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## GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE

**Author:** Susan Vreeland

**Publisher:** Penguin, 2000

**Website:** [www.penguinputnam.com](http://www.penguinputnam.com)

**Available in:** Paperback, 256 pages. \$11.00(ISBN 0-14-029628-X)

**Genre:** Fiction

### Summary

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.

**Recommended by:** *The New York Times Review of Books*

*"Intelligent, searching, and unusual ... Like the painting it describes so well, [the novel] has a way of lingering in the reader's mind."*

### Author Biography

**Susan Vreeland's** short fiction has appeared in journals such as *The Missouri Review*, *Confrontation*, *New England Review*, and *Alaska Quarterly Review*. Her first novel, *What Love Sees*, was made into a CBS Sunday Night Movie. She teaches English literature and art in San Diego public schools.

### Topics to Consider

- 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.
  - 4 Did the men view her differently than the women? Why do they all need, in fact adore, 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?
  - 5 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 they have died?
  - 6 Is there a piece of art that affects you in a special way? Elaborate.
  - 7 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?
  - 8 While reading this book, did you imagine your own version of the painting? If so, describe it.
  - 9 What do you think happened to the painting? Is its rightful place in a museum? 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?
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## Author Biography

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### From Susan Vreeland

I graduated from San Diego State University, and have lived in San Diego since I was twelve (oh, how lucky I am --- I am grateful every day), and in California since I was two. I have taught high school English in the San Diego Unified School System since 1969, and ceramics since 1986, retiring recently after a 30-year career. My student writing handbook, *What English Teachers Want*, [ISBN 0-88092-224-9] is used in high schools and community colleges in many states, and can be ordered from Royal Fireworks Press, (914) 726-4444; or [Barnes & Noble](#), or [Borders Books](#).

I didn't grow up longing to be a writer; in fact, the urge, strong as it is, is relatively recent. Concurrent with teaching, I began writing features for newspapers and magazines in 1980, taking up subjects in art, travel, education and skiing. I am married to a wonderful man, a software engineer who does my website. We live in San Diego, have no children, love to ski, take walks, visit museums, and travel, though we are too often embroiled in our work and are in a perennial struggle to make time for fun.

I turned to fiction to write *What Love Sees*. Published in 1988, it is the true story of Jean Treadway's unwavering determination to lead a normal life despite blindness. To this end, she leaves her sheltered, wealthy New England home and marries Forrest Holly, also blind, a struggling rancher in a remote California mountain town. The book was made into a CBS television movie starring Richard Thomas and Annabeth Gish. Though currently out of print, it can be ordered in large print from [amazon.com](#) and unabridged audio tape from Recorded Books, ISBN 0-7887-0645-4, at 1-800-638-1304.

My short fiction has appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *New England Review*, *Confrontation*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Calyx*, *Crescent Review*, *So To Speak* and other journals. I received Inkwell Magazine's Grand Prize for Fiction in 1999, and one of the stories in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* has been nominated for The Pushcart Prize.

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## Susan Vreeland

1946-

Entry Updated : 03/03/2004

**Birth Place:** Racine, WI

### Personal Information

Career

Writings

Works in Progress

Media Adaptations

Sidelights

Further Readings About the Author

**Personal Information:** Family: Born January 20, 1946, in Racine, WI; daughter of W. Alex and Esther Alberta (Jancovius) Vreeland-Wilborn; married Joseph Gray, November 26, 1988. *Ethnicity:*"Caucasian." Education: San Diego State University, B.A., 1968, M.A. (education), 1971, M.A. (English literature), 1979. Religion: Christian. Hobbies and other interests: Travel, ceramics, skiing. Addresses: Home: 6246 Caminito Araya, San Diego, CA 92122. Agent: Barbara Braun, 115 West 18th St., 5th Floor, New York, NY 10011. E-mail: susan@svreeland.com.

**Career:** San Diego Unified School District, San Diego, CA, instructor in English, 1969-2000, and ceramics, 1986-2000; author.

**Awards:** First place award in short fiction, Women's National Book Association, 1991; creative writing award, California Association of Teachers of English, 1996; first prize in essay category, *New Millennium Writings*, 1996; Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society Honorable Mention, 1998, for *Delft Chronicles*; BookSense Book of the Year finalist, American Booksellers Association, and Gold Award for best novel of the year, *Foreword*, both 1999, California Department of Education Recommended Reading List, International Dublin Literary Prize nominee, Storyteller of the Year Award, *Independent Publishers Magazine*, and Theodore Geisel Best of the Year Award, San Diego Book Awards Association, all for *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*; *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* was also listed as one of the twenty-five best novels of 1999 by *Publishers Weekly* and one of the twenty best novels of 1999 by *Christian Science Monitor*; grand prize for fiction, *Inkwell*, 1999; named woman of the year, *San Diego Writer's Monthly*, 1999-2000; Mark Twain Award for Short Fiction, *Red Rock Review*, 2000; Southern California Booksellers Association Award finalist, 2002, for *The Passion of Artemisia*.

## WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *What English Teachers Want* (writing handbook), Royal Fireworks Press, 1995.
- *Journey to Shambhala* (promotional film), released by Snow Lion Expeditions, 1995.
- *What Love Sees* (novel), PaperJacks, 1988, Thorndike (Thorndike, ME), 1996.

- *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (novel), MacMurray & Beck (Denver, CO), 1999.
- *The Passion of Artemisia*, Viking (New York, NY), 2002.
- *The Forest Lover*, Viking (New York, NY), 2004.

Work represented in anthologies, including *If I Had My Life to Live Over . . .* and *Generation to Generation*, both Papiér Maché Press; *Family: A Celebration*, Peterson's Publishing; and *Cracking the Earth*, Calyx Books. Contributor of more than two hundred-fifty articles to magazines and newspapers, *Travel and Leisure*, *Southwest Art*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Christian Science Monitor*. Contributor of essays and twenty-four short stories to journals such as *Missouri Review*, *New England Quarterly*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Confrontation*, *Dominion Review*, *Connecticut Review*, and *Manoa*.

**Works in Progress:** *Cedar Spirit*, a novel about Canadian artist Emily Carr, for Viking, 2004; *Life Studies*, a collection of art-related stories, for Viking, 2005; *The Potato Eaters*, a novel about Vincent van Gogh, for Viking, 2006.

**Media Adaptations:** Vreeland's novel *What Love Sees* was filmed for television, starring Richard Thomas and Annabeth Gish, and broadcast by CBS-TV in 1996; *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* was filmed for a Hallmark Hall of Fame television production, scheduled 2003.

#### "Sidelights"

Susan Vreeland's 1999 collection of interrelated stories, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, became a publishing sensation and netted its author a lucrative contract with a major publishing house. A teacher in the San Diego public school system since 1969, Vreeland wrote her first novel, *What Love Sees*, in the 1980s. Based on the true story of a blind New England woman who leaves her affluent, sheltered life to marry a blind rancher out West, *What Love Sees* was made into a television movie. Despite the modest success that Vreeland had with this first effort, she had a difficult time finding a publisher for her next project. A Colorado firm, MacMurray & Beck, eventually issued *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, and the overwhelmingly positive critical response helped make the book a best seller.

