SUMMARY

Renoir is inspired to paint “Luncheon of the Boating Party” and while doing so is drawn into the lives of the thirteen people featured as they enjoy a Parisian summer during the late 1800’s.

BIOGRAPHY (Bookbrowse.com)

In her own words ....

Coming out of the Louvre for the first time in 1971, dizzy with new love, I stood on Pont Neuf and made a pledge to myself that the art of this newly discovered world in the Old World would be my life companion. Never had history been more vibrant, its voices more resonating, its images more gripping. On this first trip to Europe, I felt myself a pilgrim: To me, even secular places such as museums and ruins were imbued with the sacred. Painting, sculpture, architecture, music, religious and social history—I was swept away with all of it, wanting to read more, to learn languages, to fill my mind with rich, glorious, long-established culture wrought by human desire, daring, and faith. I wanted to keep a Gothic cathedral alive in my heart. My imagination exploded with the gaiety of the Montmartre dancers at Moulin de la Galette, the laborer whose last breath in his flattened chest was taken under the weight of a stone fallen from the Duomo under construction in Florence, the apprentice who cut himself preparing glass for the jeweled windows of Sainte Chapelle, the sweating quarry worker aching behind his crowbar at Carrara to release a marble that would become the Pietà.

In a fashion I couldn’t imagine then, I have been true to this pledge. I have brought to life the daughter of the Dutch painter Vermeer who secretly yearned to paint the Delft she loved. I’ve given voice to the Italian Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, raped at seventeen by her painting teacher, the first woman to paint large scale figures from history and scripture previously reserved for men. On my own continent, I’ve entered deep British Columbian forests with Emily Carr, whose love for native people took her to places proper white women didn’t go. My imagination has followed Modigliani’s daughter around Paris searching for shreds of information about the father she never knew. I’ve imagined myself a poor wetnurse, bereaved of her own baby so that a rich woman, Berthe Morisot, might paint. I’ve taken my seventeenth century Tuscan shoemaker to Rome to have his longed-for religious experience under the Sistine ceiling. I’ve followed Renoir’s models to cabarets and boat races, to war and elopement, to the Folies-Bergère and luncheons by the Seine.

Discussion Questions
1. How do you think Renoir’s humble beginnings affected his life and his painting?

2. Describe what you think was going through Renoir’s mind as he took on the technical challenge of this painting. Was he ready for this? How was he to achieve the perspective? Position the figures? Anchor the terrace? Convey the river below?

3. Besides Renoir, how do other characters explore the issue of creative expression? In whom is this yearning most deeply felt? What effect does the gathering of these people have on each other? While reading this book, could you imagine being a model in the painting? What would it have been like for you? Elaborate on how you would have fit in or not.

4. Discuss the level of commitment each character had to the painting. How did their involvement affect the painting? Do you relate to any one of the characters in the painting Luncheon of the Boating Party?

5. How do the separate models’ plots act upon the progress of the painting and enlighten a single common theme? Which of the male models is your favorite? And of the female models? Why does each hold a place in your affections?

6. How did the fact that there was time pressure to finish the painting affect its result? Would the painting have turned out differently if Renoir had had more time to work on it?

7. Renoir seems to fall in love over and over again with the two things he most adored: the female form and the riverscape. He saw one woman as color, another as line. Was there something about the season in which he was painting and his relationships with Aline and Alphonsine that contributed to the overall effect of the image?

8. Why did Renoir hate the term “Impressionist” so much?

9. What does Luncheon of the Boating Party suggest about finding oneself in life and in love? Is there something unique about the way an artist finds his or her way?

10. In what ways, if any, did the novel surprise you? How do you react to a novel that incorporates real and well-known people as characters? Did anything in the novel affect the way you had previously thought about Renoir? Impressionism? French culture?

11. What in the story of this painting gives you a fresh perspective on understanding and developing the relationships and creative inclinations in your own life?

(Questions issued by publisher.)
Reviews Detail:

**Booklist Reviews**

"Starred Review"- Once again--to the delight of her legion of fans--the best-selling author of Girl in Hyacinth Blue (1999) and The Passion of Artemesia (2002) imaginatively uses art history as the basis for a carefully constructed historical novel. Vreeland turns this time to French impressionist master Auguste Renoir's famous painting Luncheon of the Boating Party, which depicts a group of people (in 1880) enjoying leisure time on the terrace of a riverside restaurant. The current conditions in the life of the painter himself launch the author on an amazingly engrossing reinvigoration of the lives of the individuals who modeled for Renoir for that work, all of whom were actual people, and all are given a third dimension in Vreeland's lovely prose, beyond the two dimensions in which they were painted. Renoir's purpose was to create not only a masterpiece but also a work that would solve the dilemma of his continuing to "belong" to the impressionist school of which he had been a primary founder; in other words, he put his reputation on the line with Luncheon. There are, then, basically three levels of "atmosphere" swirling through the pages of this riveting, complex novel: Renoir's issues in composing the painting, the separate and interconnected lives of the 14 individuals appearing in it, and the spirit of la vie moderne, the new modes of living, thinking, and expressing as conducted by the French arts community at the time. ((Reviewed February 15, 2007)) Copyright 2007 Booklist Reviews.

