

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## Books Review

### When he found out his father had an affair with Frida Kahlo, an author's investigation began

By **Lauren Sarazen**

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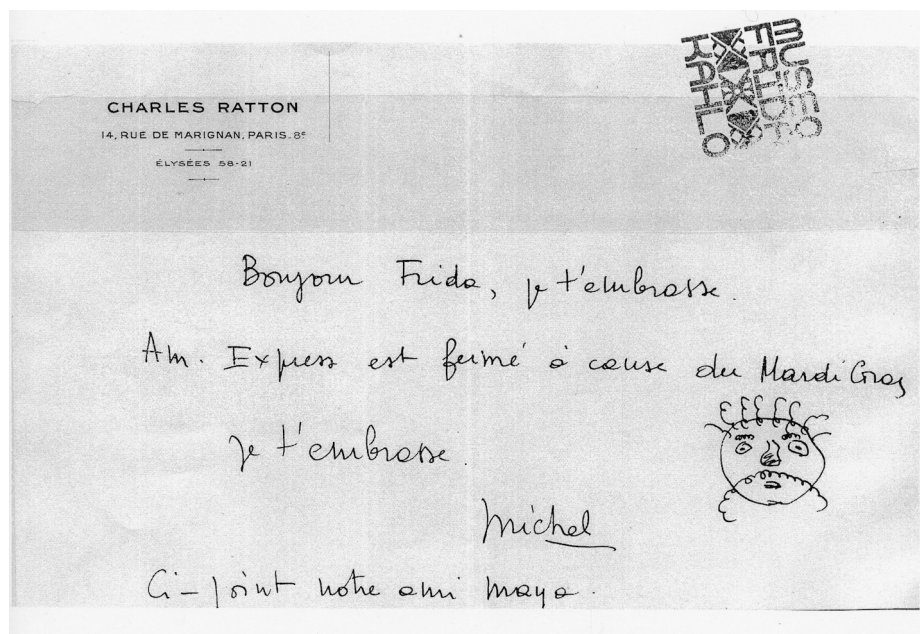
Frida Kahlo and Jacqueline Lamba, 1938. (Aube Elléouët Breton)

It's difficult to imagine a world in which Frida Kahlo plays second fiddle to anyone. Yet in 1939, Kahlo was better known as the wife of painter Diego Rivera than a daring artist in her own right. The Kahlo we would celebrate for her symbolic self-portraits, combining surreal imagery and Mexican folk art, was only just starting to come into her own. Following the devastating discovery of Rivera's affair with her sister Cristina and his intention to seek a divorce, Kahlo traveled alone to Paris to exhibit her work. There, she was welcomed into the city's artistic circles and embarked on a whirlwind affair with a young Frenchman named Michel Petitjean.

So begins "The Heart: Frida Kahlo in Paris." However, the narrative travels beyond the confines of Kahlo and Michel's affair to author Marc Petitjean's present-day investigation into his father's past. That search is set in motion when Petitjean receives a call from a Mexican researcher suggesting a passionate connection between Kahlo and his father. Kahlo's personal effects were sealed for more than 50 years in her home, Casa Azul, after her death at age 47 in 1954, and among them were Michel's letters. Presented with this one-sided correspondence, Petitjean feels compelled to delve deeper into their story. He spent his childhood gazing up at Kahlo's painting "The Heart," hanging on the wall, finding it in turns terrifying and moving. A female figure is flanked by two dresses floating on hangers — a schoolgirl uniform to the left and a traditional Mexican dress to the right. A golden rod pierces the woman's chest, and a large human heart lies bloody in the foreground at her feet. As Petitjean seeks to better understand his father, Kahlo's painting becomes his compass.

Petitjean discovers letters and recorded interviews that present a different man from the father he knew. The Michel Petitjean of 1939 was described as affable and charming, while the "man I knew," the author writes, "was certainly charming and elegant but also a little depressed and not especially amusing." Petitjean dexterously shifts from tracing Kahlo's artistic and biographical trajectory to tracking his father's progression from an associate at the Ethnographic Museum to a gallery assistant at Galerie Renou et Colle, where Kahlo exhibits. Petitjean's meticulous research fills

the gaps between his father's anecdotes to render a compelling portrait of a young man exuberantly of his time: creatively charged, sexually free and politically engaged — someone not so unlike Kahlo herself.



A letter from Michel to Frida, March 10, 1939. (Marc Petitjean)

Petitjean also captures the pop and fizz of artistic circles in Paris during the interwar years. Kahlo mingles with 20th-century luminaries André Breton and his wife, Jacqueline Lamba, Dora Maar and Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp and Elsa Schiaparelli. They drink and smoke at Café Cyrano, talking about politics and poetry, carefully tracking the updates concerning the Spanish Civil War. They go to sumptuous dinner parties at Marie-Laure de Noailles' mansion on the Place des États-Unis and play parlor games in the Bretons' living room. During a game of Truth or Dare, Kahlo memorably chooses to make love to an armchair instead of admitting that her true birth date does not coincide with the onset of the Mexican Revolution.

However, Kahlo was uneasy within Parisian circles where theory and aesthetic manifestos were all the rage. She would rather “sit on the floor in the market of Toluca and sell tortillas, than to have anything to do with” so

many of the “artistic” types in Paris, Kahlo wrote to her on-again, off-again lover Nickolas Muray in New York. Despite explaining that “she simply paints her own reality and has no theories about art other than its sincerity and necessity,” Breton repeatedly introduces her as a surrealist painter. Considering his penchant for mansplaining Kahlo’s artistic style to her, it’s no wonder he was sarcastically dubbed the “Pope of Surrealism” by his detractors.

Although Kahlo’s time in Paris was brief, Petitjean shows the ways in which this two-month sojourn was significant, charting the beginning of her independence. In Paris, Kahlo contends with questions of identity that have an effect on her work. Even in the fashion capital, she wears the brightly colored embroidered clothing of her homeland and braids ribbons and flowers into her hair. Moreover, her rejection of any connection to European culture becomes more entrenched as she embraces her Mexican identity wholeheartedly. Asked if she speaks German, a language her father taught her, Kahlo replies: “I don’t want anything to do with that country or its inhabitants, I’m Mexican, period — and proud of it.”

“The Heart” is a distinctively intimate undertaking, which is no small feat considering its well-known cast of characters. Yet in weaving together Kahlo’s biography with his quest to understand his father, Petitjean creates an unconventional and deeply personal biography.

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The Heart

**Frida Kahlo in Paris**

Marc Petitjean; translated by Adriana Hunter

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208 pp. \$25

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/when-he-found-out-his-father-had-an-affair-with-frida-kahlo-an-authors-investigation-began/2020/04/23/e4d68f12-83ce-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/when-he-found-out-his-father-had-an-affair-with-frida-kahlo-an-authors-investigation-began/2020/04/23/e4d68f12-83ce-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703_story.html)