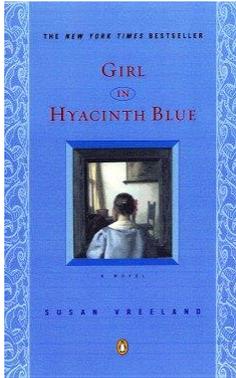


Girl in Hyacinth Blue

By Susan Vreeland



Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books (October 1, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 014029628X

ABOUT THE BOOK

"Why does the world need another painting of a woman alone in a room? Or a hundred more paintings?"

"The world doesn't know all that it needs yet," Pieter said, "but there will come a time when another of your paintings of a woman by a window will provide something."

I have a book that I read every year. Over the years it has become a comforting ritual of discovery as I always come away with renewed understanding of my place in the world and the pleasure of visiting old friends. I have a favorite picture, favorite childhood toy, favorite food...the list continues. I know what I like. More importantly, I know what speaks to me. I recognize the familiar warmth that begins to radiate through me, finally touching my heart as this certain something fulfills a part of me that I may not have even realized was wanting. The book, the toy, the food, the painting—each has become my own.

Such is the case of the Vermeer painting, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, as described by author Susan Vreeland. The painting—this girl so simple in her dress and demeanor—immediately claims a space in each of her owners' hearts and lives, as an intimate relationship is formed between objet d'art and her possessor. It is the girl, however, who is master as she becomes the keeper of their secrets, while "...they would never know her." She is idolized and coveted by a Nazi man and his son, secreted away to hide past misdeeds. Quietly befriended by a young Jewish girl during dangerous times, her silence becomes acceptance in the face of a life of constant criticism and fear. She is privately adored by a middle-aged man, reminding him of the innocent flush of first love, a love he let slip away. She is the innocent onlooker to the dissolution of a marriage; the savior of a man and his child; the light in a country woman's life; a shining moment in a young girl's life—she is that young girl, wanting so much to learn her father's trade, yet knowing her dreams are futile. She is a young woman at rest, whispering, "Let me hear your dreams, questions, and desires. I have all the time in the world—and I understand because I, too, have wished."

Vreeland leads us gently backwards in time with a reverse chronology that reveals the painting's complex history. As we retrace the painting's circuitous route from seventeenth century Amsterdam and its creator's easel to its present unlikely home, we—like the girl in the painting—bear silent witness to

the lives that the Vermeer has touched. Each chapter is a meditation on the joys and sorrows that bind the human heart deeper into its inexorably mysterious relationship with art.

We respond to Vermeer because he shows us a part of ourselves. He believed that art—whether it becomes accepted as a masterpiece or not—should speak to the soul, representing a truth so precisely as to make it undeniable to those who glance upon it. In today's Web-wide world, this is more important than ever as an endless stream of sights, sounds, even smells barrage our senses. More than ever, we need to find something that makes us pause and look inside, even for a second. Perhaps that is the importance of this beautifully rendered novel. It serves as a guidepost on the never-ending journey of self-discovery.

Taken from the publisher.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* suggest about the value, both personal and monetary, and the function and purpose of art?
2. Why would the author structure the novel in reverse chronology? What are the advantages or disadvantages of telling the story this way?
3. Discuss the different ways in which the painting—the girl—spoke to her numerous owners. Did the men view her differently than the women? Why do they all adore—need—the girl in the painting so much? Does it provide for them something that is missing from their daily lives? Whose life did the painting affect the most?
4. What does the book have to say about the joys and difficulties of being an artist? On page 204, Vermeer speaks of the "the cost" of his painting to his household. Is it worth it? Why, so often, is an artist's genius recognized only after he or she has died?
5. Is there a piece of art that affects you in a special way? Elaborate.
6. Do you think Magdalena should have introduced herself to the couple who bought the painting? Is it better not to know the subject of a painting too closely?
7. While reading this book, did you imagine your own version of the painting? If so, describe it.
8. What do you think happened to the painting? Is Cornelius capable of destroying the painting or relinquishing it? Is he a failed human being or is he capable of redemption? Is the pictures rightful place in a museum?
9. Discuss the range and significance of the last line of the book.
10. In the end, does it matter whether or not the painting is a Vermeer?



A CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN VREELAND

Taken from the publisher.

