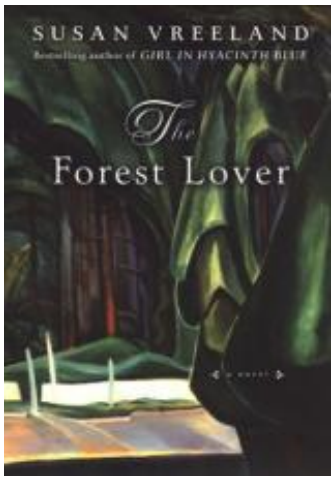
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

The Forest Lover

by Susan Vreeland



About the Book

Susan Vreeland follows her two bestselling novels with a lavish historical tale about a pioneering woman artist

It was Emily Carr (1871?1945)?not Georgia O'Keeffe or Frida Kahlo?who first blazed a path for modern women artists. Overcoming the confines of late Victorian culture, Carr became a major force in modern art. Her boldly original landscapes are praised today for capturing an untamed British Columbia?and its indigenous peoples?just before industrialization would change it forever.

In her latest novel, Susan Vreeland brings to life this fiercely independent and underappreciated figure. From illegal potlatches in tribal communities to prewar Paris, where her art was exhibited in the famed Salon d'Automne, Carr's story is as arresting as it is vibrant. Vreeland tells it with gusto and suspense, giving vivid portraits of Carr and the unconventional people to whom she was inevitably drawn: Sophie, a native basket maker; Harold, the son of missionaries, who embraces indigenous cultures; Fanny, a New Zealand artist who spends a summer with Carr painting in the French countryside; and Claude, a French fur trader who steals her heart. The result is a glorious novel that will appeal to lovers of art, native cultures, and lush historical fiction.

Discussion Guide

1. Had you ever heard of Emily Carr before reading The Forest Lover? Why do you think an artist who has been considered Canada's national treasure is so little known south of the U.S.-Canadian border? Are you now inspired to know more about her and her work?

2. In **The Forest Lover**, Emily Carr is often referred to as "a woman painter." Do we still use that expression today? Emily struggles against sexism as well as racial prejudice. Which of these two does Emily think is most insidious, and why? Which limited the reception of her art the most? Which limited her life the most?

3. Sophie says that in order to find your "power spirit" you must take risks (p. 103). What risks does Emily take? Who are some women risk-takers today? What risks have you taken in your own life, or do you anticipate having to take, in order to develop yourself more fully? Is there something Emily says or does that can serve as inspiration for you?

4. Why do think Emily is drawn to native cultures? Even though Emily denies it, do you think it is because, as Frances says, "it's substituting for something in us" (p. 133)? What might Emily be substituting for, or what is she seeking through her encounters with the native cultures of British Columbia?

5. Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass is present throughout the book. "Oh, such a soul, this Whitman had," Emily says (p. 238). Discuss the connection Emily feels with Whitman's poetry and its importance to and influence on her work.

6. In Part II, Emily has decided to go to Paris. What changes for her there? What influences her there? Later, she says she must leave because she is not herself there. What does she mean? Is this really true? How does place define who we are and influence what we do?

7. Throughout the novel, it seems Emily rejects most chances at intimacy. Why do you think this is? What do you think Emily's true feelings for Fanny involved? Was a love interest there, but denied? Do you think she was ever truly attracted to Claude, the French fur trader? Is it possible for a woman to be a brilliant, dedicated artist and also have successful relationships with family? With lovers?

8. Do you think, as Emily asks on page 137, that "creating yourself is a spiritual act" or a practical one? Is "creating yourself" different today than it was in 1910? If so, how? How have you "created yourself" and what obstacles have you had to overcome?

9. Through Emily's eyes, we see how symbols?the raven, the wolf, Dzunukwa, to name just a few?were so present and powerful in Indian culture. Are symbols as powerful and present today in the modern world? What are some symbols that we see today? Is their function the same or different from those in the native cultures of British Columbia?

10. What/where is your illahee?the land that gives comfort?

Author Bio

Susan Vreeland is the internationally known author of art-related historical fiction. Four of her books are *New York Times* bestsellers.

LISETTE'S LIST presents one woman's yearning for art at a time when her family's collection of paintings had to be hidden in the south of France from Nazi art thieves. CLARA AND MR. TIFFANY reveals the talented woman who conceived of and designed the well-loved Tiffany leaded glass lamps. LUNCHEON OF THE BOATING PARTY

depicts Renoir's masterpiece, the personalities involved in its making, and the *joie de vivre* of late 19th-century Paris. LIFE STUDIES is a collection of stories of Impressionist painters told by people who knew them, as well as contemporary individuals encountering art in meaningful ways. GIRL IN HYACINTH BLUE traces an alleged Vermeer painting through the centuries. THE PASSION OF ARTEMISIA illuminates Italian Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi. THE FOREST LOVER follows rebel British Columbia painter Emily Carr in her encounters with native peoples and cultures. WHAT LOVE SEES tells the love story of a blind couple who refuse to accept limitations.

Four of these books have been winners of the Theodor Geisel Award, the highest honor given by the San Diego Book Awards. Vreeland's novels have been translated into 26 languages, and have frequently been selected as Book Sense Picks. She was a high school English teacher in San Diego for 30 years.

The Forest Lover

by Susan Vreeland

Publication Date: February 5, 2004
Genres: Fiction
Hardcover: 352 pages
Publisher: Viking Adult
ISBN-10: 0670032670
ISBN-13: 9780670032679