*Girl in Hyacinth Blue* takes its title from a fictional painting by the seventeenth-century Dutch master Jan Vermeer, and the stories build up a fictitious provenance of the work through the lives of the owners. Vreeland's tales move backward in time, beginning in the modern era with a tormented math professor who hides the work from the art world, ashamed that his father looted it as a Nazi lieutenant in the Netherlands during World War II. The next story, "A Night Different from All Other Nights," recounts the tragedy of the Jewish family whose young daughter identified with the teenage girl in the painting. "This sequence establishes the pattern for the book's structure: each chapter stands on its own, yet also builds on the knowledge the reader has already gained," wrote Katy Emck in the *New York Times Book Review*. Other owners include a French woman in nineteenth-century Holland, who regrets her marriage and abhors nearly everything about her adopted country--except the painting--"because she recognizes in her a sense of hope she herself has lost," explained Emck. A Dutch countryside flood, the impending arrival of a child, and other events in the lives of the stories' protagonists cause the painting to be sold or acquired, and the book concludes with the story of how Vermeer himself came to create the work.

Vreeland won praise for the way in which *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* presents the lives of ordinary people across a span of three centuries. The stories also elicited positive words for the common thread that

links all the characters: an appreciation for beauty and its endurance, despite hardship. Reviewers also praised the author's mastery of setting. A *Publishers Weekly* critic found that "these poised and atmospheric tales present a rich variety of characters whose voices convey distinctive personalities." The review also remarked that in chronicling the life span of a painting, "unobtrusively, Vreeland builds a picture of the Dutch character, equal parts sober work ethic and faith in a harsh religion."

"Intelligent, searching and unusual, the novel is filled with luminous moments," wrote Emck in the *New York Times Book Review*. "Like the painting it describes so well, it has a way of lingering in the reader's mind," she concluded. A critic for *Kirkus Reviews* called *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* "extraordinarily skilled historical fiction: deft, perceptive, full of learning, deeply moving." *Library Journal's* Barbara Hoffert praised, "Each vignette," Hoffert noted, "has the stillness, the polish, and the balanced perfection of a Vermeer." *Booklist* reviewer Veronica Scrol asserted, "Vreeland uses art as a vehicle for capturing special moments in the lives of ordinary people."

With the hardcover success of *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, the paperback rights were sold for eleven times the original contract agreement with MacMurray & Beck. Vreeland also signed with a major American publisher to publish her next work, *The Passion of Artemisia*. "Vreeland set a high standard with *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*," wrote Carmela Ciuraru for *People Weekly*. She continued that *The Passion of Artemisia* "is even better." The novel is based on the life of Artemisia Gentileschi, a real painter of the Italian Renaissance. At seventeen, she is raped by one of her father's colleagues, and when the matter is taken to court, Artemisia is the subject of cruel tortures in front of the jury. Now that she is known to the Roman public as "tainted," her father marries her off to Pietro Stiatessa, a promising young painter from Florence. Love grows between Artemisia and her husband, and they have a daughter together. It is only when Artemisia becomes better known as a painter than Pietro--she is admitted into the Academy of Florence before he is--that their relationship falters.

"Vreeland's novel reminds us that Artemisia was a fiercely independent, prodigiously talented woman, the first to paint traditional religious and historical heroines from an original, female perspective," wrote Susan Tekulve of *Book*. Tekulve continued, "*The Passion of Artemisia* provides an imaginative and respectful point of view to a compelling woman's story." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* noted that the narration, told in Artemisia's voice, is both "wise" and "candid," and wrote, "readers who loved the painterly descriptions of [*Girl in Hyacinth Blue*] will be spellbound in particular by the scenes in which Artemisia is shown at work." Kristine Huntley of *Booklist* called *The Passion of Artemisia* "a vivid portrait of a complex female artist who doggedly pursues her passion despite seemingly overwhelming obstacles." In her *Library Journal* review, Eleanor J. Bader called the book "fact-based fiction at its best."

In an interview with Penelope Rowlands of *Publishers Weekly*, Vreeland explained, "I'm very much interested in the process by which a historical figure becomes a fictional character. Fiction is the process by which our time grasps the significance of a life in another time period."

Vreeland once told *CA*: "I've always envied writers whose novels gushed out from their own growing up, rich in ethnicity or place or history. Countering my complaints about my ethnic blandness, the lack of a ready-made family story, one of my writer friends said, 'Go back further.' All I had was a love for art, a Dutch name, and a trip twenty years earlier when, to my surprise, I passed through a village in North Holland named Vreeland. I had nothing more than that--except a library card and uninterrupted days of solitude, two years of cancer treatment and recovery, during which I could imagine my way out of my uncertain circumstances, and imagine my way into Dutch paintings. They showed me a heritage alive with vitality and history and the endurance of beauty. They survived--and so would I."



**Getting the idea for a novel: the author of *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* on starting the thought process.** Susan Vreeland.

*The Writer* 118.11 (Nov 2005): p13. From *Student Edition*.

**Full Text:**COPYRIGHT 2005 Kalmbach Publishing Company

SO YOU HAVE the urge to write a novel, and you're willing to spend a couple of years at it. Where to begin?

Much commercial fiction begins in the writer's mind as a story idea or plot, and then characters are invented and shaped--or rather misshaped and stretched--to fit the preconceived story. Not a good approach.

Instead, consider starting with a character. He could be someone you've observed, or someone who emerges from a particular time and place. Mull over that skeletal personality until he develops flesh; i.e., characteristics, attitudes, issues and, most important, says Robert Olen Butler, intense yearning. With this approach, you're more likely to produce a more literary novel.

Henry James' advice to beginning writers is sound: "Try to be a person upon whom nothing is lost." Here's an example. A writer friend attended a dinner party during which a woman began choking violently, while her husband went right on telling a story without paying any attention to her. My friend got a whole novel out of that glimpse by posing questions about it. What sort of marriage was it? Why was the man so intent on his story? That's the "flesh" that you build up, like a sculptor starting with a metal armature and adding clay.

An artifact might suggest a skeletal character. A baseball glove, for example, may have suggested Holden Caulfield's character to J.D. Salinger. To Butler, messages on antique postcards suggested the yearnings, and thus the stories, in his collection *Had a Good Time*. In *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, I traced an imagined Vermeer painting through history, building up the stories of people who encountered it by giving them yearnings and inner conflicts.

Many new writers begin with autobiographical material. Beware. Exact truth rarely makes good fiction. An autobiographically based novel still must have fiction's basic elements: believable, sympathetic and complex characters; intense yearning; obstacles to its fulfillment (i.e., conflict); a concrete setting in time and place; a narrative arc (in simple terms: an inciting event, conflict and resolution). True lives rarely provide this.

If you're intent on writing from your own life, you can escape the tyranny of fact by adding to the self-based character one important characteristic or attitude you don't have, and taking away one characteristic or attitude you do have. You might use a different time period, too. My story "Crayon, 1955" began with two actual but discrete events from my

life, but I made them happen simultaneously, which created an entirely new dynamic requiring exploration and invention beyond mere memory.

Search deeply for those issues in which your truest self resides. Don't hoard them. Shoot the whole wad.

Now, is your emerging concept a novel or a short story? If the concept can be presented, developed and resolved in one moment, it's a story. If there's only one conflict, or if only a few characters are needed, it's most likely a story. Conversely, if the main character and her accompanying yearning and issues have sufficient complexity that new aspects of them will require length to be revealed in all their multiple dimensions, it's probably a novel.