Q. Why did you choose Vermeer as the artist? Does his work mean something special to you?

A. That a thing made by hand, the work and thought of a single craftsman, can endure centuries longer than its maker, can survive catastrophe, neglect, even mistreatment, has always filled me with wonder. In museums, looking at a humble piece of pottery from ancient Persia or Pompeii, or a medieval illuminated manuscript, or a painting of a person with yearnings like mine, I am moved with awe and tenderness. This is the province and privilege of the writer, to let those concrete things that move us feed our imagination until we find meaning in them. In the case of paintings, I like to ask: Who sat as model for the artist? What was their relationship? Was the painter sick with dread over how he would feed his family? What did his children want from him the day he worked on this? Was his wife happy? Was he contented with his work? Beautiful art books stimulate my thinking similarly, and so, during a period of extended illness, I pored over the National Gallery catalog of the 1995-96 Johannes Vermeer exhibition and let my fancy run freely. Here was my ancestral and spiritual heritage, unknown to me before. His images of women in their homes, as I was, caught in a reflective moment, encouraged me to imagine my way out of my uncertain circumstances by imagining my way into these paintings. I found a healing tranquility in these women who reminded me of Wordsworth's line: "With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony and by the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things." Vermeer's characteristic honey-colored light coming through the window bathed their faces and touched with significance the carefully chosen items in the scene. I saw that Vermeer had the same reverence for hand-made things that I felt. He, too, was a lover of the qualities of things: the pale luminous colors in a hand-dipped window pane, a woman's silk jacket with fur trim, the rough nap of a hand-knotted Turkish carpet, a hand-drawn wall map. He invested them with connotations. An earthenware pitcher, a loaf of bread, a sewing basket suggest home and family. The window, a letter, the Turkish carpet, the map all speak of an alluring world beyond the home. He was offering them as objects worthy of stories. The cords of connection tightened, and I felt free to partner with him in the act of creation. To his spare interior, for example, I added a glass of milk which, to my fictional Vermeer, "made the whole corner sacred by the tenderness of just living."

Q. Does the girl in the painting carry a special import for you, both in terms of the novel you have written and personally?

A. When I was nine, my great grandfather, a landscape painter, taught me to mix colors. With his strong hand surrounding my small one, he guided the brush until a calla lily appeared as if by magic on a page of textured watercolor paper. How many girls throughout history would have longed to be taught that, but had to do washing and mending instead? Magdalena, the girl in my imaginary painting is drinking in the view outside the window instead of doing her sewing. What does she see? Undoubtedly, things she wants to paint. That longing for skill enough to render for others how one sees the world parallels my own yearning to write well.

Q. Reviewers have noted how beautifully you have rendered the Dutch landscape. Was the landscape an integral part of the story?

A. Landscape is more than flat land covered by floodwater, the seeping of peat bogs, a river of liquid pewter viewed from a sentry tower. It's an influence on what a person values, what she is willing to

sacrifice or argue for. The interior landscape of a soul is, in part, a reflection of the exterior landscape. After one hundred days of confinement following a bone marrow transplant, I rejoiced in taking short walks to a nearby park as I was writing *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. The uncertainty of my survival made every blade of grass gorgeous in its green intensity, lifting itself up, doing its part to make the world beautiful. Every breeze touching my neck was a gift, revitalizing me. I looked at the world tenderly, intensely, gratefully, the way Magdalena did. Is it any wonder that landscape is vital to the stories?

Q. Are you trying to send a particular message about art? In the book you write that Vermeer believed that painting helped him not only to find and to understand the truth, but also to convey it for an eternity. Do you think it is possible to do this? Is this one of your goals as a writer?

A. To feel the grace of God in a painting of the dear, quiet commonness of a domestic interior, or in a landscape, seascape, cityscape, trains us to feel the grace of God in the thing itself in situ. Does the world need another painting of people quietly going about their lives? Does it need another story? Another poem? Yes. We as a people are generally rushing headlong through the decades of our lives without reflection. We keep an unwholesome pace. We don't stop to glory in the sheen of rainwater on a stone or on a child's cheek. It's an oft told tale. If a story or a painting or a poem can urge us toward more contemplative living by which we discover some truth, then, yes, that function of art justifies sacrifices incurred in the making of it, and is a worthy goal of any artist. As for eternity, that, in part, is the responsibility of the receiver.

Q. What kind of research did you do before you began writing *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*?

A. First let me say that I loved the research because it enriched my sense of personal origin and heritage and it yielded direction to my writing. The decree against keeping pigeons, the superstition of witches, the devastating floods, the engineering of windmills, the French occupation all provided material for plot, texture, character and metaphor. I'd been to The Netherlands only once, twenty five years ago for three days, and I've never seen a Vermeer painting face to face, so I read books on Vermeer, Dutch art, Dutch social and cultural history, the changing geography of The Netherlands as more land was reclaimed from the sea, the Holocaust as experienced in The Netherlands, Erasmus's adages, the history of costume, Passover and the practice of Jewish customs, the diamond trade. I studied historical maps in a wonderful collection at the University of California, San Diego, to learn if villages and canals existed at the time of these stories. This research was ongoing while writing, not just done before. It's only when one gets into the heart of the writing that one knows exactly what one needs. By recent count, I consulted 75 books. Particularly helpful were *Johannes Vermeer*, the catalog of the 1995-96 Vermeer exhibition, published by the National Gallery and Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis; *Vermeer and His Milieu: A Web of Social History* by John Montias; *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry* by Jacob Presser; and *Memorbook: History of Dutch Jewry* by Mozes Heiman Gans.

