

Biography Resource Center

Tracy Chevalier

1962-

Also known as: Tracy Chevalier, Tracy Rose Chevalier

Birth: October, 1962 in Washington, District of Columbia

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Entry updated: 04/20/2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Career](#)

[Further Readings](#)

[Media Adaptations](#)

[Personal Information](#)

[Sidelights](#)

[Source Citation](#)

[Writings](#)

"Sidelights"

Beginning her career as an editor, Tracy Chevalier has gained a growing following as the author of historical fiction. Her novels include *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, an imagined account of the model who appears in Dutch master Johannes Vermeer's painting of the same title, as well as *The Lady and the Unicorn* and *The Virgin Blue*. Discussing *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in a *Fire and Water* interview, Chevalier noted that the girl in Vermeer's painting is "both universal and specific" and added that "you never really know what she's thinking." In Chevalier's story, the painting depicts an illiterate teenager, Griet, who works as a servant in Vermeer's household. Griet is responsible for maintaining Vermeer's studio, and thus she becomes familiar with the painter's interests and technical concerns. "By the time she sits for her portrait," wrote R. Z. Sheppard in *Time*, "Griet is a budding connoisseur."

Vermeer's wife, who recognizes her own earring as the one worn by Griet in the painting, soon grows to resent the bond that has developed between her husband and the servant. Likewise, Vermeer's mother-in-law suspects that an inappropriate relationship has developed between artist and model. "But the truth is loftier than a studio tryst," noted Sheppard, who described Chevalier's account as "an exquisitely controlled exercise that illustrates how temptation is restrained for the sake of art." Another critic, Ruth Coughlin, summarized *Girl with a Pearl Earring* in the *New York Times Book Review* as "marvelously evocative," and a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called the novel "a completely absorbing story."

While *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is Chevalier's best-known novel, it was not her first; she began her fiction-writing career with *The Virgin Blue*, a story about an American midwife who moves to France and finds her life circumstances reflected in those of a sixteenth-century ancestor. In *Library Journal*, Jo Manning praised the debut novel as a "marvelous piece of writing" that possesses "fluid language, strong characters, and imaginative plotting." Ted Hipple offered a similar opinion in a *Booklist* interview, noting that Chevalier "demonstrates ... admirable gifts with language."

The Lady and the Unicorn was inspired by a series of six tapestries that hang in the Cluny museum in Paris, their origins mysterious. In Chevalier's novel, the works are commissioned by a powerful and manipulative French nobleman whose female household ultimately becomes involved with the worldly and opportunistic artisan commissioned to do the work. Over time, the lives of these women become entwined--romantically and otherwise--in that of the artist and the work he creates, which was

originally meant to be the battle of Nancy but comes to be something far different.

Praising *The Lady and the Unicorn* as a "luminous tale," *Booklist* contributor Kristine Huntley commended Chevalier for the insight she brings to the historical epoch she describes, as well as for "colorful characters" who "leap off the page." Such praise was echoed by other reviewers, with a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor noting that the book is "marvelously imagined and sharply constructed, with a good feel for the people and the era." "What makes the tale enthralling are the details Chevalier offers," added a *Publishers Weekly* contributor, as well as "the deft way she herself weaves together each separate story strand" to create "a work of genuine power and beauty." In *The Lady and the Unicorn*, Rochelle Ratner added in *Library Journal*, Chevalier continues to develop the theme begun in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*: taking "artworks beautiful beyond words" and creating from them "an enchanting novel."

Chevalier's shift from reference-book editor to novelist came in 1993, when she quit her editorial job and earned her M.A. in creative writing at the University of East Anglia. "I try to put the success of my previous books out of my head when I write," she explained on her Web site. "If I thought about it much I'd be paralyzed with the fear of everyone's expectations of me." However, she has been able to sustain the critical success of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, as well as juggle motherhood and a host of other responsibilities. "It's kind of like running," the author added: "you feel terrible for those first ten minutes but then it gets better and afterwards you feel great."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born October, 1962, in Washington, DC; married; children: one son. **Education:** Oberlin College, B.A., 1984; University of East Anglia, M.A., 1994. **Addresses:** Home: London, England. Agent: Jonny Geller, Curtis Brown, Haymarket House, 28/29 Haymarket, London SW1Y 4SP, England. **E-mail:** hello@tchevalier.com.