Don't borrow an easy plot or stock character from movies or television. Originality is vital. Ask yourself: Ten years from now, will you still feel good about having written this? Is it an expression of your deepest self?

## Resources

### BOOKS

For more on yearning and on cultivating a state of unconscious mulling, see Robert Olen Butler's *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction* (edited by Janet Burroway).

The definitive text on fiction writing is Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*.

For mining your own life, see John Dufresne's candid *The Lie that Tells a Truth: A Guide to Writing Fiction*.

Anne Bernays and Pamela Painter offer a wealth of ideas and approaches on developing skeletal characters in *What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers*.

Susan Vreeland's books include the award-winning art-related novels *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* and *The Passion of Artemisia* and the story collection *Life Studies*.

**Source Citation:** Vreeland, Susan. "Getting the idea for a novel: the author of *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* on starting the thought process." *The Writer* 118.11 (Nov 2005): 13. *Student Edition*. Thomson Gale. Farmington Community Library. 30 May. 2006  
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**Thomson Gale Document Number:**A137016076

**Re-creating Vermeer.**

*American Artist* 67.727 (Feb 2003): p62(2). From *Student Edition*.

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For its February 2 Hallmark Hall of Fame presentation of *Brush With Fate*, a television movie based on Susan Vreeland's novel *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (Penguin Putnam, New York, New York), Hallmark commissioned Jonathan Janson, an American artist who emulates Vermeer's style, to create the painting that serves as the title work. Like the book, the movie traces the provenance of an unsigned fictional painting that is presumed to be by Vermeer, so Janson was in the unusual position of copying the Dutch master while creating an original work.

[GRAPHIC OMITTED]

"For me," the artist says, "the question was how to make an original. It had to be something with the spirit of Vermeer as far as possible and not simply a copy based on imitation." Janson felt the light should be brilliant but strongly contrasted, as in Vermeer's *Servant Pouring Milk*, which is in the collection of the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam. "I tried to capture the spirit of Vermeer's works, immersing myself as much as possible into the light and atmosphere of his interiors," he continues. "I consider the painting a re-creation, as far as it is possible, of a Vermeer, rather than an imitation or a copy. I tried to think and react as Vermeer may have in front of such a composition and to avoid my personal comments."

[GRAPHIC OMITTED]

Janson's responses were considerably accelerated, however. Whereas Vermeer worked quite slowly, perhaps completing just one or two paintings a year, Janson was allowed six weeks, although ultimately he finished in eight. So he could work from life and achieve the maximum degree of authenticity, the production team constructed a replica of a room similar to those in Vermeer's paintings--including furnishings of the period, such as an old map of Europe, a Turkish carpet, chairs, files, and various other props, some made expressly for the painting's "set"--and hired an actress who posed in costume with the make-up and hairstyle of Vermeer's young women. "It was extremely important to keep the painting within the bounds of Vermeer's use of iconography and composition and to suggest the most Vermeer-like alternatives of the various elements that had to be portrayed in the painting," Janson remarks.

Starting with a detailed drawing on a warm, toned ground, Janson sketched lightly in a monochrome umber tone to establish the lights and darks. Then, beginning with the window on the left-hand side, which represented the maximum value of brightness and served as his guide for the chiaroscuro and tonal values of the rest of the painting, he worked directly with the final colors, employing many of the pigments Vermeer used,

based on the various laboratory analyses of his paintings. "I attempted to create a work that would look like a Vermeer would have when it left his easel, not compensating for age," Janson states. Since the plot progresses over the course of four centuries (or, more accurately, regresses, as the story is told from the present back in time), the painting was aged artificially in various stages with respect to when it appears in the film.

Janson has studied Vermeer since the early 1970s. He was a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, and took a trip to Boston, where he saw *The Concert* (formerly in the collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, from which it was stolen in 1990). "Vermeer has had a important influence on both my life's interest and work," he says. "I have tried to analyze and comprehend the underlying structure and painting technique of Vermeer's work and adapt those that are particularly modern but at the same time reminiscent of Vermeer's spirit and compositions." He has produced a number of Web sites dedicated to the master's life, work, and painting technique: *The Essential Vermeer* at [essentialvermeer.20m.com/](http://essentialvermeer.20m.com/); *Glazing in the Art of Johannes Vermeer* at [glazing.fws1.com/index.htm](http://glazing.fws1.com/index.htm); *How to Paint a Vermeer* at [howtopaintavermeer.20m.com/index.htm](http://howtopaintavermeer.20m.com/index.htm); and *A Hidden Vermeer* at [pages.fws1.com/woman\\_with\\_a\\_pearl\\_necklace.htm](http://pages.fws1.com/woman_with_a_pearl_necklace.htm). The sites, in fact, led Hallmark to Janson. "Hallmark was extremely cooperative throughout the realization of the project and attempted to assist me in every possible way," he comments. "They were always open to my thoughts and ideas concerning both the painting and the historical background."

The film, which was shot on location in the Netherlands, stars Glenn Close, Ellen Burstyn, Thomas Gibson (of the television show *Dharma & Greg*), and Kelly MacDonald (*Gosford Park* and *Trainspotting*), among others. It airs on CBS stations.

**Source Citation:** "Re-creating Vermeer." *American Artist* 67.727 (Feb 2003): 62(2). *Student Edition*. Thomson Gale. Farmington Community Library. 30 May. 2006  
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**Completing the Picture with Art. (PW Interview).(author Susan Vreeland)  
(Interview).** Penelope Rowlands.  
*Publishers Weekly* 249.2 (Jan 14, 2002): p35(1). From *Student Edition*.

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It's not every novel that's conceived in high school--least of all a tale of the High Renaissance, full of art and politics--but such was the case of *The Passion of Artemisia*, the new novel by Susan Vreeland that was just published by Viking. One day in 1998, as the author passed through the art history classroom of the California school where she worked as an English teacher, a colleague called out to her, saying: "I know who your next novel will be about--Artemisia Gentileschi."

Artemisia who? was Vreeland's first thought, but her fellow teacher quickly filled in the blanks. "She just told me a few facts," Vreeland says, "that Artemisia's father was a painter, that she had been raped and that during her trial she was tortured with finger cords in an attempt to cripple her fingers and destroy her ability to paint."

Needless to say, Vreeland was hooked. And, as she did to such effect in her best-selling earlier work, *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, which traced the ownership of a lost Vermeer painting from its creation in 17th-century Holland to the present, she wasted little time in turning this art-centered tale into words.

"Fiction fills in where history leaves off," the author tells PW from her orderly home office, which overlooks palm trees and a sun- and flower-filled patio. Home is a San Diego condominium, just a few miles from the ocean, which she shares with her husband, Joseph "Kip" Gray, a software engineer and systems analyst. "I'm very much interested in the process by which a historical figure becomes a fictional character. Fiction is the process by which our time grasps the significance of a life in another time period."

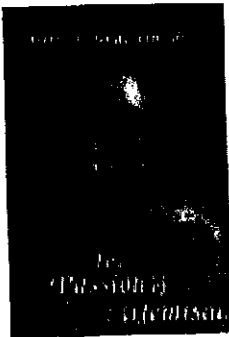


Vreeland is a slender, animated woman who must be in her 60s, but looks far younger than her age. She's a natural teacher who's known for lively bookstore appearances in which she sets out to both educate and entertain--a real classroom act. She came to fiction via freelance journalism, which she began 20 years ago, an adjunct to her teaching career; later, she honed her fiction writing at conferences and at a local writers' workshop, which she still attends.

