frozen state—sitting naked in a hallway or leaning against a doorframe or standing in the garage, staring at the truck, unsure of how long I'd been there—and I wished someone could have brought me such a pill, something to prevent me from pouring out of myself, at odds with everything.

Tom and I were living in different griefs now—his imminent, mine entrenched—but I wondered if the treatment might still be the same, and I asked him if there was any kind of pill for this, some pill like that pill they used to give him all those years ago, but Tom felt sure there wasn't, or if there was he didn't know about it, and anyway, it probably wouldn't work.

## REGARDING MR. SMITH

---

After two years of ignoring his letters, I took a meeting with Theodore Smith, at X's request, to put an end to his nonsense.

"I can't believe it's really you," he said, "I can't believe it. X's wife—  
incredible."\*

Though it was 1992, I was unaccustomed to such fawning, as she and I avoided the places where such people lingered. The sole purpose of this meeting, which I recorded for legal purposes, was to inform Mr. Smith that X would not cooperate with his supposed biography; she would not authorize it, would give no interviews, and would allow no access to her archives. As my wife's messenger, I encouraged Mr. Smith to abandon the project immediately, for he would suffer greatly trying to write a book that was ultimately impossible.

"If you truly want to write a biography," I told him, "you must first select a subject who is willing to comply, advisably a ghost."

Mr. Smith sat there blinking as I explained, in slow detail, our total disapproval of this endeavor. The estate would not license any reproductions of any of X's work, nor would he be allowed to use any of the portraits of X to which we held the copyright. We would not give permission for him to quote her lyrics, essays, scripts, or books, and of course X had no time to answer any of his questions, as she had no interest in his interest, nor any respect for anyone who intended to exploit her work in this way.

"It is her explicit wish not to be captured in a biography, not now and not after she's gone," I reminded him, my tone absolutely cordial, or at least

judicial. “She asks that you respect this wish.”

But Mr. Smith refused to believe that X would choose to be forgotten, to which I explained that X had no such intention and already had plans for what would happen to her archives in the event of her death; all I knew of those plans at the time was that access would require forfeiture of the right to biographical research.

“Her life will not become a historical object,” I explained, as X had explained again and again to me. “Only her work will remain.”

“But she’s a public figure,” Mr. Smith said, smiling in a sad, absent way. (How odd to remember the face of someone I hate, when so much else is lost to the mess of memory.) He slipped a page in a plastic sleeve from his briefcase. I glanced down—it was unmistakably her handwriting, dated March 2, 1990, and addressed to *My Darling*, and though I should have been that darling, given the year, I had a way of overlooking certain details back then.

“I have several others,” he said. “The dealers always call me when they come across one, though they’re rare, of course, and quite expensive.”

“A forgery,” I said. “Someone has ripped you off.”

“It’s been authenticated. They’ve all been authenticated,” he said.

I thought I knew what he was doing—dangling false artifacts to entrap me and compel my cooperation—but I would not budge. The letters must have been (or so I wanted to believe) all fakes, and even if X *had* written such a letter to someone else, which she most likely had not, she would’ve never associated with anyone treacherous enough to sell her out. This pathetic boy—no biographer, not even a writer—was simply one of X’s deranged fans. I don’t know why she attracted so many mad people, but she did, all the time: stalkers, obsessives, people who fainted at the sight of her. A skilled plagiarist had merely recognized a good opportunity and taken it, as people besotted with such delusion hold their wallets loosely.

“You must understand that my wife is extremely busy,” I said as I stood to leave. “She has decades of work ahead of her and no time for your little project. I must insist you move on.”

“She won’t always be alive, you know.”

I did not believe myself to be such a fool, but I was, of course, that most mundane fool who feels that though everyone on earth, without exception, will die, the woman she loves simply cannot, will never.

“Whether she wants there to be a biography or not,” Mr. Smith went on, “there *will* be one, likely several, after she’s gone.”

I told Mr. Smith, again, to cease all attempts to contact us, that we would file a restraining order if necessary, that I did not want to ever see or hear from him again; I was certain that would be the end of it.

★ ★ ★

Four years later, on November 11, 1996, X died.

I’d always thought of myself a rational person, but the moment she was gone I ceased to be whoever I thought I was. For weeks all I could do was commit myself to completely and methodically reading every word of the daily newspaper, which was filled with articles about the Reunification of the Northern and Southern Territories, a story so vast that I felt then (and still feel now) that we might never reach the end of it. I gave my full focus to reports of the recently dismantled ST bureaucracies, the widespread distrust of the new electricity grids in the South, and all the sensational stories from inside the bordered territory—details of the mass suicides, beheadings, regular bombings—and even though my personal loss was nothing in comparison to the decades of tyrannical theocracy, I still identified intensely with this long and brutal story, as I, too, had been ripped apart and was having trouble coming back together.

