
Reviewed by Chris Chan, Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

*Mask* is a collection of sixty poems, each of which in some way celebrates the life of Charlotte Salomon, an artist best known for her critically acclaimed series of paintings “Life? or Theatre?” This is a collection of approximately eight hundred pictures that composes a fictionalized autobiography, with verbal messages and musical notations written across the pictorial images. This tribute to an artist who died tragically young attempts to celebrate her life through short, carefully crafted images.

Only a rough outline of Charlotte's (pronounced Charlotteh) life is provided in *Mask*. (Wolff always refers to her subject by her first name, so this review will do likewise.) Charlotte was born in 1917 in Berlin. When she was eight, her mother committed suicide by defenestration, and young Charlotte was informed that her death was due to influenza. She did not learn the true circumstances of her mother's demise for fourteen years, when her maternal grandmother killed herself in a similar fashion and her grandfather revealed her family's history of suicidal women. In 1930, Charlotte's father got remarried to an opera singer, and Charlotte beat the odds to be enrolled in the State Art Academy in 1936. Under the Nazi regime, no more than 1.5% of the Academy's students were supposed to be Jewish, so Charlotte's admission was a pleasant surprise for her.

Two months after Kristallnacht, Charlotte moved to southeastern France to live with her grandparents, thinking that she would be safer there. She would never see her father or stepmother again, although her parents would both survive the war. In France, Charlotte and her grandparents were protected and sheltered by a rich, benevolent American, Ottilie Moore. Her grandmother's suicide occurred in 1940, and her grandfather died three years later. From 1941 to 1942, Charlotte worked incessantly at the paintings that would eventually compose “Life? or Theatre?” In 1943, she became pregnant by Alexander Nagler and married him soon afterwards. The couple was only able to enjoy their happiness for three months, for they were soon arrested by the Vichy government and placed in an internment camp. Charlotte gave “Life? or Theatre?” to Ottilie Moore for safekeeping before she and her husband were shipped to Auschwitz.

Upon arriving at Auschwitz, Charlotte was immediately sent to the gas chamber. Her husband only survived her by three months. After the war, Moore gave “Life? or Theatre?” to Charlotte's father and stepmother, but the collection was not publicly displayed (and even then, only in part) until 1961 in Amsterdam. “Life? or Theatre?” is part of the Amsterdam Jewish Historical Museum's permanent collection, although portions of the massive exhibit are occasionally shipped around the world for temporary exhibits. Wolff saw one such exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2000 and was inspired to write *Mask*. 

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None of the poems is more than two pages long, and most are much less than that. The volume opens with a poem describing Wolff buying flowers and contemplating Charlotte's tragically short life, and other poems address Charlotte's lives, loves, personal tragedies, and how her work lives on after her death. Wolff's own experiences and feelings appear throughout the volume as well.

Wolff explains that the style she has adopted in crafting and arranging her poems "is cinematic. I have juxtaposed and blended fragments of history, story, conjecture and conviction from Charlotte's life and my own. I have used close-ups, long-shots, aerial views, flash-forwards, flashbacks, splices and cuts." (9). The effect is not nearly as dizzying as this quote might suggest, since the end result is frequently compelling albeit frequently confusing.

In many ways, Mask is reminiscent of those photographic puzzles that take a familiar object and greatly magnify it. Enlarged to fifty times its normal size, it is often difficult to identify an apple stem, or a dandelion seed, or the metal band that attaches an eraser to a pencil. Only when you know what it is does the subject of the photograph become obvious. These poems are in many ways comparable to such photos. Once you realize that one is about the suicide of Charlotte's mother or her attempts to enter art school, the oblique allusions of the poem make a great deal more sense. The chronology of Charlotte's life is placed at the end of the collection. Perhaps it might have been better off at the beginning, so readers could have a sharper idea of the events that inspired each poem. Then again, without a set explanation for each poem, readers can utilize their imaginations in order to discern what Wolff is trying to convey. A short appendix at the end of the volume provides explanations of the numerous literary and historical references in the poems, as well as some of Wolff's sources of inspiration.

Perhaps the primary downside to this collection is that no images of Charlotte's pictures are included. The picture on the cover is somewhat in Charlotte's style, but it is not her own work, and therefore the reader is forced to look elsewhere to find out what the oft-mentioned images of “Life? or Theatre?” really look like. The brief verbal descriptions are insufficient to explain Charlotte's creativity and unique style. The reader is therefore compelled to take the quality of Charlotte's artistic talent on faith until he or she seeks out corroborating information on his or her own. Indeed, since Wolff openly asserts that many of the personal feelings attributed to Charlotte are purely conjectural, readers do not receive the kind of look into the artist's mind that paintings and other primary sources could provide. The general effect, therefore, does not give a sense of learning about Charlotte's true character as it does of explaining Wolff's reaction to this artist.

Mask provides no more information about Charlotte's life than a terse encyclopedia article, but this volume of verse is not meant to serve as a comprehensive autobiography. What it does do is give the reader a look at a promising life and career, seen through another creative artist's eyes. By the end of Mask, the only question that resonates more profoundly than the readers' queries about details of Charlotte's life is what this
remarkable young woman might have accomplished had Auschwitz not brought her career to a tragic end.