CAREER

Writer.

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *The Virgin Blue*, Penguin (London, England), 1997, Dutton (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Dutton (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Falling Angels*, Dutton (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Lady and the Unicorn*, Dutton (New York, NY), 2003.
- *Burning Bright*, Dutton (New York, NY), 2007.

Contributor of short stories to *Fiction* and various magazines.

EDITOR

- *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers*, preface by Naomi Lewis, St. James Press (Chicago, IL), 1989.
- *Contemporary Poets*, prefaces by C. Day Lewis and Diane Wakoski, 5th edition, St. James Press (Chicago, IL), 1991.
- *Contemporary World Writers*, preface by Susan Bassnett, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1993.

- *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, Fitzroy Dearborn (Chicago, IL), 1997.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

Girl with a Pearl Earring was released as a film in 2003. All of Chevalier's novels have been adapted as audiobooks.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- *American Reference Books Annual*, Libraries Unlimited, 1998, Bernice Bergup, review of *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, p. 478.

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, April 15, 1998, review of *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, p. 1462; September 15, 2003, Ted Hipple, review of *The Virgin Blue*, p. 252; November 1, 2003, Kristine Huntley, review of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, p. 458; April 15, 2004, Joyce Saricks, review of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, p. 1460.
- *Choice*, April, 1998, A. C. Labriola, review of *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, p. 1347.
- *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, October 24, 2001, Donna Marchetti, "Fed-up Editor Starts Writing Her Own Books," p. E1.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, November 15, 2003, review of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, p. 1325.
- *Library Journal*, October 15, 1999, Barbara Hoffert, review of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, p. 103; August, 2003, Jo Manning, review of *The Virgin Blue*, p. 127; January, 2004, Kellie Gillespie, review of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, p. 152; June 15, 2004, Rochelle Ratner, review of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, p. 108.
- *New York Times Book Review*, January 23, 2000, Ruth Coughlin, review of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, p. 20.
- *People*, January 12, 2004, Lee Aitken, review of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, p. 47.
- *Publishers Weekly*, October 11, 1999, review of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*; December 8, 2003, review of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, p. 45.
- *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, fall, 1998, Andrew B. Wertheimer, review of *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, p. 93.
- *RQ*, spring, 1992, Anna M. Donnelly, review of *Contemporary Poets*, p. 435.
- *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 23, 2002, Gail Pennington, review of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, p. E1.
- *School Library Journal*, April, 2004, Molly Connally, review of *The Lady and the Unicorn*, p. 182.
- *Time*, January 17, 2000, R. Z. Sheppard, "A Portrait of Radiance: Tracy Chevalier Brings the Real Artist Vermeer and a Fictional Muse to Life in a Jewel of a Novel," p. 94.

ONLINE

- *Fire and Water*, <http://www.fireandwater.com/> (February 2, 2000).
- *Tracy Chevalier Web site*, <http://www.tchevalier.com/> (August 5, 2004).

SOURCE CITATION

Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2007. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2007. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>

Document Number: H1000142308

© 2007 by The Gale Group, Inc.

THOMSON
*
GALE

[Print](#) [Go Back](#)

NoveList



Popularity: 
Level: Adult

Girl with a pearl earring

Tracy Chevalier

Author: Chevalier, Tracy

A poor seventeenth-century servant girl knows her place in the household of the painter Johannes Vermeer, but when he begins to paint her, nasty whispers and rumors circulate throughout the town

New York: Dutton, copyright 1999, 233 p.