Reading the paper gave a shape to my boneless days: each morning I walked the length of the gravel driveway, retrieved the paper, walked back, and read it section by section in search of something I’d never find—sense, reasons, life itself. Immersed in the news, I felt I was still in the world, still alive, while I remained somewhat protected from the resounding silence she’d left behind.

In early December of that year, I read something in the arts section that I could not, at first, comprehend. Theodore Smith had sold his biography of my wife to a publisher for an obscene advance.\* It was scheduled to be published in September of the coming year. For a few days I succeeded in putting it all out of mind. I thought, No—no, it is simply not possible, it will fail, they’ll realize the letters are frauds, that it is a work of obsession, not of fact, and when I, executor of X’s estate, deny them all the photo and

excerpt rights, that will be the end of it. How could there be a biography without any primary sources?

As it happened, the editor who'd purchased the book was someone with whom I shared a close friend. She called me that winter—a *courtesy*, she said, as she was under no obligation to gain my approval. She insisted the research was impeccable. *Scrupulous but respectful*, she said, whatever that means. She assured me that Mr. Smith truly revered and understood X as an artist, as a woman, and that he had so many wonderful insights about her work, but of course, some would find the book a little controversial, wouldn't they?

*Your wife never shied away from controversy*, the editor said.

*Is that so?*

The editor suggested I come to her office to meet with Mr. Smith while there was still time to correct the text, that I might want to dispel some rumors he'd been unable to detangle, and though I'd been sure I'd never see Mr. Smith again, by the time I'd hung up I'd agreed to the meeting.

Two days later I was sitting in a conference room with Mr. Smith, his editor, and two or three lawyers. The cinder block of a manuscript sat on the table, practically radiant with inanity. I asked for a few moments with our author, and once alone, I asked him how he'd done it.

*Oh, just, you know, day by day*, he said, the false modesty so pungent it could have tranquilized a horse.

*But what could you have had to say about her? What could you have possibly known?*

He insisted he still had plenty to go on without the archive, as she'd given thousands of interviews since the 1970s, that she rarely repeated herself, and of course there were the ex-wives, ex-lovers, the collaborators, others. They all had plenty to tell him, and lots of original letters to share. It had all gone quite well, he said, except for his interactions with me, of course, and the fact that he'd never been able to speak with X herself—a miscarriage he still regretted. But I did not care what he wanted from me and only wanted to know who had given him interviews. He listed a few inconsequential names—hangers-on and self-important acquaintances—then, surprisingly, Oleg Hall.

Mr. Smith must have known about the enmity I'd long been locked in with Oleg. The only comfort in X's death was that I'd never have to see him



again, her closest friend though I could never understand why. I'd disliked everything about Oleg, but I thought the very least I could expect of him was that he'd protect X's privacy.

*You must have been so glad she died, I accused Mr. Smith. And so suddenly! A nice dramatic end. I'm sure you were thrilled to hear the news.*

Mr. Smith squirmed in his chair as I berated him, calling him (apparently) *a groveling fraud, a useless little leech with no talent*, an insult he later quoted in his book, and though I don't remember saying those words, I do approve of the characterization.\* However, I am sure I did not, as Mr. Smith alleged, accuse him of killing my wife. I was indeed grief-wild, but I've never been a conspiracist, and it's clear Mr. Smith lacks the fortitude to accomplish a murder from afar, undetectable by autopsy.

*I'm trying my best to include you, he pleaded.*

*I do not wish to be included.*

*Then why did you come here?*

I could have said that I was attempting to wake up from this nightmare, that I came to somehow stop his book from existing, to ensure it was never published, to spit in his face, but I didn't say anything. Why did I go anywhere? I had no idea anymore, now that she was gone, where to go or how to live or why I did anything. I started to slip out, leaving the manuscript behind, ignoring the clamor around me, refusing the editor's assurance that X would be remembered "*so fondly*"—I could give a shit for anyone's fondness—but when she made the suggestion that the biography would likely inflate the market value of X's work, I do recall telling her to fuck off as soon as possible and never contact me again. It was my fault, I'll admit, for hoping any of those people could be reasoned away from profit.

★ ★ ★

The night after my first meeting with Mr. Smith in 1992, as I was falling asleep beside X, she sat up, turned on the lamp, and asked, *What did the warning mean?*

X was a nocturnal woman, but also a diurnal one—in fact, it seemed she never grew tired, or jet-lagged, not even weary on a warm afternoon—while I've always just been a regular person, tired at certain intervals.

*What warning?*

*We warned Mr. Smith to cease his research, she said, but what did we warn him with? What was the threat?*

Of course I hadn't threatened him in any specific way. She was neither surprised nor content with this answer and suggested we could send someone to his apartment to intimidate him, or to mess it up while he was out. I laughed, but she continued—we might as well get right to it and have someone break his legs, or maybe just one leg or, better yet, a hand. Did I notice whether he was left- or right-handed? I felt then, as I often felt, that I was a mobster's wife, better off looking the other way.

