

Wild Thing — 20-Minute Read Summary

Wild Thing: A Life of Paul Gauguin
by Sue Prideaux

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One of the New York Times 10 Best Books of 2025 · Winner of the Pol Roger Duff Cooper Prize 2025 · Winner of the American Library in Paris Book Award · Shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize 2024

Book in 60 Seconds

Paul Gauguin is one of the most famous painters who ever lived, and one of the most argued about. He was a successful Paris stockbroker who walked away from his wife and five children, sailed to Tahiti, painted some of the most recognizable images in modern art, and died poor and almost unknown in the South Pacific in 1903 — only to become, within a few years, a founding father of modern painting.

Sue Prideaux's Wild Thing is the first full biography of Gauguin in thirty years, and it arrives with genuinely new evidence: DNA-tested teeth that cast doubt on the long-standing story that Gauguin died of syphilis, the resurfaced manuscript of his memoir Avant et après, and the untranslated memoir of his son. Her aim, in her own words, is to re-examine Gauguin's life "not to condemn, not to excuse, but simply to shed new light on the man and the myth."

The book's central argument is that there are three Gauguins — the man, the persona he invented for himself, and the myth posterity built — and that we keep confusing them. By pulling them apart, Prideaux gives us a Gauguin who is more complicated, more interesting, and harder to judge than the legend allows. The art is extraordinary. The behavior was, in many cases, indefensible. Both things are true, and neither cancels the other.

The Story

The wild child from Peru

Paul Gauguin was born in Paris in 1848, the son of a journalist and the granddaughter of Flora Tristan, a famous feminist and socialist writer. His father died when he was three, and his mother took him to Peru, where he spent his early childhood running free on his wealthy uncle's estate in Lima. Prideaux argues that those years mattered enormously. The boy who ran wild in Peru became the man who later called himself a "savage from Peru" — and meant it as a badge of honor.

Back in France, Gauguin went to school, joined the merchant navy, and by his late twenties was a successful stockbroker in Paris. He married a Danish woman, Mette, and they had five children. He collected art and painted on Sundays. It was, by every outward measure, a respectable bourgeois life, lived very well.

Walking away

Then he walked away from all of it. By the early 1880s he was painting full time, the money ran out, Mette took the children back to Copenhagen, and Gauguin became the wandering artist. He went to Brittany, where he worked with young painters at Pont-Aven. He went to Panama and Martinique. He spent two months in Arles in the south of France living with Vincent van Gogh — an episode that ended in the most famous disaster in art history, when Van Gogh cut off part of his own ear after a furious argument in December 1888. Gauguin left the next morning and never saw him again.

Tahiti and the Marquesas

In 1891, at forty-three, Gauguin sailed for Tahiti, convinced that European civilization was corrupt and exhausted and that he could find something pure and primitive in the South Pacific. What he found was a French colony where the administration had suppressed traditional Tahitian religion and where disease had devastated the population. He painted there anyway, came back to France, failed to sell the work, and went back again in 1895. It was in this second, darker period that he painted his masterpiece, Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? — a huge canvas, nearly four meters wide, painted in Tahiti in 1897 in a state of despair after learning his daughter Aline had died. He tried to kill himself after finishing it, failed, and wrote to a friend that it was the best thing he had ever done.

In 1901 he moved to Hiva Oa in the Marquesas, built a house he called the House of Pleasure, decorated it with carved wood panels, fought with the local bishop and the colonial administration, and died there in 1903, aged fifty-four, poor, sick, and almost completely unknown.

The afterlife

Within a few years of his death, Gauguin was one of the most important artists in the world. Picasso stole from him openly. Matisse and the Fauves built on his use of flat, non-natural color. The German Expressionists, Edvard Munch, and the Nabis all traced a line back to him. In 2015, one of his Tahitian paintings — When Will You Marry?, a picture of two young women painted in 1892 — sold for about $300 million, one of the highest prices ever paid for a painting. The irony is almost too perfect: the man who died penniless, and the painting that sells for $300 million.

The Central Argument: Three Gauguins

Prideaux's core idea is that we are dealing with three different figures who share one name, and that the biography's job is to separate them.

Gauguin the man. A complicated, often selfish, sometimes generous person: a devoted father who abandoned his children, a man who could be kind and cruel in the same week, a deeply literary intellectual who read widely and wrote constantly.

Gauguin the persona. The character he invented for himself: the savage, the rebel, the man who escaped civilization. He performed this identity in his paintings, his writing, his clothes, and his way of living — and he performed it so well that we are still living inside it.

Gauguin the myth. The figure posterity built from the first two, through Somerset Maugham's 1919 novel The Moon and Sixpence, through films, museum shows, and gossip. The myth needed a hero — the tortured genius who sacrificed everything for art — and it flattened a complicated life into a parable.