Subject Headings:

Vermeer, Johannes, 1632-1675
 Artists -- Netherlands -- History -- 17th century
 Artists' models -- Netherlands
 Sixteen-year-old girls -- Netherlands
 Sixteen-year-olds -- Netherlands
 Women domestics -- Netherlands
 Husband and wife -- Netherlands
 Parent and child -- Netherlands
 Mother and daughter -- Netherlands
 Mothers-in-law -- Netherlands
 Jewelry
 Pearls
 Butchers -- Netherlands
 Catholics -- Netherlands
 Seventeenth century
 Coming-of-age stories
 Netherlands -- History -- 17th century
 Netherlands -- Social life and customs -- 17th century

Lexile:

770

Reviews for this Title:

Booklist Review: /*Starred Review*/ Inspired by Vermeer's painting of the same name, Chevalier creates an elegant and intriguing story of how a young peasant girl came to have her portrait painted. It is seventeenth-century Holland, and 16-year-old Griet is obliged to take a job as a maid for the artist Vermeer after her father loses his eyesight in an accident. She does the laundry, cares for the six children, and cleans house, but her easy manner and natural artistic perceptions ingratiate her to Vermeer, and she finds herself drawn into his world--mixing colors, cleaning his studio, and standing in for his models. This new intimacy between master and servant crosses strict social divisions, inspires jealousy in his wife, Catharina, as well as the other maid, and sparks rumors in town. At the insistence of his patron, Vermeer paints Griet wearing his wife's pearl earring. When Catharina sees the painting, a scandal erupts, and Griet is forced to make some life-altering decisions. This is a beautiful story of a young girl's coming-of-age, and it is delightful speculative fiction about the subject in a painting by an Old Master. ((Reviewed December 1, 1999)) -- Carolyn Kubisz

School Library Journal Review: YA-A fictional account of how the Dutch artist Vermeer painted his masterpiece. In this splendid novel, the girl in the painting is Griet, the 16-year-old servant of the Vermeer household. The relationship between her and Vermeer is elusive. Is she more than a model? Is she merely an assistant? Is the artist's interest exaggerated in her eyes? The details found in this book bring 17th-century Holland to life. Everyday chores are described so completely

that readers will feel Griet's raw, chapped hands and smell the blood-soaked sawdust of the butcher's stall. They will never view a Dutch painting again without remembering how bone, white lead, and other materials from the apothecary shop were ground, and then mixed with linseed oil to produce the rich colors. YAs will also find out how a maid from the lower class, whose only claim to pearls would be to steal them, becomes the owner of the earrings.-Sheila Barry, Chantilly Regional Library, VA Copyright 2000 Cahners Business Information.

Publishers Weekly Review: The scant confirmed facts about the life of Vermeer, and the relative paucity of his masterworks, continues to be provoke to the literary imagination, as witnessed by this third fine fictional work on the Dutch artist in the space of 13 months. Not as erotic or as deviously suspenseful as Katharine Weber's *The Music Lesson*, or as original in conception as Susan Vreeland's interlinked short stories, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, Chevalier's first novel succeeds on its own merits. Through the eyes of its protagonist, the modest daughter of a tile maker who in 1664 is forced to work as a maid in the Vermeer household because her father has gone blind, Chevalier presents a marvelously textured picture of 17th-century Delft. The physical appearance of the city is clearly delineated, as is its rigidly defined class system, the grinding poverty of the working people and the prejudice against Catholics among the Protestant majority. From the very first, 16-year-old narrator Griet establishes herself as a keen observer who sees the world in sensuous images, expressed in precise and luminous prose. Through her vision, the personalities of coolly distant Vermeer, his emotionally volatile wife, Catharina, his sharp-eyed and benevolently powerful mother-in-law, Maria Thins, and his increasing brood of children are traced with subtle shading, and the strains and jealousies within the household potently conveyed. With equal skill, Chevalier describes the components of a painting: how colors are mixed from apothecary materials, how the composition of a work is achieved with painstaking care. She also excels in conveying the inflexible class system, making it clear that to members of the wealthy elite, every member of the servant class is expendable. Griet is almost ruined when Vermeer, impressed by her instinctive grasp of color and composition, secretly makes her his assistant, and later demands that she pose for him wearing Catharina's pearl earrings. While Chevalier develops the tension of this situation with skill, several other devices threaten to rob the narrative of its credibility. Griet's ability to suggest to Vermeer how to improve a painting demands one stretch of the reader's imagination. And Vermeer's acknowledgment of his debt to her, revealed in the denouement, is a blatant nod to sentimentality. Still, this is a completely absorbing story with enough historical authenticity and artistic intuition to mark Chevalier as a talented newcomer to the literary scene. Agent, Deborah Schneider. (Jan.) Copyright 1999 Cahners Business Information.