**Kirkus Reviews**

In her fourth art-related historical, Vreeland (Girl in Hyacinth Blue, 1999, etc.) provides an in-depth look at one of Renoir's most famous paintings (its name is her novel's title). Maison Fournaise, on the Seine outside of Paris, is one of Renoir's favorite haunts. One July day in 1880, the 39-year-old artist is at the restaurant/hotel/boat rental when he reads a Zola essay critical of the Impressionists. It goads him into action. He will paint a scene of boaters on the upper terrace, a wide canvas work that will surpass his Montmartre spectacle Bal au Moulin de la Galette. But time is short and money is tight. He has just two months to take advantage of the summer light. He must find money for paints, for modeling fees and for eight Sunday luncheons for his group. The female models must be women he could love. Alphonsine and Angèle are naturals; the former is the owner's daughter, the latter a bawdy child of Montmartre; both women glow with vitality. He adds the self-styled Circe, beautiful but temperamental, foisted on him by a salon hostess; she will provoke a crisis when she quits, refusing to be done in profile. Renoir finds a miraculous replacement in Aline, a 19-year-old seamstress he will marry, years later. There are other model problems: One man is involved in a duel; there is constant anxiety over the total number (13 must be avoided). Vreeland maintains the suspense while skillfully providing context. The traumas of the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune are only ten years distant; Alphonsine is a war widow, a male model is a wounded veteran. The politics of the art world are unremitting; the once-cohesive Impressionists are now split three ways. Degas mocks Renoir for seeing life through rose-colored glasses; too bad. Joyful conviviality is as valid as squalor. The finished product affirms Renoir's credo: "Art was love made visible."Vreeland's love for Renoir is made palpable in this brilliant reconstruction.

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**Library Journal Reviews**

Narrated by Renoir and the friends he featured in his famed Luncheon of the Boating Party, this work allows us to visit 19th-century France. With an 11-city tour. Copyright 2007 Reed Business Information.

**Library Journal Reviews**

One of the most significant paintings of the impressionist period is Renoir's Luncheon of the Boating Party, and it's hard to imagine that a novel could do it justice. Yet this new work from Vreeland (Girl in Hyacinth Blue) does just that. She opens with an agitated Renoir eager to respond to criticism from mile Zola, of
all people, that the Impressionists have yet to produce a work of genius measuring up to their claims. Prodded by Alphonsine, whose family owns a restaurant on the river near his mother's home in Louveciennes, Renoir conceives a masterwork that will truly capture la vie moderne. He will depict a group of canotiers, or boaters, enjoying a festive lunch on the restaurant's veranda. Then he's off to collect models: Alphonsine, of course, and her brother; the painter Gustave Caillebotte; an actress and a model he has loved; and more. Vreeland weaves together their stories in unaffected prose that at first seems too modest for the painting it describes. In the end, she creates a profoundly moving portrait of the creative process and of a community of people who came together for a moment to help create one great work.] Highly recommended. [See Prepub Alert, LJ 1/07.]—Barbara Hoffert, Library Journal

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**Publishers Weekly Reviews**

Imagining the banks of the Seine in the thick of la vie moderne, Vreeland (Girl in Hyacinth Blue) tracks Auguste Renoir as he conceives, plans and paints the 1880 masterpiece that gives her vivid fourth novel its title. Renoir, then 39, pays the rent on his Montmartre garret by painting "overbred society women in their fussy parlors," but, goaded by negative criticism from mile Zola, he dreams of doing a breakout work. On July 20, the daughter of a resort innkeeper close to Paris suggests that Auguste paint from the restaurant's terrace. The party of 13 subjects Renoir puts together (with difficulty) eventually spends several Sundays drinking and flirting under the spell of the painter's brush. Renoir, who declares, "I only want to paint women I love," falls desperately for his newest models, while trying to win his last subject back from her rich fiancé. But Auguste and his friends only have two months to catch the light he wants and fend off charges that he and his fellow Impressionists see the world "through rose-colored glasses." Vreeland achieves a detailed and surprising group portrait, individualized and immediate. (May)

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