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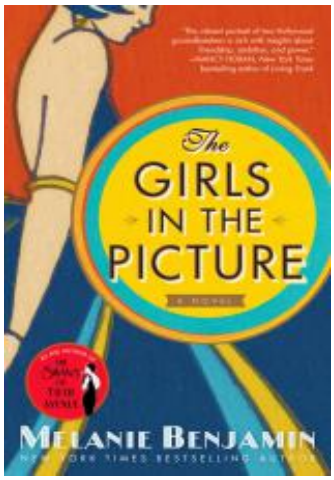
The Girls in the Picture

by Melanie Benjamin



About the Book

A fascinating novel of the friendship and creative partnership between two of Hollywood?s earliest female legends --- screenwriter Frances Marion and superstar Mary Pickford --- from the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE SWANS OF FIFTH AVENUE and THE AVIATOR'S WIFE.

It is 1914, and 25-year-old Frances Marion has left her (second) husband and her Northern California home for the lure of Los Angeles, where she is determined to live independently as an artist. But the word on everyone?s lips these days is ?flickers? --- the silent moving pictures enthralling theatergoers. Turn any corner in this burgeoning town and you?ll find made-up actors running around, as a movie camera captures it all.

In this fledgling industry, Frances finds her true calling: writing stories for this wondrous new medium. She also makes the acquaintance of actress Mary Pickford, whose signature golden curls and lively spirit have given her the title of America?s Sweetheart. The two ambitious young women hit it off instantly, their kinship fomented by their mutual fever to create, to move audiences to a frenzy, to start a revolution.

But their ambitions are challenged both by the men around them and the limitations imposed on their gender --- and their astronomical success could come at a price. As Mary, the world?s highest paid and most beloved actress, struggles to live her life under the spotlight, she also wonders if it is possible to find love, even with the dashing actor Douglas Fairbanks. Frances, too, longs to share her life with someone. As in any good Hollywood story, dramas will play out, personalities will clash, and even the deepest friendships might be shattered.

With cameos from such notables as Charlie Chaplin, Louis B. Mayer, Rudolph Valentino and Lillian Gish, THE GIRLS IN THE PICTURE is, at its heart, a story of friendship and forgiveness. Melanie Benjamin perfectly captures the dawn of a glittering new era --- its myths and icons, its possibilities and potential, and its seduction and heartbreak.

Discussion Guide

1. Frances and Mary, especially in their younger years, feel they have to choose between pursuing careers and fulfilling traditional expectations of marriage. Did these conversations surprise you? Do you think these pressures still exist for women today?

2. How did you react to the sexism Frances and Mary face in the movie industry? How do the women confront their male superiors, and do they ever prove the men who doubted them wrong?

3. Mary?s role as an actress places her in the spotlight while Frances works behind the scenes as her ?scenarist.? Does Mary?s fame work for or against her? What about Frances? relative anonymity?

4. Did you identify more with Frances or Mary? Why? Whose chapters were more intriguing to you?

5. Melanie Benjamin references many movies produced in the early days of Hollywood, such as *The Birth of a Nation, The Poor Little Rich Girl* and *The Big House*. Have you seen or heard of any of these movies? If not, did the novel make you want to seek them out?

6. Have you ever had a friendship as supportive, productive and collaborative as Frances and Mary?s? Do you think that kind of friendship can only thrive between the young and ambitious, or can you find it at any age?

7. Are Frances and Mary truly equal creative partners, or does one woman hold more power over the other? How do the power dynamics of their partnership change over the course of their lives?

8. Consider the opening line of Mary?s first chapter: ?Mama, I made a friend!? How does Mary?s relationship with her mother affect her throughout her career? Does Mary feel as though she needs to prove something to her --- and if so, what?

9. Seeing the frontlines of the war --- and the war?s brutal ramifications for women --- is a turning point for Frances. Why do you think Frances makes the decision to leave her flourishing career and go to war? How did Mary?s decision to stay in Hollywood and work on her movies affect her relationship with Frances?

10. Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks were the most celebrated couple of their age. Can you think of a similarly iconic couple alive today?

11. Despite their remarkable success, Frances and Mary experience anxiety in their personal and professional lives. What is Frances most insecure about? What makes Mary feel imprisoned?

12. What do you think causes Frances and Mary?s friendship to fracture? Do you think it was one incident or many over time? Was it inevitable?

13. Throughout the novel, Benjamin sprinkles appearances from well-known celebrities and illuminating details about the time and place of the story. What did you learn about early Hollywood and the naissance of the movie industry?

14. What female screenwriters or directors do you know of? How do sexism, gender bias and inequality manifest in the film industry today?

Author Bio

Melanie Benjamin is the *New York Times* bestselling author of nine works of historical fiction: ALICE I HAVE BEEN, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MRS. TOM THUMB, THE AVIATOR?S WIFE, THE SWANS OF FIFTH AVENUE, THE GIRLS IN THE PICTURE, MISTRESS OF THE RITZ, THE CHILDREN?S BLIZZARD, CALIFORNIA GOLDEN and THE WINDSOR AFFAIR.

Her novels have been translated in over 15 languages, featured in national magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*, and optioned for film.

Melanie is a native of the Midwest, having grown up in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she pursued her first love, theater. After raising her two sons, Melanie, a lifelong reader (including being the proud winner, two years in a row, of her hometown library?s summer reading program!), decided to pursue a writing career. After writing her own parenting column for a local magazine, and winning a short story contest, Melanie published two contemporary novels under her real name, Melanie Hauser, before turning to historical fiction.

Melanie lives in Chicago with her husband. In addition to writing, she puts her theatrical training to good use by being a member of the Authors Unbound speakers bureau. When she isn?t writing or speaking, she?s reading. And always looking for new stories to tell.

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Publication Date: January 22, 2019
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 480 pages
Publisher: Bantam
ISBN-10: 110188682X
ISBN-13: 9781101886823