The persona was not simply a lie. It was a selection. Gauguin emphasized the Peru childhood, the sailor years, and the escape from the stock exchange, and played down the parts that didn't fit — like the fact that he was a sophisticated, well-read modern intellectual in constant correspondence with other artists. The savage was a sophisticated construction, and it worked.

The New Evidence

What makes this biography different from its predecessors is that Prideaux had genuinely new material to work with — rare for a figure who died more than a century ago.

The teeth. In 2018, researchers studied three teeth found in a well beside Gauguin's house at Atuona on Hiva Oa. DNA testing showed with high probability that they were Gauguin's teeth, and they showed no trace of mercury or arsenic, the minerals used to treat syphilis at the time. The long-standing story — that Gauguin spread syphilis around the South Pacific and died of it — is probably wrong. Prideaux opens the book with this, and it sets the tone: she is going to test the myths against the evidence.

The manuscript. In 2020, the original manuscript of Gauguin's most important piece of writing resurfaced. Avant et après (Before and After) is a 213-page memoir he wrote in the last two years of his life. It had been lost for decades. In it, Gauguin writes of his belief that women should be treated as equals, his love of Jesus and hatred of the Church, tells silly stories, settles scores, and reinvents himself. Prideaux reads it both as a key to how Gauguin saw himself and as a performance — one more act of self-invention.

The son's memoir. Gauguin's son wrote a memoir that had never been translated. Prideaux uses it to get at the family side of the story — the children left behind in Copenhagen, the father they barely knew — and it complicates the simple story of a monster and his victims.

The catalogue raisonné. In 2021, the final volume of the catalogue raisonné of Gauguin's work was published, covering the paintings from 1891 to 1903. For the first time, scholars could see the whole body of work properly dated and documented.

The Key Ideas

1. Identity can be deliberately manufactured

Gauguin did not simply discover who he was. He invented Gauguin. The respectable stockbroker gradually became the wandering artist, outsider, "savage," anti-bourgeois rebel, and Polynesian exile. The lesson is broader than one painter: identities are not just found, they are made, and the making is itself a creative act. The danger is that the invented identity can swallow the person who invented it.

2. Creativity frequently requires exit

Gauguin repeatedly escaped environments that constrained him: the stock exchange, Paris, Brittany, France itself. Each exit produced a burst of creativity. Environment shapes work, and sometimes the only way to do original work is to leave the place that rewards you for doing unoriginal work. But every escape left wreckage behind — a wife, children, debts, friends. The freedom was real, and so was the damage.

3. Peripheral places can generate central innovations

Gauguin did his most original work at the edges — in Brittany, in Tahiti, in the Marquesas — far from the center of the Paris art world. The center has the money, the audience, and the critics; the edges have the freedom. The innovations came from the periphery and then flowed back to the center. It is a pattern you see across creative fields, and Gauguin is almost a perfect case study of it.

4. Innovation is recombination, not creation from nothing

Gauguin's originality did not mean an absence of influences. His paintings are full of references to Egyptian art, Javanese temple carving, Breton folk art, and Japanese prints. His genius was in combining influences nobody else was combining. That is a useful corrective to the romantic idea of the lone genius creating from a void.

5. Constraints can produce stylistic breakthroughs

Gauguin was almost always broke, often lacked materials, and had no institutional support. Those constraints shaped the style. Flat color is partly an aesthetic choice — and partly what you do when you cannot afford much paint, when you are working fast, on rough canvas or burlap. Scarcity forced simplification, and simplification became a style. Limitation is not always the enemy of creativity.

6. Rivalry can accelerate creativity

The two months Gauguin spent living with Van Gogh in Arles in 1888 were a collision. Van Gogh believed in painting from nature, from direct observation. Gauguin believed in painting from memory and imagination. That argument, conducted at full volume in a small yellow house, pushed both of them. Rivalry, handled honestly, is a creative force.

7. Great achievement and bad behavior are separate variables

This is the idea that matters most, and the one the book returns to again and again. We want a single verdict: cancel the artist, or forgive him. Prideaux refuses the single verdict. The art is extraordinary; the behavior was, in many cases, indefensible. Both things are true, and neither cancels the other. Holding two ideas at once is the book's real demand on the reader.

8. Posterity performs selection

Reputation is not fixed. Each generation picks the Gauguin it needs. The early twentieth century needed the rebel genius. The late twentieth century needed the colonial villain. Our generation needs a test case for the question of art and morality. The evidence keeps changing, and we keep changing, so the test case will keep changing too.

Brittany: Where Gauguin Becomes Gauguin

Before Tahiti made him famous, Brittany made him an artist. Gauguin first went to Pont-Aven in 1886, and he kept coming back. It was a small village, cheap, beautiful, and full of young painters — and it was where he worked out the ideas that would define him.

