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By:
Tracy Chevalier

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What people Say:

Jeffrey Keeten

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When the Vermeers came to visit Griet's home she had no idea they were there for her. Her parents had decided, given their near destitution, to find Griet a position as a maid with a wealthy family. Her older brother had already been placed in a Delft tile factory. It was now her turn to earn the food that made it's way into her belly. She was, after all, seventeen.

Johannes Vermeer was a master painter, recognized even in his own time as one of the best, but he was a slow painter. He would only paint when he was inspired to paint. An empty purse or a rumbling stomach were never enough inspiration to make him paint faster. He averaged only two to three paintings a year. As someone who has always admired his paintings I do wish he had been more prolific with his brush, but the fact that there are so few paintings by Vermeer make them all the more precious.

Griet is thrown into this chaotic household. The house is brimming with children, too many children even by the standards of the day. Catharina, Vermeer's wife, liked being pregnant and though the added burden of a new mouth to feed each year places extra financial stress on her husband and her mother Maria Thins she is oblivious to the consequences. Their fortunes wane and fall based more on the property incomes of her mother than on the commissioned paintings of Vermeer. Each year the purse strings get pulled a bit tighter.

There is one patron, a man who has bought several Vermeer paintings, who they all have to curry favor with...Van Ruijven. His wealth infuses him with an air of entitlement. He is used to getting what he wants and when he sees the wide eyed beauty who has just joined Vermeer's household he decides he wants her.

Vermeer has found from the very beginning that Griet is different. She sees the world as a painter sees the world. He finds reasons to have her help him by grinding paints and assisting with the objects that populate his paintings. It is only natural that a young girl would start to have feelings and dreams regarding a man such as Vermeer. He is not only talented, but he is also attractive with those gray eyes that see so much more than anyone else.

She becomes very adept at lying so she can spend more time in the studio.

Van Ruijven, like odious men always seem to be, is adept at finding young women alone. He is not wanting to gossip with her or exchange thoughts about the weather or to woo her or to cajole her into parting with her charms. His hands with fingers like hooks push against her clothes weighing the

curve and shape of her. She has to fend him off without offending him.

Griet has another man in her life, not one that she would choose, but one that is infatuated with her. Pieter, the butcher's son, wants to make her his wife. Being the wife of a butcher is a dream for many women because she and her family will always be well fed. A butcher is miles away from dream landscape of being the wife of a master painter.

Tracy Chevalier has deftly conceived the possibility of

Daniel

Another one of my wife's recommendations (I read a lot of books that way), I picked it up from the bookshelf the night we came back from seeing the film with Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth. I loved the movie--it was just so incredibly sumptuous--and was curious to know the story in the novel, which I knew from experience, and from my wife's continuous comments, would be different, more detailed. I was right.

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Chevalier has won a place in my heart and bookshelf. Her novels are well-crafted, simple to follow, and addictive; Girl was no exception. The story of the maid Griet in 1600's Delft, Holland, was amazing in its simple prose and endless emotion. Completely fictional (no one knows who exactly were the models for any of Vermeer's paintings), it nonetheless possesses a veracity that makes you believe Chevalier found the long-lost journal of this unknown woman and wrote her novel based on it. The details of seventeenth century Holland are rich; you feel you are walking the canal-lined streets of Delft, smelling the pungent scents of the Meat Market, holding your breath as Vermeer paints next to you. Griet is a wonderful protagonist, taking you into her world, yet retaining a few secrets for herself, especially where Vermeer is concerned.

Girl is one of those novels that truly invites you, and almost kidnaps you, to become part of the story, to walk next to the characters, to share in their lives, to feel as they feel. Watch the movie, by all means (the photography is absolutely incredible), but then read the novel and get the whole story. You will not be disappointed.

Kate

I know almost nothing about art, but even I can tell that Girl With a Pearl Earring by Johannes Vermeer is a brilliant painting; 'captivating' is probably the best word to describe it. One presumes that Chevalier agrees with me, and this is what lead her to write a novel about the painting, its subject and its creator. So, is the novel as captivating as the piece that inspired it?

The short answer would be 'no'.

Now for the longer answer...

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Now for the longer answer...