Kirkus Reviews England-based Chevalier's first US appearance is another novel based on a painting of Vermeer (see Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, p. 998). The tale this time is told - alluringly indeed - by the housemaid who sat as a model for the painting in question. Griet is only 16, in 1664, when she's hired as a maid in the grant Delft household of Johannes Vermeer, who practices the Catholic faith and has a family consisting of wife, mother-in-law, cook, and five children (by story's end there will be 11). Griet's own faith is Protestant, and her humble family has been made even poorer since her father, a tile-painter, had an accident that left him blind. Hard-working and sweet-tempered Griet is taken on, then, partly as an act of charity, but the austere and famous painter is struck by her sensitive eye for color and balance, and after a time he asks her to grind paints for him in his attic studio - and perhaps begins falling in love with her, as she certainly does with him. Let there be no question, however, of anything remotely akin to declared romance, the maid's station being far, far below the eminent painter's, not to mention that his bitterly jealous wife Catharine remains sharply resentful of any least privelege extended to Griet - a complication that Vermeer resolves simply through intensified secrecy. There's a limit, though, to how much hiding can be done in a single house however large, and when Griet begins sitting for Vermeer (his patron, the lecherous Ruijven, who has eyes - and hands - for Griet, brings it about), suspicions rise. That's as nothing, though, to the storm that sweeps the house and all but brings about Griet's very ruin when Catharine discovers that the base-born main has committed the thieving travesty of wearing her pearl earrings. Courageous Griet, though, proves herself a survivor in this tenderhearted and sharp-eyed ramble throught daily life - and high art - in 17th-century Delft. Another small and Vermeer-inspired treasure. (*Kirkus Reviews*, October 15, 1999)

Author Web Sites:

1. <http://www.tchevalier.com/> - Tracy Chevalier's Web Site

ISBNs Associated with this Title:

052594527X
 0452282152
 0452284937
 1568951868
 0788760440
 1565114973
 1565114965
 0452287022
 1568958501
 0613338111

Bookreporter.com's Annual
BEACH BAG OF BOOKS

Featuring 14 Weekly Contests May 18 through August 24



amazon.com

Free and fast information

ReadingGroup Guides.com

Home	Find a Guide
Roundtable	Advice & Ideas
Newsletter	Feedback

[About This Book](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Author Biography](#)

[Author Interview](#)

**Penguin
Putnam**

Related Guides

- [Falling Angels](#)
- [The Virgin Blue](#)

[Read a Review](#)

Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier

List Price: \$14.00

Pages: 240

Format: Paperback

ISBN: 0452284937

Publisher: Plume

[Buy this book from Amazon.com](#)



About this Book

In mid-career, the renowned 17th century Baroque artist Johannes Vermeer painted "Girl with a Pearl Earring," which has been called the Dutch Mona Lisa. **Girl with a Pearl Earring** tells the story behind the advent of this famous painting, all the while depicting life in 17th century Delft, a small Dutch city with a burgeoning art community.

The novel centers on Griet, the Protestant daughter of a Delft tile painter who lost his sight in a kiln accident. In order to bring income to her struggling family, Griet must work as a maid for a more financially sound family. When Jan Vermeer and his wife approve of Griet as a maid for their growing Catholic household, she leaves home and quickly enters adult life. The Vermeer household, with its five children, grandmother and long-time servant, is ready to make Griet's working life difficult. Though her help is sorely needed, her beauty and innocence are both coveted and resented. Vermeer's wife Catharina, long banished from her husband's studio for her clumsiness and lack of genuine interest in art, is immediately wary of Griet, a visually talented girl who exhibits signs of artistic promise. Taneke, the faithful servant to the grandmother, proves her protective loyalty by keeping a close eye on Griet's every move.

