

The Painted Girls Reading Guide



Q&A with Cathy Marie Buchanan

1. Did you always intend *The Painted Girls* as a tribute to sisterhood?

I once heard the great Canadian writer Alistair MacLeod comment he did not so much buy into the old adage “write what you know” as some broader notion of writing about one’s obsessions. I’d take it a step further and suggest that, deliberate or not, a writer’s preoccupations find their way onto the page. When I first put pen to paper, my intention was to set down the story of the model for Degas’s beloved sculpture *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. But soon enough her sister was demanding equal time. I think now it was inevitable that my story would hold up a magnifying lens to the mysteries of sisterhood—the rivalry, the love. With three sisters of my own—each deeply loved by me despite alarming teenage rows—I have often found my mind lingering, wondering, stuck. What is it that provokes rivalry among sisters? And why is it so many of us the world over find solace in the strong arms of the sisters we love, that we so readily open our own? It was quite unintentional—though no accident—that I found myself pondering these questions as I imagined the story of Marie and Antoinette.

2. Were you a dancer?

I studied classical ballet quite seriously throughout high school and during the early years of university, and danced with a small regional company for a number of years. I am a Licentiate of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance and taught young dancers in order to pay for my own ballet lessons.

One of the great pleasures of researching *The Painted Girls* was attending a class of fourteen-year-old girls at the Paris Opéra Ballet school. Through thirty years and a continent away from my own days at the barre, I was struck by how familiar the exercises, the corrections and the music were to me. It made me think Marie's experience in the classroom and on the stage was a whole lot more similar to my own than one might expect.

3. Were you surprised to learn of the exploitation of the young dancers at the Paris Opéra Ballet?

I first learned about Marie van Goethem when I happened on a BBC documentary called *The Private Life of a Masterpiece: Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. To discover that back in 1881 the public had linked *Little Dancer* with a life of vice and young girls for sale certainly flew in the face of my modern day notions of the sculpture and ballet. Today *Little Dancer* is beloved, an object of pilgrimage for young dancers that world over, and ballet is by and large considered a high-minded pursuit. So yes, I was very much surprised to learn about the sway the abonnés held at the Opéra and their often less than honorable intentions with the young ballet girls. What ruffled my feathers most, though, was the way those privileged gentlemen so fully sidestepped any culpability. Forget their advantages of education and wealth. Forget that the ballet offered a chance for a poor girl to escape the gutter, to find some semblance of security. Any blame for the questionable liaisons fell squarely on the shoulders of the ballet girls. In the historical record they are accused time and again of corruption and depravity, of having the "lightest of morals."

4. What is your writing routine?

I write every day, sitting down at the computer as soon as my boys leave the house for school. There does not appear to be any rhyme or reason to when I write well. The objective is always the same, to lose myself in the words I am setting on the page. And I have had moments when I look up from the computer, dazed. It takes a second to grasp that I am sitting at my desk, a further second to decide: Is it morning or afternoon? Have I had lunch? My head is lost in another time, another place, another life. It's when the best writing has come.

Questions for discussion

1. *If I had a bit of nerve, I would tell him I want to look pretty instead of worn out. I want to be dancing instead of resting my aching bones. I want to be on the stage, like a real ballet girl, instead of in the practice room, even if it is not yet true.* Marie thinks this while pondering the paintings in Degas's workshop. What kind of art is he interested in making? Why are his innovations so important in the history of art? Do you see empathy or hostility toward the

dancers in his artworks? In what ways is Degas sympathetic toward Marie? In what ways is he not? Does his interest in Marie ultimately give her feelings of hope and possibility, or feelings of inadequacy?

2. *“Tonight, roasted chicken in your belly,” Maman says, loosening her arms, stepping back from me. “And always, an angel in your heart.”* Marie’s mother often reminds her that the spirit of Marie the First, her older sister who died in infancy, is with her. How is Marie affected by her namesake? Why, at the end of the book, does she tell the old man at the tavern her name is Marie the First?
3. Is Marie deluding herself in believing her hatred of Émile is justified? Once she sees he cannot be guilty of the second murder, is it fair for her to destroy the alibi provided by the calendar? To what extent is she looking after her own best interests when she burns it?
4. *Sometimes I wonder, though, if for the very best ballet girls, the trickery is not a little bit real, if a girl born into squalor cannot find true grace in ballet.* Marie thinks this while looking at her fellow ballerinas on the Opéra stage. Does Marie experience true grace while dancing? Without the ballet can Marie be fully content?
5. *Antoinette was too bold in speaking her mind to end up with her legs spread open for a slumming gentleman.* Marie ponders this misconception after a posing naked with her knees parted on Monsieur Lefebvre’s sofa. What leads her to such an idea? Are such misconceptions common among sister?
6. Émile consistently mistreats Antoinette. He forces himself upon her and then tells her it’s her fault; he allows Pierre Gille to slap her, and then abandons her for him. Is Antoinette’s blind love for Émile realistic? Of all his wrongdoings, why is it a lie that finally makes her see the light?
7. In what instances does Antoinette’s bold temperament hinder her? When does it serve her well?

8. “Both are beasts. The physiognomies tell us...Those two murderers are marked.” Degas says this to Marie after Émile is declared guilty of a murder she knows he did not commit. Why does Degas feel it is fair to judge the boys’ characters based on the way they look? What are some other moments in the book when people are judged as “beasts” or based on appearance?
9. “No social being is less protected than the young Parisian girl—by laws, regulations, and social customs.” —*Le Figaro*, 1880. Why did Buchanan choose this quotation as the book’s epigraph? How does it relate to the story? In what ways are the Van Goethem sisters unprotected?
10. *I want to put my face in my hands, to bawl, for me, for Antoinette, for all the women of Paris, for the burden of having what men desire, for the heaviness of knowing it is ours to give, that with our flesh we make our way in the world.* Marie thinks this while waiting to see Antoinette at Saint-Lazare. Is she correct in such thinking? To what extent does the sentiment hold true today?
11. What role does honesty play in this book? Do you support Antoinette’s decision to tell “one last lie” to Marie, the lie about Émile’s guilt? Does she go overboard with her
12. refusal to tell even white lies by the end of the book? In what ways are Marie and Antoinette good sisters to each other? In what ways are they not? Would the power of sisterhood have prevailed had Antoinette not found out Émile was unfaithful to her?
13. Have you seen *Little Dancer*? What were your impressions? Have they changed after reading *The Painted Girls*? How?
14. Will you recommend *The Painted Girls* to a friend? A sister? Why?