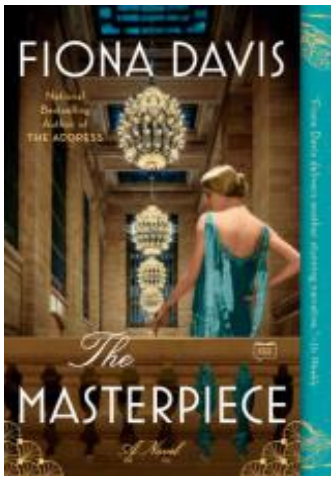
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The Masterpiece

by Fiona Davis



About the Book

In this captivating novel, national bestselling author Fiona Davis takes readers into the glamorous lost art school within Grand Central Terminal, where two very different women, 50 years apart, strive to make their mark on a world set against them.

For most New Yorkers, Grand Central Terminal is a crown jewel, a masterpiece of design. But for Clara Darden and Virginia Clay, it represents something quite different.

For Clara, the terminal is the stepping stone to her future. It is 1928, and Clara is teaching at the lauded Grand Central School of Art. Though not even the prestige of the school can override the public's disdain for a "woman artist," fiery Clara is single-minded in her quest to achieve every creative success --- even while juggling the affections of two very different men. But she and her bohemian friends have no idea that they'll soon be blindsided by the looming Great Depression...and that even poverty and hunger will do little to prepare Clara for the greater tragedy yet to come.

By 1974, the terminal has declined almost as sharply as Virginia Clay's life. Dilapidated and dangerous, Grand Central is at the center of a fierce lawsuit: Is the once-grand building a landmark to be preserved, or a cancer to be demolished? For Virginia, it is simply her last resort. Recently divorced, she has just accepted a job in the information booth in order to support herself and her college-age daughter, Ruby. But when Virginia stumbles upon an abandoned art school within the terminal and discovers a striking watercolor, her eyes are opened to the elegance beneath the decay. She embarks on a quest to find the artist of the unsigned masterpiece --- an impassioned chase that draws Virginia not only into the battle to save Grand Central but deep into the mystery of Clara Darden, the famed 1920s illustrator who disappeared from history in 1931.

Discussion Guide

1. Much like Clara, Virginia suffers a great loss --- her mastectomy and the end of her marriage --- and needs to reinvent herself. What other similarities and differences do you observe between Clara and Virginia? What are the strongest internal motivations for each woman? How do they bend away from and toward the social expectations of their eras? Could you see them being friends?

2. When Fiona Davis moved to New York, she experienced the reverse transformation of Grand Central Terminal from a scary place you wouldn?t want to be caught in past dark into a vibrant center of architecture and business. Have you witnessed this kind of change in a city, a specific building or any location? What, if anything, do you think played a role in creating the changes that occurred? Did you lose or gain anything in the process?

3. When Virginia takes the watercolor that she finds in the abandoned art school in Grand Central Terminal, she?s unsure if it?s the right thing to do. What are your thoughts on this choice? What does the watercolor represent to Virginia, if anything? Would you have taken the watercolor? Why or why not?

4. THE MASTERPIECE explores the many facets of the art world in the 1920s, including Clara?s place in it as a woman who understands the value of pragmatism and determination. Think about how we view and experience art and artists today. Are there any stark differences and/or similarities between the present and the past? Art styles have certainly changed, but has our relationship with art and artists changed? Why or why not? Is there an art style or school that you prefer? Do you have any favorite artists?

5. Clara is drawn to both Oliver and Levon, who couldn?t be more different. Do you think she made the right choice? Who would you have chosen --- if either --- and why?

6. While working in Grand Central, Virginia discovers a new appreciation for a building most believe should be destroyed. What are your thoughts on historic preservation? Should money be put into restoring and preserving the old, or does that prevent progress?

7. Both Virginia?s life and her daughter Ruby?s life go through dramatic changes in THE MASTERPIECE. These transitions cause conflict between mother and daughter, but Virginia?s acceptance of Ruby?s choices ultimately paves the way to a strong relationship. What are your thoughts on the way that Virginia handled this situation? How would you have handled it? Do any relationships in your life resemble the one between Ruby and Virginia?

8. What do you think of Clara?s actions after the train crash? What would you have done in her situation?

9. In reality, the federal government gave unprecedented support to artists during The Great Depression. As part of the New Deal, museums were built and artists were paid with federal tax dollars. How do you feel that aligns with the fictional plot of the book? Do Clara and Levon?s paths veer toward or away from what artists experienced in that era?

Author Bio

Fiona Davis is the *New York Times* bestselling author of several historical fiction novels set in iconic New York City buildings, including THE STOLEN QUEEN, THE MAGNOLIA PALACE, THE ADDRESS and THE LIONS OF

FIFTH AVENUE, which was a Good Morning America book club pick. She's also the author of SAMANTHA: THE NEXT CHAPTER, the first legacy novel for American Girl. Her articles have appeared in publications like *The Wall Street Journal* and the *Oprah Magazine*.

She first came to New York as an actress but fell in love with writing after getting a master's degree at Columbia Journalism School. Her books have been translated into over 20 languages, and she's based in New York City.

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