The artist himself, however, holds another view entirely of the young maid. Recognizing Griet's talents, Vermeer takes her on as his studio assistant and surreptitiously teaches her to grind paints and develop color palettes in the remote attic. Though reluctant to

overstep her boundaries in the cagey Vermeer household, Griet is overjoyed both to work with her intriguing master and to lend some breath to her natural inclinations—colors and composition—neither of which she had ever been able to develop. Together, Vermeer and Griet conceal the apprenticeship from the family until Vermeer's most prominent patron demands that the lovely maid be the subject of his next commissioned work. Vermeer must paint Griet—an awkward, charged situation for them both.

Chevalier's account of the artistic process—from the grinding of paints to the inclusion and removal of background objects—lay at the core of the novel. Her inventive portrayal of this tumultuous time, when Protestantism began to dominate Catholicism and the growing bourgeoisie took the place of the Church as patrons of the arts, draws the reader into a lively, if little known, time and place in history.

A Little Background

The Baroque period is remembered less by one specific style of art than as a period of time. Derived from the Portuguese "barocco" for "irregular pearl," Baroque was comprised of many diversions from Biblically based Renaissance painting. The Protestant Reformation unleashed artists from rote depictions of scenes from the Bible and allowed them to venture into increasingly more interesting domestic domains. Ladies of the day would pose before silent musical instruments in rooms adorned with the trappings of success, like maps of newly explored territories and shelves with expensive volumes of books. As the merchant class gained monetary status in the community, so did their desire to be painted, just as royalty was just a few decades earlier.

Jan Vermeer (1632-1675), a native of Delft who never left the small city, relied on the bourgeoisie for his living. A converted Catholic for his wedding day, Vermeer struggled to support a large family. Many of his paintings depict the wives or daughters of his Protestant patrons caught in the middle of common household actions—pouring a pitcher of water, writing a letter, or playing an instrument. He strove for realism, going so far as to blend sand in his paints to create an accurate texture of bricks in the famous portrait of his hometown, "View of Delft."

The most well known departure from Vermeer's calculated paintings is the intriguing, mysterious subject of "Girl with a Pearl Earring," thought to be painted in 1665. In the painting, a young woman, adorned in an unusual head wrap and wearing a prominent pearl-drop earring, turns to face the painter over her left shoulder—eyes sympathetic and slightly lowered, mouth demurely parted. The moment captured by the painting is captivating—sexually charged yet undeniably innocent. This is the subject of Chevalier's novel, **Girl with a Pearl Earring**. The novel both recognizes the painting's historic and artistic intensity and monopolizes on that intensity to create a fascinating story of a young girl in a small city during a unique period of time. Few authors could make the leaps necessary to enliven a centuries-old

painting for modern readers. Tracy Chevalier achieves all this and more, keeping her audience wondering what the novel's outcome will bring as well as what facts their art history texts hold. Readers and art lovers alike will find this novel engaging, evocative, and insightful.

[top of the page](#)

Discussion Questions

- 1.** Do you think Griet was typical of other girls her age? In what ways? How did she differ? Did you find her compassionate or selfish? Giving or judgmental?
- 2.** In many ways, the primary relationship in this novel appears to be between Griet and Vermeer. Do you think this is true? How do you feel about Vermeer's relationship with his wife? How does that come into play?
- 3.** Peering into 17th century Delft shows a small, self-sufficient city. Where do you think the many-pointed star at the city's center pointed toward? What was happening elsewhere at that time?
- 4.** Discuss the ways religion affected Griet's relationship with Vermeer. His wife? Maria Thins?
- 5.** Maria Thins obviously understood Vermeer's art more than his wife did. Why do you think this was the case? Do you think she shared Griet's talents?
- 6.** Do you think Griet made the right choice when she married the butcher's son? Did she have other options?
- 7.** How is Delft different to or similar to your town or city? Are the social structures comparable?
- 8.** Though **Girl with a Pearl Earring** appears to be about one man and woman, there are several relationships at work. Which is the most difficult relationship? Which is the most promising?

[top of the page](#)

Courtesy of Penguin Putnam, Inc.

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Advertising](#) | [About Us](#)