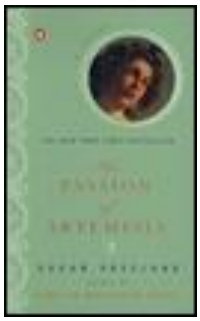
Book Clubs / Reading Guides



The Passion of Artemisia
Susan Vreeland

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Discuss all the questions in your reading group and write your answers into your book-project folder. Number your answers clearly so you can quickly find them or cut up this sheet and glue the questions into your reading diary. Your project folder will be assessed for completeness, clarity of organization and content.

Before Reading the Novel:

1. Look at the pictures for several minutes. What is your impression of the woman? Who is she? What is she thinking right now? Write an inner monologue following the woman's thoughts. Write at least one A4 page.

INTRODUCTION (by Susan Vreeland)

What would it take for a woman to be a famous painter in Baroque Italy? Talent. Passion. Determination. Good fortune. Artemisia Gentileschi had all but one.

In my previous novel, **Girl in Hyacinth Blue**, Magdalena, the fictional daughter of Johannes Vermeer, longed to paint. With the eye of an artist she imagined a painting of the moment of her father's death, "but the task was too fearsome. She lacked the skill, and the one to teach her had never offered."

But what if someone had offered? When I learned that a well known Italian Baroque painter, Orazio Gentileschi, did teach his daughter, Artemisia, I was fascinated. That she produced works of startling invention which took the Baroque spirit of exuberance to its height, that she expressed a feminist sensibility in painting strong heroines caught in moments of danger or tension, thinking and acting against the grain, that she was the first woman to be admitted into the Accademia dell' Arte in Florence, the first woman to make her living solely by her brush—

all this was more than I'd hoped for. And when I read that she had been raped at seventeen by her father's friend and collaborator, her second teacher, I knew there was a story here.

Rather than focusing the story on the rape or using a broad brush to paint a sweeping biography, I chose to explore the inner Artemisia, her developing state of mind, her transcendence over misfortune and resentment, the possibilities of forgiveness and love in a ruptured life, and the connecting tissue of beauty, art, spirituality, and wholeness which allow her, finally, to tell her father, "We've been lucky. We've been able to live by what we love. And to live painting, as we have, wherever we have, is to live passion and imagination and connection and adoration, all the best of life—to be more alive than the rest."

Inquiring into what state of mind is most propitious for creative work, Virginia Woolf asserts in **A Room of One's Own** that "the mind of an artist, in order to achieve the prodigious effort of freeing whole and entire the work that is in him, must be incandescent, like Shakespeare's mind." She says of him, "All desire to protest, to preach, to proclaim an injury, to pay off a score, to make the world the witness of some hardship or grievance was fired out of him and consumed. Therefore his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded."

But what of a woman who had plenty of reasons for grievance—rape, public scorn, torture by a papal court intending to cripple her talent, betrayal by a father who saw her as a novelty through which he could make money, the jealousy and indifference of a philandering husband? How was she to set it all aside so as to give birth, whole and unstained, to the work gestating in her? Or could the circumstances of her life serve a creative purpose? Could her passions be used, or must they be repressed in order to achieve a fragile satisfaction in her work? In post-Renaissance Italy, what would be required of a woman to keep that mind incandescent?

Those were the questions that intrigued me. I had to write a novel to find the answers.

Steeping myself in her cultural milieu, I wanted to translate the Baroque style of visual arts into storytelling. Just as Baroque figures are realistic individuals instead of ideal types, I pictured an Artemisia who has a thick neck, develops a double chin, has backaches, buys real boar sausage, screams in childbirth, swats her child, manages money poorly. In her world, a servant girl yearns to draw, a washerwoman sings arias, and a nun disobeys her order to adore the art of Rome. Just as the Baroque gives us scenes dramatically contrasting light and dark, I've drawn a woman torn by the vicissitudes of an uncertain life, going through dark times—slander, torture, heartbreak, grief—and experiencing extraordinarily bright periods—patronage by the Medici, the joy of motherhood, utter abandonment in love, and exuberance in the act of creation—any of which could suddenly darken. Happiness is never secure.

The Passion of Artemisia is fiction, which is to say, imagined conversations seamed together by pieces of days and nights, trivial as well as momentous actions, invented characters as well as actual people. Woolf says women's history "has to be invented—both discovered and made up." This is the process by which an historic figure moves from yellowed archives to academic interest and from scholarship to heroic popular legend, becoming more complex and beloved as a result. I wanted to participate in giving Artemisia her cultural moment, her own heroism. I was true to fact only so long as fact furnished believable drama, in the hope that what I produced would be concordant with the soul and passions of the real Artemisia Gentileschi, 1593-1653, for whom the story behind the art was always vital.