Chevalier is probably one of the best-known historical novelists of the last ten years, with this book always in the foreground when she is discussed. As far as historical information goes, I think she does okay with it. I had a pretty clear picture of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century by the time I was done with the book (whether or not its accurate or not is another matter), but I felt at times that there wasn't that detail that critics proclaimed about on the cover.

The characters, I feel, are never truly developed. Vermeer himself remains a mystery throughout, even to the protagonist and narrator, Griet, who appears to have some connection with him. Griet meanwhile, is what I would describe as a stock teenage girl character. She is similar to many characters I've read before, and yet she does not really advance on that.

The narrative style is one that I would have adored at 14, but by now find to be pedestrian. This is first person narrative at its simplest (and blandest) and I don't feel that we gain anything from it - the novel may just as well have been in third person and would not have suffered for it. It may even have benefited from it.

Jason Koivu

I CAN'T SHOUT "

" LOUD ENOUGH!!!

The popular fame obtained by this book and its subsequent movie version starring Scarlett Johansson...

two hours later

(Sorry, I was daydreaming)...had me expecting a tumultuous romance, a grab-ya and hold-ya reading experience. But this...I don't know what

was, but it wasn't exciting in the least.

is about a maid, who becomes a model, who gets her picture painted and attracts the notice of a few men. The painter is famous, so tha

I CAN'T SHOUT "

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Madeleine

So the parts when Vermeer was actually being a painter were interesting. Seeing as I slogged through this on account of a recommendation that arose from an art-class lecture on Vermeer, I was hoping that the art stuff would at least deliver.

But it's not a good sign when a book's most compelling moments revolve around two people grinding pigments. And, no: "Grinding pigments" is not a euphemism for artist-bangin'. It is, quite literally, referring to the detailed descriptions of how paint was ma

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metal tubes replaced pig bladders as the paint-storing vessels of choice.

This was the most predictable book I've read in a while, and that includes the two graphic-novel series that are simply retelling stories I know well in a new medium. I knew exactly where the plot was going within the book's first dozen pages. Every subsequent thread was introduced with the subtlety of a sledgehammer and the writerly finesse of a 14-year-old's first attempt at fanfiction.

It was also pretty obvious what stereotype everyone was going to play from his or her very first appearance. There really isn't a multi-dimensional character in this book. I understand that the first-person voice is a limited perspective by its nature, and I would write it off as just that if the peripheral characters were the only flat archetypes, but even the narrator doesn't carry any convincing weight. Griet is the protagonist because she's the main character. And because all of the characters with whom she has scuffles are inexplicably bitchy. Not giving characters any real motivations, not making them behave and interact believably, and generally preferring to tell rather than show all contributed to making this whole book feel sloppy, underdeveloped and rushed. If "Girl with a Pearl Earring" was maybe 200 more pages of really hammering out the story and its players, maybe then it'd be a more satisfying read. At least it's mercifully quick and mostly painless at its current length.

I say "mostly painless" because there are some groan-worthy lines showcased here: While more pages would have maybe benefited the plot, there is

-- save for a control-freak editor -- that could have improved the prose itself. I could not get past the clunky writing. It didn't take me long to get violently annoyed by the author's fondness for hitting the reader over the head with the most obvious attempts at subtle foreshadowing by way of forcing too much weight on these flimsy, laughably ominous one-sentence paragraphs. There were numerous other technical things that kept grating on me about the writing and its myriad shortcomings. Among them: Griet saying things like "I always regretted that decision" to indicate that she's looking back on a time that is very clearly written as the present; not one character shows any development throughout the novel; sixteen-year-old Griet, the daughter of a tile painter, somehow knows more about painting and composition than Vermeer, a professional artist who actually managed to garner some fame during his living years.

Even when the book pissed me off (which was often), I will admit that I never found Griet herself to be irritating (maybe because I kept fantasizing about Scarlett Johansson to save my brain from oozing through my ears?) -- but I was irked at how it felt like Chevalier was Mary Sue-ing her way through the character. The way that every man whom Griet encountered in the whole! damn! book! fawned over and flirted with her, the way she was presented as being uneducated but naturally clever just because she sometimes spoke her mind and separated her chopped veggies by color, the way Griet's family was painted as these simple, sheltered little Protestants who knew nothing of the world around them.... there was far too much black-or-white for me to take anything about the book seriously.

I don't care enough to write about this book any more. So. Every other gripe I have notwithstanding, here are three of the book's most glaring failures: