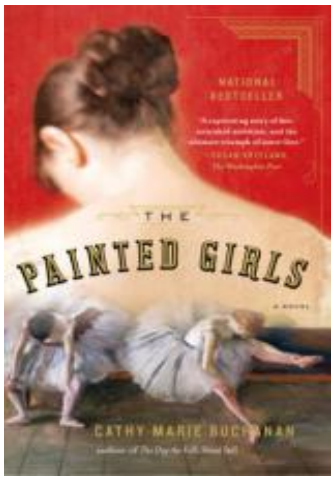
The Painted Girls

by Cathy Marie Buchanan



About the Book

1878 Paris. Following their father?s sudden death, the van Goethem sisters find their lives upended. Without his wages, and with the small amount their laundress mother earns disappearing into the absinthe bottle, eviction from their lodgings seems imminent. With few options for work, Marie is dispatched to the Paris Opéra, where for a scant 17 francs a week, she will be trained to enter the famous ballet. Her older sister, Antoinette, finds work as an extra in a stage adaptation of Émile Zola?s naturalist masterpiece *L?Assommoir*.

Marie throws herself into dance and is soon modeling in the studio of Edgar Degas, where her image will forever be immortalized as *Little Dancer Aged Fourteen*. There she meets a wealthy male patron of the ballet, but might the assistance he offers come with strings attached? Meanwhile Antoinette, derailed by her love for the dangerous Émile Abadie, must choose between honest labor and the more profitable avenues open to a young woman of the Parisian demimonde.

Set at a moment of profound artistic, cultural, and societal change, THE PAINTED GIRLS is a tale of two remarkable sisters rendered uniquely vulnerable to the darker impulses of ?civilized society.? In the end, each will come to realize that her salvation, if not survival, lies with the other.

Discussion Guide

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 Degas interested in making? Why are his innovations so important for the history of art? Do you see empathy or hostility toward the dancers in his artworks?

2. 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?

3. *?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?

4. 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?

5. *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 ballet dancers on the Opéra stage. Does Marie experience true grace while dancing? Without the ballet can Marie be fully content?

6. *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 Lefebrve?s sofa.What leads her to such an idea? Are such misconceptions common among sisters?

7. 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?

8. In what instances does Antoinette?s bold temperament hinder her? When does it serve her well?

9. *?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 based on appearance?

10. *?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?

11. *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?

12. 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 refusal to tell even white lies by the end of the book?

13. 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?

14. Have you seen *Little Dancer*? What were your impressions? Have they changed after reading **The Painted Girls**? How?

15. Will you recommend **The Painted Girls** to a friend? A sister? Why?

Author Bio

New York Times bestseller and book club favourite Cathy Marie Buchanan is the author of three novels.

Her most recent is DAUGHTER OF BLACK LAKE. Her previous novel, THE PAINTED GIRLS, was a *New York Times* bestseller, a #1 national bestseller in Canada, and was named a best book of the year by NPR, *Good Housekeeping* and Goodreads. Her debut novel, THE DAY THE FALLS STOOD STILL, was a *New York Times* bestseller, a Barnes & Noble Recommends selection, and a Canada Reads Top 40 Essential Canadian Novels of the Decade. Her work has been translated into nine languages.

Buchanan holds a BSc (Honours Biochemistry) and an MBA from Western University, and recently became a certified yoga instructor. She lives in Toronto.

Critical Praise

"THE PAINTED GIRLS is historical fiction at its finest, awash in period details of the Paris of Degas and Zola while remaining, at its heart, the poignant story of three sisters struggling to stay together even as they find themselves pulled toward different, and often misunderstood, dreams. Cathy Marie Buchanan also explores the uneasy relationship between artist and muse with both compassion and soul-searing honesty."

? Melanie Benjamin, author of ALICE I HAVE BEEN

"Part mystery, part love story, THE PAINTED GIRLS breathes heart and soul into a fascinating era of the City of Lights. One can't help but be drawn in by this compelling and lyrical tale of sister love and rivalry."

? Heidi W. Durrow, author of THE GIRL WHO FELL FROM THE SKY

"Beautiful and haunting. From the first page, I was swept up and enchanted."

? Amy Greene, author of BLOODROOT

"Will hold you enthralled as it spools out the vivid story of young sisters in late 19th century Paris struggling to transcend their lives of poverty through the magic of dance. I guarantee, you will never look at Edgar Degas?s immortal sculpture of the *Little Dancer* in quite the same way again."

? Kate Alcott, author of THE DRESSMAKER

The Painted Girls

by Cathy Marie Buchanan

Publication Date: February 4, 2014
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 416 pages
Publisher: Riverhead Trade
ISBN-10: 1594632294
ISBN-13: 9781594632297