

The Virgin Blue by Tracy Chevalier

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About this Book

Before she introduced the world to Griet, the heroine of her *New York Times* bestselling novel **Girl With a Pearl Earring**, Tracy Chevalier wrote another book, never published in the United States. "A beautiful story shot with vivid colors," (*The Times*, London) **The Virgin Blue** is a novel of passion and intrigue that compels readers to the very last page.

In **The Virgin Blue**, Tracy Chevalier transports us back to 16th-century France during the development of the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent persecution of the Huguenots-followers of John Calvin's preaching of the "Truth." Isabelle du Moulin-called "La Rousse" for her copper-colored hair-is tormented and shunned by her hardworking, God-fearing Huguenot community, suspicious of her lingering adoration for the Virgin Mary, her skills at midwifery, her mysterious association with wild wolves, and her fiery red hair. Pregnant with an illegitimate child, Isabelle marries above her station-into the severe Tournier family, outwardly stoic followers of the Truth who covertly adhere to older, pagan superstitions.

More than four centuries later, Ella Turner, an American, and her husband Rick move to a small town in France. While in France, Ella hopes to brush up on her French, qualify to practice as a midwife, and start a family. Village life turns out to be less than idyllic when dreams of a disturbing color blue get between her and her plans. Her nightmares of the color blue, and her father's suggestion, lead Ella investigate her French Huguenot ancestry, trace their flight into Switzerland following the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and unearth the sinister secret the family has buried for four hundred years. However, this task is not an easy one. Ella, knowing little more than her family's original surname, Tournier, begins her research at a local library, finding only a negligible amount of information on her ancestry. During her quest, she befriends Jean Paul-a dark, handsome, Byronic librarian, whose magnetism becomes increasingly difficult to resist-and discovers too many parallels with the past to dismiss as coincidence. The one afternoon, Ella discovers her brown hair

inexplicably begun to turn red...

Alternating between the stories of Ella and Isabelle, **The Virgin Blue** is a haunting tale of ancestral legacies set against a dazzlingly descriptive portrait of French provincial life today, as well as of the hardships-and harsh beauty-of life in the sixteenth century.

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Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the commonalities between Isabelle and Ella. Do you feel that they mirror each other?
2. Compare Isabelle's 16th century France to Ella's modern day France. Are there any similarities? Differences?
3. Do you think Ella is harsh on Rick for his inability to understand her? Do you think she is justified in her behavior?
4. Does your opinion of Jean Paul fluctuate throughout the novel?
5. How Ella's goal of getting pregnant interrupted? What does the interruption say about her feeling toward Rick?
6. How do the locals in France receive Ella? Does Rick have the same experience? Would Ella have known what the locals were saying about her without Jean Paul telling her?
7. Describe Ella's relationship with her cousin Jacob like? How do he and his wife help Ella feel "at home"?
8. Discuss the significance of Ella's hair gradually turning red. Discuss her reaction. What is Rick's reaction?
9. Who do you consider to be the heroine of this novel?
10. What was your reaction to Ella finding Marie? What was your reaction to Ella showing Sylvie Marie's bones?
11. Why does Ella get psoriasis? What does it represent? How does it make her feel about herself? How does Rick react to it?
12. Hannah's last audible words are "we are safe". Why does she stop speaking?
13. How does Ella know that the baby she conceived is Rick's and not Jean Paul's? Do you think she'd rather be pregnant with Jean Paul's baby?
14. Why does Ella steal Jean Paul's blue shirt? How does this link them metaphorically?

15. Discuss Rick's reaction to Ella's affair with Jean Paul.

16. Overall, do you consider this to be Ella's story or Isabelle's story?

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Tracy Chevalier

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BIOGRAPHY

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I was born in October 1962 and grew up in Washington, DC. After getting a BA in English Oberlin College (Ohio), I moved to London, England in 1984. I intended to stay 6 months here. My husband is English, and my son has an English accent.

[THE LADY AND THE UNICORN](#)

As a child I often said I wanted to be a writer because I loved books and wanted to be as with them. I wrote a few stories in high school, but it was only in my twenties that I start "real" stories, at night and on weekends. Sometimes I wrote a story in a couple of evenin times it took me a whole year to complete one.

[FALLING ANGELS](#)

[GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING](#)

Once I took a night class in creative writing, and a story I'd written for it was published in London-based magazine called *Fiction*. I was thrilled, even though the magazine went bar months later.

[THE VIRGIN BLUE](#)

[APPEARANCES](#)

I worked as a reference book editor for several years until 1993 when [I left my job](#) and year-long MA in creative writing at the University of East Anglia in Norwich (England). My were the English novelists Malcolm Bradbury and Rose Tremain. For the first time in my li expected to write every day, and I found I liked it. I also finally had an idea I considered enough to fill a novel. I began [The Virgin Blue](#) during that year, and continued it once tl was over, writing while also working as a freelance editor. I was lucky to find an agent re easily, and the book was published in England in 1997. It got a few small reviews, sold a copies, then sank to the bottom of the pond to live with all of the other unnoticed novels. since been republished in the UK, and published in the US and elsewhere.)

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I began [Girl with a Pearl Earring](#) in February 1998 and completed it in October 1998, worl time. Two weeks later I had my son. There's nothing like a fixed biological deadline to foc mind! I don't think I'll ever write anything so quickly again. Since then I've written two m novels: [Falling Angels](#), which is set in a cemetery in early 20th-century London, and [Th and the Unicorn](#), about a set of medieval tapestries.

I try to put the success of my previous books out of my head when I write. If I thought al much I'd be paralyzed with the fear of everyone's expectations of me. I still feel like a no' Sometimes I read what I've just written and think, Yuck. Each book is just as hard to writ previous. I might have a good writing day, but the next day I still have to face the blank : paper. It's a painful process but I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's kind of like running - terrible for those first 10 minutes but then it gets better and afterwards you feel great.

My greatest challenge is to juggle motherhood, writing, and the outside demands made o writer. The best life for my writing is a quiet, boring one, with big chunks of time availabl to work. That is no longer easy to create!



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The Virgin Blue



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Huguenot Cross

Cross worn by Huguenots. It is in the shape of a Maltese cross and is made up of a four-petal lily of France, the petals representing the four Gospels. Connecting the petals are four fleur-de-lis – a symbol of France. A dove hangs from the lower petal and represents the Holy Ghost. It was designed in 1688 and is often worn today by Huguenot descendents.