There he met Émile Bernard, twenty years younger than him, and together they developed Synthetism. The idea is simple to state and radical to practice: do not copy nature; synthesize it. Take what you see, strip it down to its essential shapes, and rebuild it in flat color and strong line.

Brittany mattered for another reason too: it was the first escape that worked. Paris was expensive, competitive, and full of critics who wanted him to paint like everyone else. Brittany was cheap and far away, and it let him experiment. That pattern repeated for the rest of his life — he needed distance to do original work. The problem was that distance also meant isolation, and isolation, for Gauguin, eventually meant despair.

The family story belongs here as well, because it is the part that often gets flattened into a single sentence: he abandoned his wife and children. And he did. But Prideaux shows what that actually looked like, day by day, and it is messier and sadder than the sentence suggests. Mette was practical and strong, and she held the family together in Copenhagen after the money ran out. Gauguin wrote to her constantly and sent what money he could — usually nothing. He begged her to join him in Tahiti; she refused, sensibly. Their son Clovis died young. Their daughter Aline, whom Gauguin adored, died in 1897, and that death broke him. The son's memoir, which Prideaux uses for the first time, gives us the children's side, and it is not a simple story of a monster and his victims. It is a story of a family broken by poverty, ambition, and distance — and by a man who could not be in two places at once and chose the wrong one.

That is the book's way of handling Gauguin's choices throughout: not as the choices of a man who did not care, but as the choices of a man who cared about the wrong things at the wrong time, or who cared about art more than he cared about the people around him. That is not an excuse. It is an explanation — and explanations are what biography is for.

The Art: What Gauguin Actually Did

Gauguin's great innovation was not that he painted "primitive" subjects. It was that he stopped trying to paint the world the way it looks, and started painting the way it feels. He and the young painter Émile Bernard called it Synthetism: big flat areas of color, heavy dark outlines, no realistic shadows, no traditional perspective, color used emotionally rather than descriptively. A face can be yellow, a sky can be red, if that is what the feeling demands.

The painting that announces it is Vision of the Sermon (1888). Breton women pray, and behind them, in the same picture, Jacob wrestles with the angel — not a separate scene, but in the women's vision, on the same flat red field as their white caps. It shocked people then. It still shocks people now.

He smashed the rules of Western painting that had held since the Renaissance: the picture box, single-point perspective, realistic scale, believable solidity. He privileged decorative line and flat color. That opened a door, and Matisse walked through it, and Picasso walked through it, and the whole of modern art, in a sense, walks through it. That is why the book can claim, without exaggeration, that Gauguin was vital to the French avant-garde and to modern art as a whole.

And yet the art and the life are not the same thing, even though Gauguin wanted us to think they were. The paintings are full of Tahitian subjects, but they are also full of references to other traditions. The life was chaotic; the paintings are controlled. The man was often cruel; the paintings are often tender. That gap is part of what makes them endure.

The Hard Part: What Prideaux Does Not Hide

No honest account of this book can skip the part that makes it uncomfortable — and makes it important.

Gauguin was a man in his forties and fifties who took a series of very young Tahitian girls as partners, some of them thirteen or fourteen years old. He painted them, lived with them, and called them his wives. The most famous is Tehamana, who was thirteen when he "married" her in 1891 and who appears in several of his best-known paintings. He did this as a European man in a French colony, where the administration was actively suppressing Tahitian culture, language, and religion.

Prideaux writes about all of this straightforwardly, throughout the book. She acknowledges that he abandoned his first wife and children, that he had sex with and "married" teenagers as a middle-aged man, and that he perpetuated colonial narratives that tied Tahitian culture to a kind of open-handed sensuality — narratives that gave men like him permission to indulge their fantasies.

The question is what she does with that material, and this is where the reviews of the book split. The publisher's copy says his "scandalous reputation is largely undeserved." Some reviewers accept that; others do not. The Hyperallergic review argued bluntly that the reputation is not largely undeserved, and that Wild Thing adds a slightly more charitable study rather than transforming the picture. The Los Angeles Review of Books noted that the book is essentially sympathetic to its subject, and that an earlier biographer, David Sweetman, had already softened the caddish reputation back in 1995.

Prideaux wrote in the Guardian that she felt she "couldn't live in the dishonest and hypocritical position of loving the paintings and hating the man." That is an honest statement — and a revealing one. She is not pretending to be neutral. She is a wonderful biographer and also an advocate. Her previous books are lives of Nietzsche, Edvard Munch, and Strindberg — three difficult, complicated men — and she has a gift for getting inside difficult men and making them intelligible without making them innocent. The risk is that intelligibility starts to feel like exoneration.

