



Girl in Hyacinth Blue

By Susan Vreeland

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This luminous story begins in the present day, when a professor invites a colleague to his home to see a painting that he has kept secret for decades. The professor swears it is a Vermeer—but why has he hidden this important work for so long? The reasons unfold in a series of events that trace the ownership of the painting back to World War II and Amsterdam, and still further back to the moment of the work's inspiration. As the painting moves through each owner's hands, what was long hidden quietly surfaces, illuminating poignant moments in multiple lives. Susan Vreeland's characters remind us, through their love of this mysterious painting, how beauty transforms and why we reach for it, what lasts and what in our lives is singular and unforgettable.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

There are only 35 known Vermeers extant in the world today. In *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Susan Vreeland posits the existence of a 36th. The story begins at a private boys' academy in Pennsylvania where, in the wake of a faculty member's unexpected death, math teacher Cornelius Engelbrecht makes a surprising revelation to one of his colleagues. He has, he claims, an authentic Vermeer painting, "a most extraordinary painting in which a young girl wearing a short blue smock over a rust-colored skirt sat in profile at a table by an open window." His colleague, an art teacher, is skeptical and though the technique and subject matter are persuasively Vermeer-like, Engelbrecht can offer no hard evidence--no appraisal, no papers--to support his claim. He says only that his father, "who always had a quick eye for fine art, picked it up, let us say, at an advantageous moment." Eventually it is revealed that Engelbrecht's father was a Nazi in charge of rounding up Dutch Jews for deportation and that the picture was looted from one doomed family's home:

That's when I saw that painting, behind his head. All blues and yellows and reddish brown, as translucent as lacquer. It had to be a Dutch master. Just then a private found a little kid covered with tablecloths behind some dishes in a sideboard cabinet. We'd almost missed him.

By the end of "Love Enough," this first of eight interrelated stories tracing the history of "Girl in Hyacinth Blue," the painting's fate at the hands of guilt-riddled Engelbrecht *fails* is in question. Unfortunately, there is no doubt about the probable destiny of the previous owners, the Vredenburg family of Rotterdam, who take center stage in the powerful "A Night Different From All Other Nights." Vreeland handles this tale with subtlety and restraint, setting it at Passover, the year before the looting, and choosing to focus on the adolescent Hannah Vredenburg's difficult passage into adulthood in the face of an uncertain future. In the next story, "Adagia," she moves even further into the past to sketch "how love builds itself unconsciously ... out of the momentous ordinary" in a tender portrait of a longtime marriage. Back and back Vreeland goes, back through other owners, other histories, to the very inception of the painting in the homely, everyday objects of the Vermeer household--a daughter's glass of milk, a son's shirt in need of buttons, a wife's beloved sewing basket--"the unacknowledged acts of women to hallow home." *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* ends with the painting's subject herself, Vermeer's daughter Magdalena, who first sends the portrait out into the world as payment for a family debt, then sees it again, years later at an auction.

She thought of all the people in all the paintings she had seen that day, not just Father's, in all the paintings of the world, in fact. Their eyes, the particular turn of a head, their loneliness or suffering or grief was borrowed by an artist to be seen by other people throughout the years who would never see them face to face. People who would be that close to her, she thought, a matter of a few arms' lengths, looking, looking, and they would never know her.

In this final passage, Susan Vreeland might be describing her own masterpiece as well as Vermeer's. --Alix Wilber

From Publishers Weekly

As Keats describes the scenes and lives frozen in a moment of time on his Grecian urn, so Vreeland layers moments in the lives of eight people profoundly moved and changed by a Vermeer painting a thing of beauty and a joy forever. Vreeland opens with a man who suffers through his adoration of the painting because he inherited it from his Nazi father, who stole it from a deported Jewish family. She traces the work's provenance through the centuries: the farmer's wife, the Bohemian student, the loving husband with a secret

and, finally, the Girl herself Vermeer's eldest daughter, who felt her "self" obliterated by the self immortalized in paint, but accepted that this was the nature of art. Descriptions of the painting by people in different countries in various historical periods are particularly beautiful. Each section is read by a different narrator, some better than others. Several add dimension to the story and writing, while others are so intent on portraying the book's ethereal qualities they make the listener conscious of the reader instead of the language. Still, this is a delightful production. Based on the MacMurray & Beck hardcover (Forecasts, July 12, 1999).

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From [Booklist](#)

Reading Vreeland's new book is like opening up a Chinese box: each chapter reveals a new layer of meaning and import. The "novel" follows the trail of an "unknown" painting by the Dutch master Vermeer--*The Girl in Hyacinth Blue* from the time of its creation in seventeenth-century Holland to the present day. In each of the eight independent but chronologically linked chapters, the painting shows up as a prop in the lives of different owners, and in telling the circumstances under which these people acquire or lose the painting, Vreeland gives the readers a sense of the evolution of Dutch social history. The first chapter opens with the discovery of the painting in the basement of a mathematician. It turns out that he inherited it from his father, who was a Nazi looter in Holland during World War II. The second chapter features the circumstances of the Jewish family from whom the painting was stolen. The remaining chapters take the readers further back into Dutch history until the final, or rather the original, moment when Vermeer decided to paint the portrait of his daughter, a young girl dressed in hyacinth blue. True to the spirit of Vermeer, Vreeland uses art as a vehicle for capturing special moments in the lives of ordinary people; true, too, to Vermeer's legacy, she creates art that brings a unique pleasure into the lives of ordinary readers. *Veronica Scrol*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Phyllis Callahan:

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