Q. Four of the eight chapters had been previously published in various journals. Why did you decide to combine them all into one book? Why did you structure it in this manner, moving from present into the past? Did you write this book from the beginning, or from the end?

A. Without knowing that I was embarking on a novel, I wrote the first story, "Love Enough," as part of a collection of stories on various arts. Unwilling to abandon the painting I had created, I wrote a companion piece from the point of view of the painting's subject, and called it "Magdalena Looking." A vast gap separated the two. It occurred to me that I could write one story per century, tracing the painting's owners. I called the series "Delft Quartet." Still my imagination wasn't content until I filled in those smaller spaces with companion stories. I wanted to create the Jewish family from whom the painting was looted. I wanted to endanger the painting's existence, and I wanted the artist to speak for himself. Only when I wrote Vermeer's own story, "Still Life," did I realize that I had a composite novel.

Having conceived of the contemporary story first, I kept it that way in my mind, and thereby preserved the mystery of whether the painting was, in fact, a genuine Vermeer. Starting at the painting's creation would have spoiled that.

Q. Why do you think your book has touched so many people? What do you think this book gives the reader?

A. The girl in the painting, not doing her mending, simply thinking and gazing out the window, gives us permission to have moments of reflective inactivity. Saskia's cry to her decent but workaholic husband, "There's got to be some beauty too," Adriaan's sudden grief that he had "fancied love a casual adjunct and not the central turning shaft making all parts move," his regret that he "had not stood astonished before the power of its turning" urge us to give more of our lives to love and beauty and reflection and to the intense noticing of commonplace things.

Q. How did your work as a teacher of literature, writing, and art affect the way that you approached and wrote the novel?

A. For me, bits of poetry, scenes crafted with paint or words, observations from nature all come together in my work. As a writer I am a hunter and gatherer. For example, while researching tropes for a set of lessons on figures of speech, I find my own prose growing richer with them. In guiding students to appreciate in their reading the felicities of language, the psychological depth of character, the exploration of serious themes, the engagement with fundamental issues of life, mortality, love, faith, artful living, and self-actualization, I concurrently work to infuse these same elements into my writing. While I am encouraging self-actualization of my students through their reading, I am actualizing my own fuller self through writing, by considering those issues mindfully and imaginatively, by living other lives and thereby extending my own. Michaelangelo is said to have remarked, "God is in the details." Similarly in writing, after getting down the basic structure of a story, I love the period of revision where I can add more texture with details. It is no mere coincidence that the last stages of writing are called polishing, and here I think of the ivory sheen on Michaelangelo's most famous Pieta. With this polishing comes the refinement of voice, the unexpected uncovering of inter-relatedness, the possibility of suggesting something meaningful with a detail that reaches into my readers' lives. That is nearly the most wonderful experience I can imagine, and it doesn't come easily or often enough, but when it does, it humbles me with gratitude.

Q. Are you working on anything now?

A. Yes. Every day. I'm working on a novel about an Italian Baroque painter, Artemisia Gentileschi, the first woman to contribute significantly to art history. She was raped by her painting teacher, betrayed by her father, uprooted by the constant need to find work. It's a story of her self-actualization as a painter, daughter, wife, mother, friend, and independent woman ahead of her time.

After that, I need to complete a collection of stories exploring the ways art penetrates lives. There are stories involving Monet, Cezanne, Van Gogh told from the points of view of peripheral characters. Other stories make reference to paintings by Matisse, Seurat and others. Some are about fictional painters, a sculptor's model, a ceramicist, children performing opera, a child drawing with crayon and imitating Picasso, a poor girl making a book of drawings while on a bus ride to give to her boyfriend in a penitentiary.

After that, I need to revise *Cedar Spirit*, a novel of Emily Carr, the Canadian painter who struggles to free herself from Victorian convention in order to engage in friendship with an Indian woman, as well as paint her beloved British Columbian wilderness and its native subjects. As a result, she comes to adopt

a native spirituality.
After that, oh my, I can't wait to find out.