There is also a gap Prideaux is honest about: the Tahitian women in the paintings have almost no voice in the record. Tehamana and the others appear as models and as wives, but we hear almost nothing from them directly. The sources are Gauguin's letters, his memoir, colonial records, and the accounts of other Europeans. The Tahitian perspective is largely absent because it was never written down. That is a gap in the book — and a gap in the archive itself.

Memorable Lines

Prideaux's own framing of her project is the line to remember:

> *"Not to condemn, not to excuse, but simply to shed new light on the man and the myth."*

And her confession in the Guardian, which explains the book's sympathies more plainly than any review:

> *"I couldn't live in the dishonest and hypocritical position of loving the paintings and hating the man."*

On the paintings themselves, the most-quoted description of Gauguin's method comes from the Synthetist idea itself: do not copy nature — synthesize it. Take what you see, strip it down to its essentials, and rebuild it in flat color and strong line.

Fair Criticisms

Sympathy vs. correction. The book's defenders call it a myth-busting correction of the record; its critics say it is a more charitable portrait that does not actually overturn the basic facts. The teeth do not settle the syphilis question conclusively, and the manuscript does not change what Gauguin did in Tahiti. A reader should enjoy the storytelling and keep asking: is this the evidence speaking, or the biographer?

The abrupt ending. At least one reviewer noted that Prideaux ends the book at Gauguin's death in 1903 rather than giving a full account of his posthumous career — the museums, the prices, the myth-making. The afterlife of the paintings is sketched rather than fully told.

The absent voices. The Tahitian women at the center of the paintings are largely silent in the book, because they are largely silent in the archive. Prideaux acknowledges this, but it remains a real limitation — and a reminder of whose stories get preserved.

The single-verdict problem. By refusing to condemn or excuse, the book can feel, to some readers, like it is refusing to judge at all. That refusal is deliberate and defensible, but it leaves the hardest question — what do we do with great art by a man who behaved badly? — for the reader to answer alone.

Why It's on the List

Wild Thing was named one of the New York Times 10 Best Books of 2025, one of the New Yorker's Top Books of 2025, and one of Vogue's Best Books of 2025. It won the Pol Roger Duff Cooper Prize and the American Library in Paris Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford Prize.

It earned those honors because it does something rare: it takes a figure everyone thinks they already understand, brings genuinely new evidence to bear, and produces a portrait that is richer, stranger, and harder to dismiss than the legend. Jennifer Szalai, in the New York Times Book Review, called it "enthralling [and] terrific" and said Prideaux is "everything you might want in a biographer." The New Yorker called it "remarkable."

It is also on the list because Gauguin himself matters. He changed what painting could do, and the argument about him — about art, morality, colonialism, and genius — is one of the live arguments of our time. A biography that sharpens that argument, rather than settling it, earns its place.

How to Approach It

The book is about 416 pages, in nineteen chronologically arranged chapters, each centered on a place or a phase: the Peru childhood, the stockbroker years, Brittany, Arles, Tahiti, the Marquesas. It is richly illustrated, and Prideaux weaves biography together with visual analysis of the paintings.

Read it with a phone nearby. When she writes about Where Do We Come From?, or Vision of the Sermon, or the Yellow Christ, pull the image up and look at it while you read. The book is designed to be read that way, and it is much richer for it.

You can read it straight through as a life story — it moves like a novel — or a chapter at a time, letting each painting sit with you. Either way, read it with your alertness switched on: admire the research, enjoy the storytelling, and keep asking whether the evidence or the biographer is doing the talking.

If you ever get the chance, go and stand in front of a Gauguin in person. Where Do We Come From? is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Yellow Christ is in Buffalo. Vision of the Sermon is in Edinburgh. The reproductions are beautiful, but the scale and the color in real life are something else. You can see, standing in front of one, why Picasso could not stop looking at them.

What to Read Next

- Sue Prideaux, I Am Dynamite! A Life of Nietzsche — the same method applied to another difficult genius, and the best next step if you loved this book's approach.
- Clare Dederer, Monsters: What Do We Do with Great Art by Bad People? (2023) — the essential counter-argument. Dederer takes Gauguin head-on and asks the question Prideaux leaves open.
- W. Somerset Maugham, The Moon and Sixpence (1919) — the novel, loosely based on Gauguin, that did more than anything else to fix the image of the artist as scoundrel-genius in the public mind. Read it to see the myth being made.
- David Sweetman, Paul Gauguin: A Complete Life (1995) — the previous major biography, and the one that first softened the caddish reputation.

Wild Thing: A Life of Paul Gauguin by Sue Prideaux — Daily Book, Episode 50. A biography that does not settle the argument about Gauguin, but makes it more interesting, and more honest, by showing how much of the story was constructed — by Gauguin himself, and then by the century that followed him.