ABOUT SUSAN VREELAND

Here is a little essay, "The Balm of Creative Endeavor," that Penguin asked me to write for their newsletter. I think it expresses who I am better than dry biographical facts.

"The Balm of Creative Endeavor"

Art, I am convinced, can emerge from extremity. In my case, long, uninterrupted days of treatment for lymphoma became a gift which resulted in **Girl in Hyacinth Blue**.

Wanting to fill my eyes and thoughts with beauty as I began chemotherapy, I pored over art books and absorbed the placidness of Monet's garden, the sparkling color of the Impressionists, the strength and solidity of Michelangelo's figures showing the titanic power of humans at one with God, Jan Vermeer's serene Dutch women bathed in gorgeous honey-colored light. These women took on added significance because I had a Dutch name. It was comforting, in case I had to leave this world, to find, through them, my heritage and place of origin. My conviction grew that art was stronger than death.

Vermeer painted only 35 canvases. There could have been another, I reasoned, which survived neglect, mistreatment, theft, natural catastrophe. Survival was foremost in my thinking. I constructed in my mind another painting incorporating elements he frequently used. Imagining my way into the lives of the people who might have owned the painting through the centuries resulted in imagining my way out of my own dire circumstances. As the stories took shape, I thought less and less of what I was going through, and more and more of the characters, lives, settings and circumstances I was creating. Creative endeavor can aid healing because it lifts us out of self-absorption and gives us a goal. Mine was to live long enough to finish this set of stories that reflected my sensibilities, so that my writing group of twelve dear friends might be given these and remember me and be proud of me in some small way.

When I was hospitalized for a month for a bone marrow transplant, I hoped they'd give me a private room because I intended to read my manuscript aloud over and over to polish the sentences, and that would drive any roommate batty. Conscious that one's thinking determines one's experience, and in the spirit of Dag Hammaarskjold's statement, "The only value of a life is its content for others," I gathered uplifting quotes to put on the windowed door of my room, facing outward to benefit family and friends going to visit other seriously ill patients, and so doctors and nurses tending to me would have a positive thought right before they saw me. Quotes like Milton's "The mind is its own place, and of itself can make a Heaven of Hell, or a Hell of Heaven," and Shakespeare's "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," vitalized me and readied me for writing.

I took my journal of affirmations, a big dictionary and a thesaurus, beautiful new nightgowns in bright silks and flowered satin, colorful earrings and scarves to wrap my bald head, CD's of classical music, Gregorian chant, and Jessye Norman's Spirituals in Concert including "That Great Gettin' Up Morning" to help me rouse myself, and that moving "There is a Balm in Gilead." And, of course, art books. These composed my "armor of enrichment" as I went to do battle with Goliath.

I put a little sign on my hospital window high above Los Angeles: "Every morning lean thine arms awhile upon the windowsill of heaven and gaze upon the Lord. Then, with the vision in thy heart, turn strong to meet thy day." I wrote a love poem to my husband, and a Haiku series about my doctors and nurses. My Dutch characters became real to me and I loved them too. Nurses were amazed that I wasn't experiencing the horrible side effects predicted. Three times a day they shined a flashlight in my mouth to look for bloody sores. None there, folks! I had filled my mouth with love and beauty instead.

When I came home, I found myself drinking in the simplest things—the blessing of a refreshing breeze, the velvet texture of newly cut grass, a small child's lilting laughter. All the world seemed tender and rooted me in its loveliness. I embraced Henry James's writing advice

to be a person upon whom nothing is lost. After recovery, my little book about people who lived their defining moments in the presence of a beautiful painting, as I did, has launched me into a new and healthy life. I am humbled with gratitude.

AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN VREELAND

Artemisia tells her own story in this novel. Why did you choose a first person narrator?

I felt using the first person would allow me to get closer to Artemisia. With the first person, it's the reader's assumption that all descriptions, observations, feelings are hers rather than the narrator's. Not wanting a sense of a contemporary author looking back to that century, I felt the first person could provide more immediacy. Also, a first person voice would help to distinguish **The Passion of Artemisia** from a biography.

What are the difficulties involved in writing a fictional story that is based on real facts?

First, one must find the story one wishes to tell buried in the known history. Then, one must be willing to risk criticism when that story requires departure from fact. Writing historically based fiction is first a matter of discovery, then focus, then selectivity.

A person's real life involves a huge number of people, far too many to give focus to a novel. In order to avoid the narrative sprawl that would limit space for development of important characters, I had to eliminate Artemisia's brothers, sons, and many of the people for whom she painted in order to reveal her relationships with her father, husband, and daughter more deeply.

Conversely, archival and published history often don't record the relationships that are significant, so characters have to be invented to allow the subject to reveal intimate thoughts and feelings through interaction. For this purpose I invented the two nuns, her models, her neighbor, and Renata, her chambermaid.

