

Girl in hyacinth blue



**ASSIGN
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Girl In Hyacinth Blue GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE Overview In eight quasi-connected stories, Susan Vreeland delivers a fictional lesson on aesthetics. Set amidst human sorrow and historic chaos, the narrative follows an imagined Vermeer painting from the present day through 330 years of its provenance--beginning with its willful destruction in the 1990s and concluding with its inspired creation in the 1660s: Chapter 1. 1995(?): in Pennsylvania, math teacher Cornelius Englebrecht burns the painting in his fireplace; 1942: in Amsterdam, from the Vredenburg home, German soldier Otto Engelbrecht loots the painting, hides it, and absconds with it to America. Chapter 2. 1940: in Amsterdam, diamond merchant Sol Vredenburg buys the painting for his daughter Hannah as a gift for her 11th birthday. Chapter 3. 1899: in Vreeland, engineer Laurens van Luyken, having originally purchased the picture as an anniversary gift for his wife, decides to give it to his daughter Johanna, engaged to the Amsterdamer Fritz. Chapter 4. 1803: in The Hague, French aristocrat Gerard buys the painting from a Dutch noble; wife Claudine absconds with and sells it, without the documents attesting to its authenticity. Chapter 5. 1717-18: from the floodwaters of Delfzijl, scholar Adriaan Kuypers flees with the painting to Oling where he relinquishes it to the farmer's wife, Saskia, who sells it to a dealer in Amsterdam. Chapter 6. 1717: in Delfzijl, Aunt Rika, wife of a slave trader, offers the painting as a bribe to her nephew Adriaan to hide the evidence of his bastard child and keep her name respectable. Chapter 7. 1665-8: in Delft, Vermeer begins and completes the painting of his daughter Magdalena. Chapter 8. 1675: in Delft, Vermeer dies, and after his death his daughter Magdalena sells the painting to the local baker; later,

in Amsterdam in 1696, Magdalena observes a nice family buying the painting at auction. Topics For Discussion 1. The plot summary reveals that much of the picture's provenance remains unknown. Why do you think Vreeland leaves blank so much of the picture's history? Where do you imagine the painting was, say, between 1803 and 1890? Why do you think Vreeland places the painting in periods of history reflecting so many atrocities? What would have been gained--or lost--from this novel had the author placed the picture in more heroic moments of human history? 2.

For many readers the chapters seem uneven in quality. Which chapters seem to you more/less successful than the others? Can you say why some fail to work as well as others? 3. The original title for the opening chapter was Love Burning. What additional textual evidence exists to affirm the painting's destruction by Cornelius? Do you think that Cornelius makes a morally correct decision when he burns the picture? Do you think that Richard ought to have stepped in to save it? 4. In *A Night Different From All Other Nights*, Hannah slaughters the family's pet pigeons.

Why and for whom does Hannah destroy these pets? How is the death of the pigeons related to the Amsterdam setting? In what way is the family's celebration of Passover relevant to this story? Would a different Jewish holiday, say Chanukah, have had the same symbolic value? 5. Why do you think that Digna sews samplers, in *Adagia*, embedded with quotations by Erasmus? You might want to discuss Erasmus, and the part this Dutch Renaissance humanist plays in the drama going on between this 19th century husband and wife? 6. The *Hyacinth Blue* chapter is written in the first person and in a vastly different style from that of the other chapters. Authors

often use the first person point of view to expose an unreliable narrator. In what way is Claudine's account of these events unreliable? In other words, what part or parts of the story does she fail to understand? Why do you think that Vreeland chose to tell Claudine's story from that character's limited point of view? 7.

In the Morningshine chapter, Saskia and Stign have an unsatisfying marriage. Indeed, unhappy marriages and unpromising couples seem to be the norm in this book. What, according to Vreeland, constitutes an unhappy union? 8. Why is scholarly Adriaan Kuypers, in the Personal Papers chapter, attracted to superstitious Aletta Pieters? Does Aletta's family history help to explain her irrational behavior? 9. The concluding Magdalena Looking chapter traces the painting's subject from her wistful 14th year (when she wishes her father would paint her) to her melancholic middle age. In it, we learn that following her father's death, Magdalena marries an unimaginative saddler, moves to Amsterdam, and ends up childless.

What does this sad story contribute to the viewer's understanding of the painting? 10. Magdalena sells the painting for over 300 guilders. Saskia sells it for 75 guilders. Claudine sells it for 24 guilders. Today, the picture would be sold for several hundred million guilders. Given these discrepancies, what do you think Vreeland is suggesting about the monetary value of art? The novel opens in the present day when Cornelius Engelbrecht, a lonely math teacher, invites one of his colleagues from the art department to see a painting he has kept secret for decades.

Though he insists it's an authentic Vermeer, a painting ready to rock the art world, he explains vaguely, I prefer it not be known. Security risks. I just wanted you to see it, because you can appreciate it. The art teacher leaves unconvinced, and Cornelius's dreadful paradox is unresolved. He's spent decades worshipping the painting and enduring the guilt that stains it since he first learned his father stole it from Jews he helped deport from the Netherlands. As he stares at the girl in blue, the narrator explains, The one thing he craved, to be believed, struck at odds with the thing he most feared, to be linked by blood with his century's supreme cruelty.

He'd have to risk exposure for the pure pleasure of delighting with another .. in the luminescence of her eye. From this haunting first chapter, the book moves backward in time to the previous owners of the painting. In each new house, all the way back to Vermeer's, it assumes a new meaning. For little Hannah in Amsterdam, the girl in the blue dress is a model of pensive contemplation amid the rising tide of anti-Semitism. Hannah is burdened with a profound sense that she and her family are living, as Emily Dickinson put it, between the heavens of storm.

In this stunning chapter, nothing more violent than the death of a pigeon takes place, but the horizon glows with horror. Further back, the painting belonged to a man who loved it as a memory of the love he foolishly lost. For an earlier owner, it's an emblem of the daughter she cannot bear. Caught in what Vreeland calls the excruciating complexities of life, each owner relinquishes the Vermeer only as a last resort. One desperate young man wraps his newborn son with the painting and leaves it on a boat near a flooded house.

The note reads, Sell the painting. Feed the baby. Vreeland's study of Girl in Hyacinth Blue illuminates the hopes and fears we invest in beautiful objects. In the end, the narrator notes, it's only the moments that we have. But what exquisite moments they are in this thoughtful b ...