*Well, it's something to think about, she concluded, if he tries to contact us again.*

From the very start, I knew that X possessed an uncommon brutality, something she used in both defense and vengeance. She was only a little taller than me, but her physical power was so outsize that over the years I'd seen her level several men much larger than she was, sometimes for justifiable reasons but also in misplaced rage. The longer we were together, the more I understood that I, too, was at risk of being the object of her anger, that there was always the possibility, however remote, that she might turn against me, if not physically, then emotionally or intellectually, that she could destroy me totally should the whim ever arrive.

I fear I am the sort of person who needs to feel some measure of fear in order to love someone. My first love had been—privately, embarrassingly—God itself, something that made me, something that could destroy me; every mortal relation that came after, until her, had always fallen short of the total metaphysical satisfaction I'd felt in prayer.

But I never needed to fear X's strength. Other things, yes, but never her strength.

★ ★ ★

Months after that disastrous afternoon in that office, I received an advance copy of Smith's book accompanied by a terse note explaining that the "scene" I'd made had been included in the newly added prologue. I left the book on the floor of the garage beside the trash bin until one morning—something must have been extremely wrong with me—I went to the garage

and, instead of the daily paper, brought in that book and did not stop reading until I reached the last page.

Though I had failed to prevent this book from coming into existence, Mr. Smith's horrific prose and lightless perspective seemed to be the more atrocious error. His writing is—both aesthetically and in substance—page by page, line by line, without interruption, worthless. The only thing impressive about it was that he managed to take a subject flush with intrigue and grind it down into something so boring, so absolutely pedantic and without glamour, that I often laughed aloud, alone, so sure it would fail, that the book's primary weakness was not the estate's lack of cooperation, but that it simply wasn't any good.

I slept easily that night, certain I'd reached the end of this entire charade.

★ ★ ★

I am not bitter that Theodore Smith's *A Woman Without a History* was met with such acclaim—let him drown in his spurious success—but I am surprised that such a dull book has captured the attention of so many. I am not even appalled by his depiction of me—unflattering to be sure, but I have no interest in the flattery of a fool. What bothers me about it is that his lies have been held up as the definitive account of X's life, that his work speaks the final word about her groundbreaking, multihyphenate career and its impact, that every reader and critic seems to believe that Mr. Smith successfully navigated the labyrinth of secrets X kept around herself, and that he illuminated some true core of her life. This is far from the case.

It is no secret that my wife layered fictions within her life as a kind of performance or, at times, a shield. Mr. Smith described this as “a pathological problem” and called her “a compulsive liar, crippled by self-doubt, a woman doomed to fortify herself with falsehoods.”\* Though it is true that not even I always knew where the line was between the facts of her life and the stories she constructed around herself, my wife was no liar. Anyone who was ever fortunate enough to be a part of X's life had to accept this hazard—she lived in a play without intermission in which she'd cast herself in every role.

That was the first reason X refused to authorize a biography: it would necessarily be false, and this work of falsehood could only serve to enrich whatever writer was shallow enough to capitalize on her infamy. And yes, I realize I am that writer now, but over the course of this work, my reasons and aims for it have shifted as the story around X shifted; Mr. Smith wished to warm his cold hands on her heat, while I have been scorched by it.

X believed that making fiction was sacred—she said this to me many times, and mentioned it in her letters and journals and essays repeatedly—and she wanted to live in that sanctity, not to be fooled by the flimsiness of perceived reality, which was nothing more than a story that had fooled most of the world. She chose, instead, to live a life in which nothing was fixed, nothing was a given—that her name might change from day to day, moment to moment, and the same was true for her beliefs, her memories, her manner of dress, her manner of speech, what she knew, what she wanted. All of it was always being called into question. All of it was costume and none of it was solid. Not even her past was a settled matter, and though anything else around her might fluctuate, that unsettled core—her history—was to remain unsettled.<sup>†</sup>

“A biography,” she wrote in a letter to her first wife, “would be an insult to the way I have chosen to live. It’s not that I am a private person; I am not a person at all.”\*

I’ve since discovered another, more specific reason that X did not want anyone to fact-check her past prior to 1972, the year it seemed she had materialized out of nothing, without a past, without a beginning. Of Mr. Smith’s many egregious errors, his misidentification of her parents and birthplace is perhaps the most fundamental, though it is true that X made uncovering that fact nearly impossible, as she obfuscated every detail, planted false narratives, and never came clean.

In fact, until I set about doing my own research, even I did not know where she’d been born. She once told me she had no memory of her life before she was eighteen, and another time she said she could not legally reveal the identity of her parents, but occasionally she claimed that they were dead, tragically dead, or that they’d kicked her out, or that she hated them so much she couldn’t remember their names. She sometimes said she was born in Kentucky or Montana or in some wilderness, raised by various animals, or that she’d been born illegitimately—an ambassador and his