Sometimes a fact conflicts with what an author needs a character to do. In truth, Artemisia was illiterate until midlife, her father considering it more important to teach her to paint than to read. In order to keep the nuns in the story while she was in Florence, I had to have her learn to read and write at the convent.

Another challenge is scenic and chronological accuracy. Clothing, food, currency, and transportation must all be researched in historical reference books. Still lifes and figure paintings helped with food and clothing. When dealing with locales as old and well known as Rome and Florence, I had to ascertain whether certain streets, architectural features, sculptures, and paintings were in the same place as they are today. Only a chance reference told me that the Scalinata, later dubbed the Spanish Steps, up to Santa Trinità dei Monti weren't yet built at the time Artemisia climbed the Pincian Hill. With permission of the Mother Superior of the Convent of the Sacred Heart at Santa Trinità, I moved the time forward that Santa Trinità was a convent of nuns rather than a monastery for brethren.

Sometimes nothing can be depended upon other than being there. I stayed in the convent of Santa Trinità in Rome to understand its layout and feel its calm in a bustling city, and I climbed the bell tower in Florence not just to see the view Artemisia and Pietro would have seen, but to describe the stairwell. Those on-site experiences are the treat of research. In truth, all of the research was enjoyable for me because I felt it directing me and giving the book depth and authority.

A danger of fact-based fiction is the discovery of some detail so delectable that one is tempted to deflect the narrative direction in order to include it. One must resist. Fiction is about character, not research.

In the novel you vividly depict the challenges of life as a painter and as a woman in seventeenth-century Europe. How did you research these details? In what ways did you use your research on the real Artemisia Gentileschi to inform your portrayal of her character?

In **A Room of One's Own**, Virginia Woolf posits that a hypothetical, gifted sister of Shakespeare, wishing to write but prevented from a broad education by limited reading and restricted interaction in the world of ideas, would have been laughed at and ultimately would have been driven to despair. Woolf concludes: "Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at [sic]." It wasn't difficult to move this imaginary gifted woman from the sixteenth century world of letters and theater to the seventeenth century world of paint and canvas. That process is the purview of the imagination.

Germaine Greer's seminal work, **The Obstacle Race: Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work**, (1979), lays down the difficulties female artists faced: competing obligations of marriage and motherhood; the restrictions against women seeking art training; male willingness to accept women's painting only as a benign drawing-room recreation but not as a professional activity for monetary gain, which might put a woman in the public eye; and perceptions of women's intellectual inability to tackle "serious," large-scale historical, mythical, or biblical subjects. Except for the good fortune of being born to a fine painter anxious to make money off of his talented daughter, these are the same obstacles Artemisia faced. It is a mark of her genius that she turned each one to an advantage.

The actual trial record, as recorded in Mary Garrard's work of art history, **Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art**, not only gave me a vivid account of the trial and her own statements, but gave me her voice, as did a letter to Galileo and other letters to her patrons, usually concerning payment. Guided by Garrard's scholarship, I surmised much about her attitudes and struggles directly from studying her paintings in comparison to paintings of the same subjects done by other painters of her time.

The rest is informed imagination.

Much of Artemisia's story is affected by the mores of her time and yet she is entirely sympathetic to a twentieth-century audience. How did you achieve this balance?

Artemisia achieved our sympathies for herself. Just think of what she did: defied the papal court by refusing to recant her testimony that she'd been raped; rejected the man who, according to seventeenth-century Italian culture, would restore her respectability with a marriage of reparation; made demands upon her father; left her husband for her art, and took her daughter with her; attended court events at the Medici's Pitti Palace without a husband or an escort; used her talent to give feminist interpretations of typical Baroque heroines; and ultimately supported herself by doing what she loved most in life. Any one of these actions would have made her sympathetic to a twentieth-century audience. Her perseverance and self-invention raised her to be a heroine of her own life composition. It's amazing to me that she hasn't been popularized as a feminist model before this.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS : Read the questions before reading the book. This will make you aware of some important issues and it will be easier for you to answer the questions later.

1. Sometimes, it's too easy to assume that in centuries past, women were victims of gender prejudice and limitations. What negative events in Artemisia's experience were caused by her own thinking and actions? What better decisions could she have made? What advantages did Artemisia have as a woman?

2. Orazio is seen by Artemisia as the cause of her misfortunes. To what degree is this a fair assessment? How did the attitudes and strictures of the time influence him?

3. When Sister Graziela gives Artemisia the pearl earring, she also gives her some advice. How did she follow and not follow this advice? When it's her turn to give advice to Palmira, she reduces it to one line. Why did she make that choice?

4. In what ways did Galileo influence Artemisia? She said to him, "Even stone bears the footprints of many men." How does this apply to women and to her in particular?