Her passion for writing about artists came about unexpectedly, by way of cancer. Diagnosed in the mid-'90s with lymphoma, and very, very ill, she spent much of her hospital time perusing art books because, as she says, "they gave me peace and joy and meditation." That experience led her, after her remission in 1997, to writing art-related stories, including a novella about Artemisia. "It seems like sourbread dough, the cultivator for something," Vreeland says of this as-yet-unpublished collection. "There were a couple of stories there that could very well blossom into novels."

Two stories that did flower were on Vermeer, an artist Vreeland loves for the tranquil, unhurried nature of his work. In 1998, she decided to expand these pieces into a whole book of stories on Vermeer. After one of her earlier pieces on him was accepted for publication by the Missouri Review, that publication's fiction editor, Greg Michaelson, who held the same title at the small Colorado publishing house of McMurray & Beck, asked to see the others.

The result was *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, which Vreeland's agent, Barbara Braun, sold to McMurray & Beck as a novel in 1998. Advance reviews were good, and, within weeks of the book's 1999 publication, the paperback rights were auctioned to Viking for \$50,000-10 times the purchase price for the hardcover edition. "I felt catapulted into a new life," the author says, recalling that early sale. And so was her book, which to date has sold 60,000 copies in hardback, 300,000 in paper.



When Viking editor Jane VanMehren asked her new author what else she was working on, Vreeland showed her an early version of *The Passion of Artemisia*, as well as her as-yet-untitled story collection. The result was a two-hook deal, with the publisher buying both works for \$250,000. The initial print run for *Artemisia* is 90,000. Foreign rights have been sold in several countries and it's Book Sense's number one pick for January and February.

The author researched her subject by reading histories, studying the records of the trial of Artemisia's assailant (who happened to be her artist father's collaborator) and, finally, by walking the streets of Florence and Rome. "I just walked where she walked, smelled the smells of the river, noticed the quality of light." Vreeland is the first to admit that the Renaissance itself, and not just this one painter's life, was a revelation. "I didn't know much about Italian art beyond Raphael and Micheclangelo."

*Artemisia's* story has attracted others, too, including the French writer Alexandra Lapierre, whose hook *Artemisia* was marketed as a biography in France, but is being sold as a novel in the United States. "When I saw that book at BEA my heart fell,"

Vreeland admits. But soon her natural optimism returned. She's heartened by the fact that sales of *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue* actually seemed to increase after another book on Vermeer--Tracy Chevalier's *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*--came onto the market. "The books had a positive effect on each other," Vreeland reports, adding that she and Chevalier have since become friends. In the case of *Artemisia*, the two books are substantially different, the author adds. "Mine is much more a work of the imagination," she says. "Mine is my Artemisia..."

Rowlands is the author of *Weekend Houses* (Chronicle), as well as books on the European designers Jean Prouve and Eileen Gray, due out from Chronicle in March 2002.

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Artful research

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Paintings, diaries and old travel books are valuable resources for fiction writers in search of authentic details

#### IMAGE PHOTOGRAPH

"Is it possible for an ordinary person to climb over the area railings of #7 Eccles Street, either from the path or the steps, lower himself down from the lowest part of the railings till his feet are within two feet or three of the ground and drop unhurt? I saw it done myself but by a man of rather athletic build. I require this information in detail in order to determine the wording of a paragraph."

James Joyce wrote this to his aunt when he was away from Dublin. Can't you just imagine her muttering, "That boy! What will he think of next?" as she gets her umbrella to go out in the rain and take the trolley to Eccles Street?

Excessive? Unnecessary? Stalling from the act of writing? Joyce's letter is instructive and revealing.

Similarly, I must admit that I sent my French translator on a mission to find out if the carvings of heads on the facade of the Ministere de la Defense on Boulevard Saint-Germain in Paris are repeats of the same face or different faces. Among other things, she told me I had the wrong street! While some writers may be more cavalier, claiming that it's fiction, after all, I hold with the meticulous Joyce, not wholly out of allegiance to a recognized master, but for the sake of the richness of story that results. For me, research gives direction, depth and authority to the writing; it doesn't just decorate a preconceived story with timely trivia.

Early research tends to be scattered, while one searches for the story, but later, usually during or after a first draft when one discovers in the work some needed information, it becomes pin-point precise. At either time, an array of interesting material, some of it crucial, some merely usable, will emerge-and sometimes leap off the page. The results can be exciting. A single unexpected line can prompt a whole story. For example, the line in Jacob Presser's grim history, *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry*, indicating that in 1941 Jews were not allowed to keep pigeons, provided the genesis of my story "A Night Different From All Other Nights."

That story is one of eight linked narratives comprising my composite novel, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, which traces an alleged Vermeer painting in reverse chronology through the centuries, showing how defining moments in people's lives are lived under its influence. Besides the present, six time periods and numerous locales in the Netherlands are evoked: 1942 in Amsterdam; 1896 in Vreeland (yes, a real

village located between Amsterdam and Utrecht); 1798 in The Hague during French rule; 1717 in Oling, Delfzijl, Westerbork and Groningen (which I learned had been a university town since 1614, prompting my focal character to be a student); 1665 in Delft; and 1685 in Amsterdam. Naive in understanding what such a project entailed, I found that by the end I had consulted 76 books.

I'd been to the Netherlands only once, 25 years ago for three days, and I had never seen a Vermeer painting face to face. Blithely, I went ahead. I read books on Vermeer, Dutch art and social and cultural history, the Holocaust as experienced in the Netherlands, the changing geography of the Netherlands, Erasmus' adages, the history of costume, Passover and the practice of Jewish customs, Amsterdam's diamond trade, Dutch superstitions and treatment of witches, the French occupation, and the engineering of windmills and dikes.

Twenty printout pages from the Internet on the engineering of windmills (they vary regionally), on gears, wallowers, Archimedean screws and drive shafts yielded one paragraph establishing the authority of the windmill engineer. The research also suggested a metaphor appropriate for the character who says, "I had fancied love a casual adjunct and not the central turning shaft making all parts move. I had not stood astonished at the power of its turning." I would not have arrived at his critical self-assessment and the epiphany of the story without meandering through gears and drive shafts.

Where to find factual details

Here are 10 research sources and approaches, beginning with the most obvious and ending with the ultimate-travel-that I used for either *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* or my latest novel, *The Passion of Artemisia*, which takes place in 17th-century Italy.

Social conditions, history and politics. A smattering of titles might serve to show how I approached possible narratives from different angles: *Daily Life in Rembrandt's Holland* by Paul Zumthor and Simon Watson Taylor; *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* by Simon Schama; *Persecution, Extermination, Literature* by Sem Dresden and Henry G. Schogt; *Vermeer and His Milieu-A Web of Social History* by John Michael Montias. Some I used as browser books; others for specific information. Their bibliographies proved to be good sources for characters' names.

For fiction of more recent times, newspaper archives in university or large city libraries provide details, a tone of immediacy, and accounts of personal involvement in events, movements and trends that history books seldom record. Advertisements in newspapers reveal values-the larger cultural values as well as monetary values-by comparison of product prices, property values and wages. Historical societies archive material, often catalogued in files about local events and individuals whose lives intersected with history. You also will find useful information in diaries, recorded oral histories, period maps and photographs.

