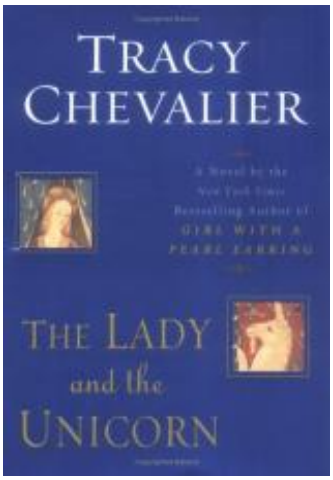
The Lady and the Unicorn

by Tracy Chevalier



About the Book

A set of bewitching medieval tapestries hangs today in a protected chamber in Paris. They appear to portray a woman's seduction of a unicorn, but the story behind their making is unknown-until now. In **The Lady and the Unicorn**, Tracy Chevalier weaves fact and fiction into a beautiful, timeless, and intriguing literary tapestry-an extraordinary story exquisitely told.

Discussion Guide

1. The Lady and the Unicorn is based on real tapestries of the same name. Does the knowledge that **The Lady and the Unicorn** is based on real events and people affect your reading? If so, how?

2. The novel is structured around the making of the tapestries, from their conception to their completion. The lives of the people involved in their creation are altered. What does this suggest about the interconnectedness of life and art?

3. In **The Lady and the Unicorn**, each character has a different understanding of the function of art. Is it, as Claude believes "to imitate life" or is it as Nicolas des Innocents suggests, "to make things more beautiful than they are?"

4. In **Girl with a Pearl Earring** and in **The Lady and the Unicorn**, Tracy Chevalier seems to suggest that art and desire are intertwined. How does she do this? Do you agree? Similarly, both novels also seem interested in the relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

5. The novel is written from a number of points of view. What does this allow Tracy Chevalier to achieve? Nicolas des Innocents's point of view is pivotal. Can you explain why?

6. Is Nicolas des Innocents as innocent as his name suggests? What does he learn by the end of the novel?

7. The tapestries feature a unicorn and a lady. In the novel, a unicorn is a symbol that has a very different meaning for each character. What does the unicorn represent to Nicolas des Innocents? To Jean LeViste? What else does the unicorn mean?

8. The each tapestry represents a different sense with the exception of the sixth. In this one, the lady is holding the necklace she wears in the other five tapestries as she stands in front of a battlefield tent, with a lion and the unicorn holding the flaps of the entrance open. Emblazoned above the entrance in gold is the phrase "A Mon Seul Desir" ("To My One Desire"). Some interpret this tapestry as a renunciation of the five senses; others argue that it shows love is the sixth sense and the tapestry is an introduction to seduction. The novel offers an interpretation through Nicolas des Innocents who says that the tapestries "aren't just about a seduction, but about the soul too." What does the sixth tapestry mean to you?

9. How are secrets important in this novel?

10. In **The Lady and the Unicorn** the relationship between mothers and daughters is explored. How is the relationship between Claude and Genevieve different from the relationship between Alienor and Christine? How are they similar? What do they suggest about the way mothers and daughters interacted with each other at this point in time?

11. In this novel, Tracy Chevalier describes the position of women at this point in history. What was their primary role? How did the novel's different women-Genevieve, Claude, Alienor, and Christine-deal with the limitations places upon them by society? Is Claude right when she says, referring to the convent, "A place that is a paradise to Maman and a prison to me. But that is what a lady's life is, I've found."?

12. The novel takes place in Paris and in Brussels. We learn of the snobbery of the French towards the Belgian people and get a real sense of how these two societies were different. How does this opposition contribute to the novel?

13. How does Philippe de la Tour's job as the cartoonist foreshadow the part he will play in Alienor's life?

14. Are the tapestries the only works of art in this novel? What else could be considered a work of art?

15. Leon le Vieux at the end of the novel says, after "poking at the lavender and rosemary bushes, 'I'm always surprised how resilient these are in winter'?" What else could he be referring to?

16. The Lady and the Unicorn takes place during two years, starting during Lent-Eastertide 1490 and ending in Septuagesima 1492. How does the compression of the events into two years contribute to the novel's power?

17. In the novel's last scene, Genevieve tells Nicolas that the tapestry describing touch is her favorite. She explains that she likes it best because "she is very clear, that lady-clear in the soul. She's standing in a doorway, on the threshold between one life and another, and she's looking forward with happy eyes." Nicolas tells us that his inspiration is quite different, that he had sought to describe Christine "standing in the doorway to the workshop, pleased that she would be weaving. What does Genevieve's interpretation reveal? What does Tracy Chevalier seem to suggest about the very nature of art in Genevieve's interpretation and Nicolas's intent?

Author Bio

Tracy Chevalier is the *New York Times* bestselling author of such novels as GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING, which has been translated into 45 languages and made into an Oscar-nominated film, a play and an opera. Born and raised in Washington, DC, she lives in London with her husband.

Critical Praise

"On the academic front, here is the old Chevalier, exact and guarded, accurate and self-contained?On the erotic front, she positively explodes, the shy smiles of **Pearl Earring** replaced by a terrific torrent of carnal imagery, every sense invoked and appetite exploited."

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