5. To what extent was Graziela in control of her own fate? In what ways does the term "passion" apply to Graziela, Orazio, Galileo, and Artemisia?

6. Artemisia told Palmira, "To be a painter, you've got to care for people, for their feelings." Why did she believe this? Is it true for all art in all time periods? In her time period?

7. How has Artemisia influenced the minor female characters—Umiliana, Fina, Vanna, Renata, Paola? What has she learned from them? How are they representatives of the time, or exceptions to the social mores?

8. Through what stages must Artemisia grow if she is to reconcile with her father? What experiences move her in that direction, or away from that direction? Did they love each other?

9. Artemisia asked her father, "Haven't you ever felt like shouting, 'Look. Look and let this beauty transform your heart'?" Has this happened to her? What beauties?

10. Of all her paintings, which one(s) was she most passionate about? Which one(s) do you favor? Hypothetically, if Artemisia, the woman with the same history, lived in the nineteenth century, what do you think she'd be painting? What would her style(s) be like? If she could have seen the scope of art history after her as well as before, which artists would she have admired and why? Which ones do you?

11. Is there a piece of art that affects you in a special way? Describe it, and explain its effect on you. You will find excellent arts books in the library or you may want to browse some big galleries in the internet to find a work of art that moves you.

12. Find out more about the real Artemisia Gentileschi and her work. Search the internet and take notes. Does the author stick to these facts or has she changed anything?

13. Read the short extract from *A Room of One's Own* where Virginia Woolf writes about Shakespeare's imaginary sister Judith. Discuss the role of women at that time. What were their options. What was expected of them? How has the situation changed? Write a 5§-essay comparing the lives and times of the different women characters in the extract, in the novel and young women in the 21st century.

An Excerpt from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's* Own, Chapter 3

Be that as it may, I could not help thinking, as I looked at the works of Shakespeare on the shelf, that the bishop was right at least in this; it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare. Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say. Shakespeare himself went, very probably,—his mother was an heiress—to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin—Ovid, Virgil and Horace—and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighbourhood, who bore him a child rather quicker than was right. That escapade sent him to seek his fortune in London. He had, it seemed, a taste for the theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door.

Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen. Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. They would have spoken sharply but kindly, for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter—indeed, more likely than not she was the apple of her father's eye. Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly but was careful to hide them or set do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of fire to them.

Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighbouring woolstapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father. Then he ceased to scold her. He begged her instead not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage. He would give her a chain of beads or a fine petticoat, he said; and there were tears in his eyes. How could she disobey him? How could she break his heart? The force of her own gift alone drove her to it. She made up a small parcel of her belongings, let herself down by a rope one summer's night and took the road to London.

She was not seventeen. The birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was. She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager—a fat, looselipped man—guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting—no woman, he said, could possibly be an actress. He hinted—you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she even seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last—for she was very young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same grey eyes and

rounded brows—at last Nick Greene the actormanager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so—who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?—killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross–roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.

That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius. But for my part, I agree with the deceased bishop, if such he was—it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born to–day among the working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women whose work began, according to Professor Trevelyan, almost before they were out of the nursery, who were forced to it by their parents and held to it by all the power of law and custom? Yet genius of a sort must have existed among women as it must have existed among the working classes. Now and again an Emily Brontë or a Robert Burns blazes out and proves its presence. But certainly it never got itself on to paper. When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without singing them, was often a woman. It was a woman Edward Fitzgerald, I think, suggested who made the ballads and the folk–songs, crooning them to her children, beguiling her spinning with them, or the length of the winter's night.

This may be true or it may be false—who can say?—but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty. No girl could have walked to London and stood at a stage door and forced her way into the presence of actor–managers without doing herself a violence and suffering an anguish which may have been irrational—for chastity may be a fetish invented by certain societies for unknown reasons—but were none the less inevitable. Chastity had then, it has even now, a religious importance in a woman's life, and has so wrapped itself round with nerves and instincts that to cut it free and bring it to the light of day demands courage of the rarest.

To have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might well have killed her. Had she survived, whatever she had written would have been twisted and deformed, issuing from a strained and morbid imagination. And undoubtedly, I thought, looking at the shelf where there are no plays by women, her work would have gone unsigned. That refuge she would have sought certainly. It was the relic of the sense of chastity that dictated anonymity to women even so late as the nineteenth century. Currer Bell, George Eliot, George Sand, all the victims of inner strife as their writings prove, sought ineffectively to veil themselves by using the name of a man. Thus they did homage to the convention, which if not implanted by the other sex was liberally encouraged by them (the chief glory of a woman is not to be talked of, said Pericles, himself a much–talked–of man) that publicity in women is detestable. Anonymity runs in their blood.