Biography, autobiography, personal narrative and oral history. The mere memory of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* suggested that I create a young character the antithesis of Anne in terms of self-expression, yet suffer-ing similar revelations. *Memorbook: History of Dutch Jewry* gave me personal accounts, photos and reproductions of public notices such as an auction of art held to support German Jewish refugees, which I developed into a scene.

A search for personal narratives might start at Columbia University's library Web site, [www.Columbia.edu](http://www.Columbia.edu),

edu/cu/lweb. Click on "Electronic Resources/Databases," then "Archival Resources" to locate manuscript, archives and oral history collections-not only at Columbia but throughout the United States and abroad. Similar finding aids are available at the Library of Congress site, [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov), under "American Memory."

Geography books. These tomes provide information about weather, topography, crops, industry, indigenous plants, birds and other animals. In my case, *The Making of the Dutch Landscape* and *Brave Little Holland* and *What She Taught Us* were the sources of story ideas as well as the details to make them work. I also consulted field guides to birds and plants, and a history of Dutch agriculture.

Maps. Besides those available in travel bookstores, universities often have historical map collections. This was essential for *Girl* because I had to know if certain villages and canals existed at the time of each of the stories. What a horrible mistake that would have been if I had set a story in a village that was still under the sea when the story took place. From works by authors from Guy de Maupassant to Hemingway, place names give authenticity, which helps to put the reader right there. The Library of Congress has a wealth of zoom-in maps at [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov). Click "American Memory: American History in Words, Sounds and Pictures," then click "Collection Finder" and go to "Maps."

Travel books. Look for the descriptive sort, the older the better. They provide visual and cultural detail. Early English narratives of the Grand Tour, such as Henry James' *Italian Hours* and James Boswell in *Holland*, are apt to convey attitudes toward places and people that might suggest how your characters think. For a series of stories on artists, I found the Michelin guide to Paris enormously helpful, giving me street names, maps and line drawings of significant buildings, together with historical data on how the buildings and districts changed. This helped me avoid the mistake of assuming that what is present now was present then. Don't neglect contemporary narratives of place, such as *Under the Tuscan Sun* by Frances Mayes, to get a flavor of the food and landscapes.

Other novels written at the time, about the time or set in the same place. Fiction can reveal helpful details, such as attitudes, concerns, expressions, syntax and diction. Dava Sobel's *Galileo's Daughter* illustrated the prose style of letter-writing in 17th-century Italy. The stories of *Colette* suggested the voice for *Claudine* in the chapter "Hyacinth Blues," which takes place during the French rule. A *Sampling of Dutch Literature* gave me the suggestion to play my characters against Holland's greatest enemy-storm floods-and gave me characteristics of Dutch people. Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters on Cezanne* provided insights into the artistic temperament.

Artwork. Paintings that were done in the same time and place as one's fiction are excellent sources of information about costume, hairstyles, jewelry, household furnishings, landscape, available foods, flowers typical of the region, even the quality of light in a region, Vermeer's "trademark."

Photography books and the online photo archives of the Library of Congress provide similar visual references. Go to [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov), click on "American Memory: American History in Words, Sounds and Pictures," then go to "Collection Finder."

Children's and juvenile fiction and nonfiction. These books often offer valuable information that is sufficient in some cases, and have the advantages of providing evocative illustrations and simplifying complicated political histories. Books for young readers tend to give personalities to historical persons. One book about a medieval illuminator of manuscripts explained in a clear, nonacademic way, the grinding of pigments for the making of paint, which I used in both books.

Interviews. People are intrigued by novelists and are usually delighted to be consulted. For *Girl*, I consulted a pigeon breeder to learn why the owning of pigeons was prohibited to Jews under the German occupation, and how homing pigeons "worked." I called the Dutch embassy to find out about coinage in the 17th century. A teacher of Jewish culture explained the traditions of Passover and gave me a Haggadah. Open-ended questions can be surprisingly helpful. I asked a friend who had been a child in London during the blitzkrieg what she remembered, and she mentioned that she and her friends played parachutes by jumping off porches with open umbrellas whenever they heard planes above—a detail that I transferred to Amsterdam in *Girl*.

For *Artemisia*, I called an aquarium to learn the color of the edible sea urchins in the Bay of Genoa. Two characters of that novel are nuns at the convent of Santa Trinita above the Spanish Steps in Rome (though the steps weren't there when *Artemisia* climbed the Pincian Hill, a fact I luckily learned while browsing in a travel book). To find out how a nun might respond in a particular situation, I asked a friend who knew a former nun who called another nun who e-mailed the present mother superior of the Order of the Sacred Heart at Santa Trinita, who invited me to stay at that very convent when I came to Rome!

Travel. While travel is not always practical (I wrote *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* entirely while undergoing cancer treatment and could not travel), it will yield unexpected insights. On just a two-week trip to Italy, I learned much that corrected mistakes in an early draft of *The Passion of Artemisia*, and it gave me visual material, tastes, sounds, distances, relative sizes and positions of things. There's nothing like walking where your character walked to discover uneven pavements, mosquitoes, river stench, the smell of plaster frescoes and old wood in a convent. For *Artemisia*, I climbed the 400 steps of Giotto's bell tower in Florence not only to see what my characters would have seen (which I had imagined incorrectly), but to be able to describe the steps.

If you are fortunate enough to travel for research, take a lightweight audio recorder for snippets of reaction and description, a small, simple camera and an easy-to-carry notebook. Record your impressions. Ask waiters what herbs and spices are in the entrees, bus drivers what crops are growing alongside the road. You might not get what you asked for, but you might get something else equally usable.

Don't go on such a trip too early in the writing. Have a draft first. Before leaving, prepare prioritized lists of what you'll need to find out. Go online to find the hours and locations of museums, libraries and cemeteries, so you won't be in the right place on the wrong day. Remember, too, that it might take longer to do things in foreign countries than it does at home.

Now it's time to write

So when does one stop researching and start writing? You write when the story comes to life and assumes some structure, when you can't help but start, not when you know everything you'll need to know. That's impossible to anticipate before you get into the heart of the writing. You might need to push yourself away from the safer act of research and leap into a first draft.

Some commonsense advice: Keep phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Use your bookmark function online to go back easily to a site. Take notes just as you did for high school term papers, giving title, author, call number, pages consulted for each reference. You never know if you'll need to go back.

During the writing of *Girl*, I checked out the National Gallery catalog of the 1995-'96 Vermeer exhibit nine times. I've had to spend countless hours letting my fingers do the re-walking when a quick page number noted would have saved me frustration. When your story is in the formative stages, take down more than you think you'll need. Keep a list of possible names for characters.

Don't get bogged down with fears of historical inaccuracy when writing a first draft. In one of the flood stories in *Girl*, the student needs to write a note. He's in a rowboat. He can't dip a pen in an inkwell. Did they have pencils in 1717? Look it up later. Keep writing. Keep the momentum going. If you don't know what they ate, leave it blank and get down the more important elements of the scene.

One caveat: Even if you put into your manuscript some fact delectable to you, recalling your delight in discovering it, if the story does not justify it, take it out. Type it up. Pin it on your wall. Use it elsewhere, but don't include it. The book is about characters, not about research.

