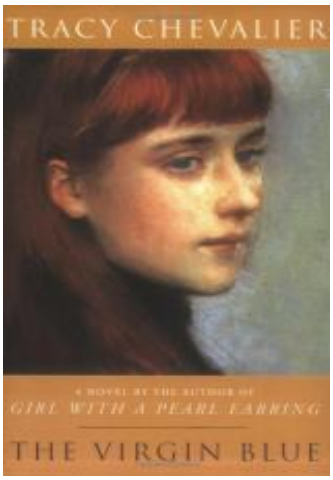
ReadingGroupGuides
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The Virgin Blue

by Tracy Chevalier



About the Book

Before she introduced the world to Griet, the heroine of her *New York Times* bestselling novel **Girl With a Pearl Earring**, Tracy Chevalier wrote another book, never published in the United States. "A beautiful story shot with vivid colors," (*The Times*, London) **The Virgin Blue** is a novel of passion and intrigue that compels readers to the very last page.

In **The Virgin Blue**, Tracy Chevalier transports us back to 16th-century France during the development of the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent persecution of the Huguenots-followers of John Calvin's preaching of the "Truth." Isabelle du Moulin-called "La Rousse" for her copper-colored hair-is tormented and shunned by her hardworking, God-fearing Huguenot community, suspicious of her lingering adoration for the Virgin Mary, her skills at midwifery, her mysterious association with wild wolves, and her fiery red hair. Pregnant with an illegitimate child, Isabelle marries above her station-into the severe Tournier family, outwardly stoic followers of the Truth who covertly adhere to older, pagan superstitions.

More than four centuries later, Ella Turner, an American, and her husband Rick move to a small town in France. While in France, Ella hopes to brush up on her French, qualify to practice as a midwife, and start a family. Village life turns out to be less than idyllic when dreams of a disturbing color blue get between her and her plans. Her nightmares of the color blue, and her father's suggestion, lead Ella investigate her French Huguenot ancestry, trace their flight into Switzerland following the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and unearth the sinister secret the family has buried for four hundred years. However, this task is not an easy one. Ella, knowing little more than her family's original surname, Tournier, begins her research at a local library, finding only a negligible amount of information on her ancestry. During her quest, she befriends Jean Paul-a dark, handsome, Byronic librarian, whose magnetism becomes increasingly difficult to resist-and discovers too many parallels with the past to dismiss as coincidence. The one afternoon, Ella discovers her brown hair inexplicably begun to turn red?

Alternating between the stories of Ella and Isabelle, **The Virgin Blue** is a haunting tale of ancestral legacies set against a dazzlingly descriptive portrait of French provincial life today, as well as of the hardships-and harsh beauty-of life in the sixteenth century.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the commonalities between Isabelle and Ella. Do you feel that they mirror each other?

2. Compare Isabelle's 16th century France to Ella's modern day France. Are there any similarities? Differences?

3. Do you think Ella is harsh on Rick for his inability to understand her? Do you think she is justified in her behavior?

4. Does your opinion of Jean Paul fluctuate throughout the novel?

5. How Ella's goal of getting pregnant interrupted? What does the interruption say about her feeling toward Rick?

6. How do the locals in France receive Ella? Does Rick have the same experience? Would Ella have known what the locals were saying about her without Jean Paul telling her?

7. Describe Ella's relationship with her cousin Jacob like? How do he and his wife help Ella feel "at home"?

8. Discuss the significance of Ella's hair gradually turning red. Discuss her reaction. What is Rick's reaction?

9. Who do you consider to be the heroine of this novel?

10. What was your reaction to Ella finding Marie? What was your reaction to Ella showing Sylvie Marie's bones?

11. Why does Ella get psoriasis? What does it represent? How does it make her feel about herself? How does Rick react to it?

12. Hannah's last audible words are "we are safe". Why does she stop speaking?

13. How does Ella know that the baby she conceived is Rick's and not Jean Paul's? Do you think she'd rather be pregnant with Jean Paul's baby?

14. Why does Ella steal Jean Paul's blue shirt? How does this link them metaphorically?

15. Discuss Rick's reaction to Ella's affair with Jean Paul.

16. Overall, do you consider this to be Ella's story or Isabelle's story?

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.

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