#### SIDEBAR

A wish list for historical-fiction writers

Crowning every historical-fiction writer's wish list is the mother of all dictionaries, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which indicates when individual words came into use, and how and when their meanings changed. There are three versions that won't break the bank: *The New Shorter OED*, two volumes; *The Compact OED*, small print with magnifying glass; and *The Oxford English Dictionary CD-ROM*.

Here are some other reference books on my shelves that I turn to often:

*Timetables of History: A Horizontal Linkage of People and Events* by Bernard Grun is an indexed grid, with years beginning at 5000 B.C. down the left column, and categories across the top: history and politics; literature and theater; religion and philosophy; visual arts; music; science and technology; daily life. If I'm looking for whether I can have a character turn on a water faucet in a Paris flat in 1883, (indexed under "plumbing"), or more general, timely references that I could have my character mention, this is the first book I turn to.

*Timelines: Day by Day and Trend by Trend from the Dawn of the Atomic Age to the Close of the Gulf War* by Paul Dickson offers news items by date as well as innovations, hot topics, additions to the national lexicon and words or phrases typical of the time, such as beatnik, hot tubs, gridlock, test-tube babies or "may the force be with you."

*English Through the Ages* by William Brohaugh gives approximate dates of the first recorded use of words, by category.

*Roget's International Thesaurus* with an index (not a thesaurus in dictionary form) has lists of items of apparel, fabrics, furniture, hairstyles, tools and machinery, vehicles and carriages, vessels, musical instruments, animals, husbandry breeds, plants, stones, minerals, woods, colors, types of glass, manners of cooking, and foods, which can be checked against *English Through the Ages* and *Timetables of History*.

Other valuable resources are: *Everyday Life in the 1800s* by Marc McCutcheon, *The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life in Renaissance England* by Kathy Lynn Emerson, and *The Writer's Guide to Everyday Life in the Middle Ages* by Sherrilyn Kenyon.

Other resources include:

Histories of art by time period and country

Histories of music and costume

Histories of transportation, manufacturing, household devices

Books of names of things, including tools and architecture

Atlases with street maps of cities

Foreign-language dictionaries

Time-sequence histories

Field guides to birds, flowers and trees

-Susan Vreeland

SIDEBAR

I climbed the 400 steps of Giotto's bell tower in Florence not only to see what my characters would have seen, but to be able to describe the steps.

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**Penguin Putnam**

## Girl in Hyacinth Blue by Susan Vreeland

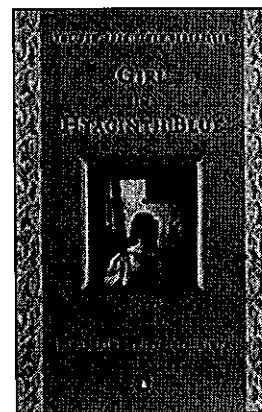
List Price: \$11.00

Pages: 242

Format: Paperback

ISBN: 014029628X

Publisher: Penguin USA



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

### About this Book

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. 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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### Discussion Questions

1. What does Girl in Hyacinth Blue suggest about the value (personal and monetary) and function/purpose of art?
2. How does art serve us? Why do we need it?

3. Do you feel the author is focusing more on the role of art or the nature of life?
4. This painting seems to have a different effect on each of the owners. Why?
5. How does the painting function for each character? Who loves it the most?
6. Why would the author structure the novel in reverse chronology? What are the advantages/disadvantages of telling the story this way?
7. Discuss the range and significance of the last line.
8. In the end, does it matter whether or not the painting is a Vermeer? To whom does it matter and to whom is it irrelevant, and what does this say about their characters?
9. What actually happened to the painting? Does it matter that the final outcome is not shown on scene?
10. What does the book have to say about the joys and difficulties of being an artist?
11. How does the character of women and girls change through the centuries?
12. In what way does the girl in the painting reflect Hannah and Magdalena's natures?
13. In what way are Hannah and Magdalena similar? In what way are Hannah and Anne Frank similar--and different?
14. Where does the novel touch on the tragic? the triumphant?
15. Is it a novel?

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## REVIEWS

### NEW YORK TIMES

#### GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE

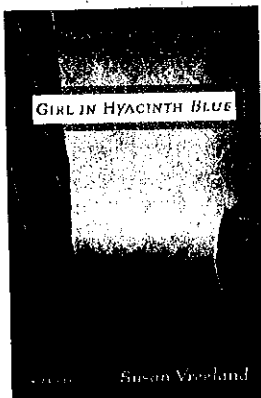
Susan Vreeland's second novel, "Girl in Hyacinth Blue," may be a book about a painting, but it is never content with surfaces. Tracing the influence of one extraordinary picture on a succession of human lives, it touches gently yet thoughtfully on such weighty topics as the immortality of a great artwork and the ways in which art can be used for various ends. In the course of her explorations, Vreeland covers a lot of time and space: "Girl in Hyacinth Blue" begins in present-day America and ends in the 17th century Netherlands, scrolling backward as each chapter accounts for the painting's role in the life of one of its owners.

Among other things, Vreeland has given us an art detective story, since the early chapters suggest that this marvelous painting--a portrait of a young girl whose face seems to be filled with dreams and longings--may be a lost Vermeer. When we first encounter it, the picture is hidden from view, its possession the dark secret of a lonely mathematician whose father looted it from a Dutch Jewish family that he then sent to die in a concentration camp. Horrified by his father's crimes, he worships the painting with obsessional fervor, fearing that if anyone sees it, the secret of its provenance will come to light. But, as is the way with such things, he also feels compelled to show off his trophy.

The chapter that displays the mathematician's solitary, guilt-filled pleasure is followed by another that provides a lively view of the close-knit Jewish family from whom the painting was stolen--and particularly of the young daughter who identifies with its subject, a girl just about her own age. This sequence establishes the pattern for the book's structure: each chapter stands on its own, a marvel of economy, yet also builds on the knowledge the reader has already gained.

Vreeland is especially good at conveying the tensions that arise among her characters but go largely unspoken. She is also adept at capturing the differing sensibilities of various historical periods, working unobtrusively and successfully avoiding a contrived "period" feel. In the process, she provides her own nicely sketched gallery of portraits: a frivolous Frenchwoman marooned in a loveless marriage in the 19th-century Netherlands; an 18th-century farmer's wife hungering for beauty in the midst of the flat Dutch countryside; and an Enlightenment scientist who embarks on an affair with a superstitious serving girl.

In all these episodes, the painting is pivotal, both in a practical and a spiritual sense. The aristocratic Frenchwoman hates all things Dutch except the girl in the painting because she recognizes in her a sense of hope that she herself has lost. The farmer's wife loves the same girl because she symbolizes a serene loveliness that is unattainable for people who labor in the fields. In the end, each woman is forced to sell the painting so that each, in her own very different way, can survive. But for each of them, the possession of "Girl in Hyacinth Blue" leads to profound changes.



This conflict of the spiritual and the practical comes to dominate the final chapters of the novel in which the exigencies of the painter's life are movingly brought to the fore. Like many of its predecessors, the penultimate chapter is filled with a sense of tenderness, of gratitude for the gift of life--a mood that doesn't cloy because it is accompanied by a clear evocation of the daily stresses of loving and living. But the crowning chapter is the final one, which introduces the girl in the picture and provides a glimpse of what is actually going on behind those dreamy eyes.

Throughout "Girl in Hyacinth Blue," Vreeland strikes a pleasant balance between the timeless world of the painting as a work of art and the finite worlds of its possessors and admirers--not to mention the world of its subject and its creator. Intelligent, searching and unusual, the novel is filled with luminous moments; like the painting it describes so well, it has a way of lingering in the reader's mind.

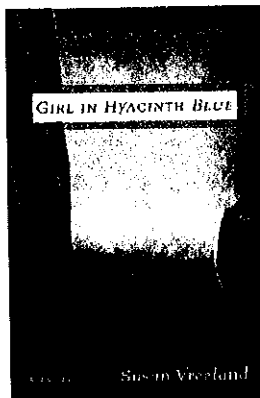
--Katy Emck December 19, 1999



## PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

### \* GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE

The eight interlinked stories in this impressive debut collection revolve around a single painting by Vermeer; as one might expect, they contain insightful observations about the worth and the truth of art. Vreeland's skill goes deeper still; these poised and atmospheric tales present a rich variety of characters whose voices convey distinctive personalities, and each offers glimpses of Holland during different historical eras. The chronology is reversed: the first story occurs in the present day, and succeeding narratives progress back in time to the 17th century. Set in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation, the moving "A Night Different From All Other Nights" portrays the Jewish family from whom the painting will be stolen after they have been sent to a concentration camp, and re-poses the question (also asked in the first story) of how killers can revere beauty. Two narratives that treat the same event--the birth of a baby and a turning point in a marriage--take place in neighboring hamlets near Groningen during the St. Nicholas flood of 1717. Each fills in details the other does not have, and each provides indelible images of brutally hard life in a waterlogged land. In the penultimate "Still Life," set in 17th century Delft, a poverty-hounded Vermeer begins the portrait of his daughter Magdalena; "Magdalena Looking" which closes the book, reflects the evanescence of the moments that paintings capture. Unobtrusively, Vreeland builds a picture of the Dutch character, equal parts sober work ethic and faith in a harsh religion. Against these national characteristics she juxtaposes the universal human capacity for love--romantic, familial, parental--and a kind of obsessive love, the quest for beauty that distinguishes otherwise ordinary lives. The historical details that ground each narrative in time and place are obliquely revealed. In the same way, the Vermeer masterpiece achieves fuller dimension in each tale as small details of color, brushstroke, lighting, background, serve to create the picture in the reader's eye. Only the opening story disappoints. It seems staged rather than psychologically compelling. The remaining entries are elegantly executed, with characters who have the solidity, and the elusive mystery, of Vermeer's subjects. There is suspense, as well; one wants to read these tales at one sitting, to discover how the Vermeer influenced everyone who possessed it. Vreeland paints her canvas with the sure strokes of a talented artist. July 12, 1999



## KIRKUS REVIEWS

### \* GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE

Vreeland's wonderful second outing (*What Love Sees*, 1996, not seen) is a novel made of stories, each delving farther into the provenance of a Vermeer painting, and each capturing a moment of life, much as the great painter did himself.

The only wobble in this elegant little book is at the start, where a stiffness in character may be intended but jars even so: a high-school math teacher confides to a colleague that he owns (and adores) a painting--of a girl sewing at a window--that he knows is a Vermeer. All the evidence--of technique, color, subject--is there, yet the painting lacks documentation to validate its authenticity: nor will the math teacher, one Cornelius Engelbrecht, tell just how it became his. The reader is more privileged, though, and learns quickly enough that Engelbrecht's Nazi father stole it in 1940 from a doomed Jewish family in Amsterdam. Such reader-privilege becomes an overwhelming emotional test when Vreeland goes back to visit that family, in that year, just before the theft ("*A Night Different From All Other Nights*"). Farther back still, a happily married Dutch couple owns the painting--and when the husband admits that the girl in it reminds him of an earlier lover, the marriage is briefly shaken ("*Adagia*"). Set when Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony is "new," "*Hyacinth Blues*" offers a biting bit of social satire--and lets the reader discover just how the painting's papers did in fact get lost. Still deeper back goes Vreeland, taking up with masterful insight, feeling, and control the life of a small Dutch farm family caught in the great flood of 1717; of a young engineer who loves, loses (pathetically), and hands on the painting; of Vermeer himself as he paints the picture, struggling against debt, father of 11; and, in a wondrous, bittersweet epiphany, of the daughter herself whom Vermeer chose as his model.

Extraordinarily skilled historical fiction: deft, perceptive, full of learning, deeply moving.

## BOOKLIST

### \* GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE

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

## FOREWORD

### GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE

"There was something in this girl he could never grasp, an inner life inscrutable to him. He was in awe of the child's flights of fancy, her insatiable passion always to be running off somewhere. To still it for a moment, long enough to paint, for eternity, ah." These were the thoughts of Vermeer, a Dutch painter suddenly captivated by the idea of using his young daughter, Magdalena, as a model. He noticed "her eyes, pale cerulean...[how the] open window reflected her face, and in one pane, the image of her cheek shone luminous as though blended with the dust of crushed pearls."

The fictional portrait, the "Girl in Hyacinth Blue," becomes the pearl that is not crushed as it is sold, stolen or tenderly given by one owner to the next. Though described as a novel, Vreeland's book is more a collection of short stories. Rather ordinary people own the work beginning in the seventeenth century when it was given by Vermeer's family to a baker to pay off bills. "Love Enough" relates that its present owner, an American professor, has hidden the painting because it reminds him of the terrible truth about his father's past.

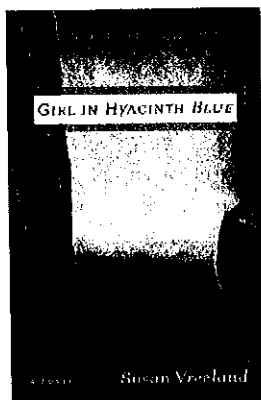
The portrait has perhaps the most meaning for Vermeer's daughter, who appears in the final poignant story, "Magdalena Looking." In 1696, as a woman with bad teeth, she sees the painting at an auction and yearns to own it again. Magdalena recalls sitting for the portrait and remembers how she wondered then what she meant to her father. "Slowly, she came to understand that he looked at her with the same interest that he gave to the glass of milk." Yet, the reader knows from "Still Life" that for Vermeer, the glass of milk in the scene made "the whole corner sacred with the tenderness of just living," and at the moment of his inspiration, Magdalena stood before him "as if offered by God."

Vermeer enhanced his exquisite paintings with mundane objects; Vreeland places the girl's portrait in the possession of ordinary people leading ordinary lives.

Vreeland is an accomplished author whose first novel, *What Love Sees*, was broadcast in 1996 as a CBS Sunday night movie special. She teaches English literature, creative writing and art in the San Diego public schools.

*Girl in Hyacinth Blue* should appeal to readers who enjoy nontraditional love stories.

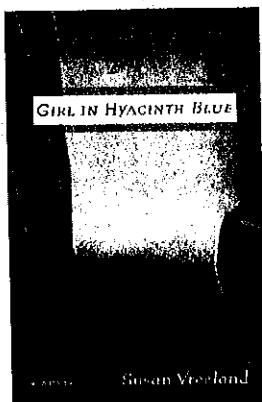
--Linda Salisbury



## TAMPA TRIBUNE

### GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE

You may one day see a painting, framed in thin brass and hanging isolate on a museum's white wall, that stirs your emotions unlike anything you have seen before. The blended hues, explicit detail and engaging subject might interact hypnotically upon the canvas and give you reason for pause. Then, because



the work is overwhelming, you may close your eyes and ignore the small placard with historical details, choosing instead to imagine the artist, the studio, the very day this masterpiece was created.

In her magical second novel, Susan Vreeland guides us back through Dutch centuries to the moment of provenance of a painting that, in the present day, hangs in the study of a reclusive math professor. This still life of a young girl peering through a window serves as the emotional centerpiece in this finely woven series of tales, presented in reverse chronology. Each story in this novel is intimately related through an admiration for the innocence and beauty of the girl in the painting; and a varied expression of love by a melange of intriguing, real characters is a running theme.

"I have always had a fascination with old, old things," Vreeland says, tracing back the inspiration for "Girl in Hyacinth Blue." I have always been drawn to antiques, my first thought when I see medieval writings or ancient pottery being, 'One day, there was a man who fashioned that.' The life of the maker brief, the creation of his heart and hands remaining for centuries."

At the outside, readers are introduced to a professor struggling with a moral dilemma: This painting he loves--of a young girl seated at a table, gazing outward at an unseen landscape--was obtained during Nazi looting of a Jewish household during the Holocaust. The painting is unsigned, but it bears strong resemblance to the work of Dutch master Vermeer. His whole life the professor has been unable to share the painting, the girl, with the world, fearing that the atrocity behind her custody may serve to steal her from him. When he finally succumbs and invites a fellow professor--an art professor--over to his home, the ownership lineage is explored, first in real time by the visiting professor, and then back hundreds of years as Vreeland uses her narrative license.

In a touching fashion, we are introduced to the family of the Holocaust, the girl in the painting watching over them just days before they are removed from the house and taken to their deaths. Further back then, we see a precious married couple, struggling with their own nostalgic angst, offering the painting to their soon-to-be-married daughter. An aristocratic wife sells this girl in the hyacinth blue so she may escape a loveless marriage. We also see her sold to provide bread for a loving but struggling family, and we see her escape an 18th-century flood by an almost divine intervention.

It is not until the final section, when we are introduced to the artist and shown the very moment of inspiration and creation, that we meet her in person, a child full of youthful exuberance and longing for requited love. We hear her name for the first time, though we have known her for 300 years and watched her give so much love and provide hope to so many.

"I can recall when I was a child and sat with my great-grandfather, who was a painter," Vreeland says. "His gnarled knuckles around my little hand, we took a paint brush, combined colors, and I was amazed at how a lily appeared on the water-color paper. That moment of inspiration--it has been with me forever."

Vreeland's prose is deftly skilled and easy to read, though not trite. She enables the reader to explore the thoughts of characters omnisciently in some instances, and with a limited, first person view at other times, through varied narrators. Her depiction of Dutch history is engaging and thorough, but she never gets superfluous with drone description and minutiae.

Most remarkably, she has painted a masterpiece of her own with her words, created an image so vivid that readers may expect to see the "Girl in Hyacinth Blue" hanging on a museum wall.

Ultimately, though Vreeland spends considerable time describing the artwork, it is the stillness of the girl in the painting that provides an intimate portrait of

the lives witnessed. We see through her eyes, as they look upon her owners--poor and rich, old and young--and cannot escape the power of love and sometimes cruel, unavoidable rigidity of the passage of time.

One of her characters says, "I came to see that knowing what love isn't might be just as valuable, though infinitely less satisfying, as knowing what it is." This is just one of many valuable lessons found within the content of this pocket-size book. The premise is fascinating, the presentation unique, and the artistry by which Vreeland intertwines the stories, introducing the tribulations and trials of the individuals and families long since passed away, is exceptionally engaging.

---Brian Fine

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## PARADE

### GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE

A little gem of a novel is Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, a series of short tales about a mysterious painting attributed to the great 17th-century Dutch artist Jan Vermeer and its effect upon the lives of all who come in contact with it. Vreeland artfully tells her stories backward, starting with the era of the Nazi occupation in Holland and going back to Vermeer's own day, with the beleaguered artist working on his canvases among his eleven children in his native town of Delft. With sensitivity and suspensefulness, the author recreates three centuries of everyday Dutch life. She almost makes one see the haunting painting--a young woman seated near a window--which touches the souls, and sometimes the fortunes, of its widely diverse possessors. At the end, even the girl in hyacinth blue herself seems to become real in this beautifully written exploration of the power of art.

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[Genesis Of The Book](#) [Excerpt](#) [Vermeer](#) [Book Club Discussion Questions](#)  
[Teacher's Guide](#)

-----Books by Susan Vreeland-----

[Life Studies](#) [The Passion of Artemisia](#) [The Forest Lover](#) [Girl in Hyacinth Blue](#)

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## Editorial Reviews

### Amazon.com

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 *filis* 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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### **The New York Times Book Review, Katy Emck**

Intelligent, searching and unusual, the novel is filled with luminous moments; like the painting it describes so well, it has a way of lingering in the reader's mind.

### **From AudioFile**

Susan Vreeland's story of a painting truly comes to life in vivid color through the readings by these performers. With a different reader for each vignette, the performers make this highly acclaimed but unremarkable book something special. The emotion, character, and variety of voices make the stories exceptional. Each chapter could stand alone as a good short story, but together they flow to create a life for the painting as it travels back in time, changing hands as a parade of characters live their lives with it. Thanks to a lively reading, one may not want to stop listening until the painting returns to its moment of inspiration as an idea in the artist's mind. H.L.S. © AudioFile 2002, Portland, Maine-- Copyright © AudioFile, Portland, Maine --*This text refers to the **Audio CD** edition.*

### **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*

### **From Kirkus Reviews**

Vreeland's wonderful second outing (*What Love Sees*, 1996, not seen) is a novel made of stories, each delving farther into the provenance of a Vermeer painting, and each capturing a moment of life, much as the great painter did himself. The only wobble in this elegant little book is at the start, where a stiffness in character may be intended but jars even so: a high-school math teacher confides to a colleague that he owns (and adores) a painting of a girl sewing at a window that he knows is a Vermeer. All the evidence of technique, color, subject is there, yet the painting lacks documentation to validate its authenticity: nor will the math teacher, one Cornelius Engelbrecht, tell just how it became his. The reader is more privileged, though, and learns quickly enough that Engelbrecht's Nazi father stole it in 1940 from a doomed Jewish family in Amsterdam. Such reader-privilege becomes an overwhelming emotional test when Vreeland goes back to visit that family, in that year, just before the theft (*A Night Different From All Other Nights*). Farther back still, a happily married Dutch couple owns the painting and when the husband admits that the girl in it reminds him of an earlier lover, the marriage is briefly shaken (*Adagia*). Set when Beethoven's Eroica symphony is new, *Hyacinth Blues* offers a

biting bit of social satire and lets the reader discover just how the paintings papers did in fact get lost. Still deeper back goes Vreeland, taking up with masterful insight, feeling, and control the life of a small Dutch farm family caught in the great flood of 1717; of a young engineer who loves, loses (pathetically), and hands on the painting; of Vermeer himself as he paints the picture, struggling against debt, father of 11; and, in a wondrous, bittersweet epiphany, of the daughter herself whom Vermeer chose as his model. Extraordinarily skilled historical fiction: deft, perceptive, full of learning, deeply moving. -- *Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*