



Keeping the World Away

MARGARET FORSTER

An expertly researched account of Gwen John's early artist career precedes the fictional provenance of John's 1907 painting; A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris. Biographical facts and novel storytelling combine to reveal the stories of five women who are intricately connected by the struggles of modern life and the impact that one quiet and unassuming painting has on their lives. Page numbers refer to Keeping the World Away, Margaret Forster. New York: Ballantine Books. 2008.

1. Reread the prologue. Do you recognize the main character? How does a young girl's experience at the Tate prepare readers for the novel?

2. Gwen lives in two Paris apartments during her affair with Rodin, one on the rue St. Placide and the second an attic room where she paints the novel's signature painting, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris* (Museums Sheffield: Graves Gallery). Reread Margaret Forster's description of the painting below and use the link to see a digital image.

(p.73-74) "The person who lived in this room was in perfect control of her emotions. She had been out for a walk and picked the flowers and had come home to it well satisfied."

http://www.wikigallery.org/wiki/painting_198019/Gwen-John/A-Corner-of-the-Artists-Room-Paris

Forster describes a second painting, *Girl Sewing at a Window* (private collection, England), by Gwen John that also depicts an interior living space. See the description and link below.

(p.69) "She painted a woman in black in front of the window, sewing. The dense black of her frock told its own tale. Everything else was lightness and color".

http://www.wikigallery.org/wiki/painting_198116/Gwen-John/Woman-Sewing-at-a-Window

Compare the two paintings. What are the similarities and differences? Is there any significance to the windows being open or closed? If so, what does it suggest?

3. Is *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris* a self-portrait? Must a self-portrait include an image of the artist or can the artist's identity be revealed through a place?

4. After a long absence from Rodin, Gwen realizes that her painting is not an accurate portrayal of herself rather a picture of the woman Rodin wants her to be.

(p.75) "She wanted to be rid of the first version, the one painted with such joy. The next she would complete in a different mood and hide. Then she would be done with trying to make herself into what her lover wanted."

Gwen is determined to change her perspective and gives *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris* to Ursula. The painting travels through the hands of five women and acts as a catalyst for change in each woman's life. Discuss the changes that Charlotte, Stella, Lucasta, Ailsa and Gillian make as a result of owning the painting.

5. Each woman in the novel interprets Gwen's painting in a slightly different manner. Discuss these differences. Do you agree with one woman's interpretation of the painting or do you have your own?

6. The women struggle to find themselves and struggle to find an environment where they can flourish. Can you personally relate to this struggle? How did you find yourself? Did you need to make changes in your life? If so, what were they?

7. Margaret Forster creates unique and well developed characters in *Keeping the World Away*. Charlotte is a dreamer; Stella is a beautiful but restless caregiver; Lucasta a mistress; Ailsa an independent adventurer and Gillian a bold and curious young woman looking to uncover a family secret. Do you see yourself in any of Forster's characters? How would you describe your personality?

8. Think of a place in your home or community that most genuinely reflects you. Imagine that place and its contents. If you were preparing to paint a picture of that location would you include everything? Would you omit some things or add things? Why? What does this place reveal about you?

Further Resources:

Fryberger, Betsy. *Gwen John: Paintings and Drawings from the Collection of John Quinn and Others*. Exh. cat. London: Browse and Darby, 2007.

Rewald, Sabine. *Rooms with a View: The Open Window in the 19th Century*. Exh. cat. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

Roe, Sue. *Gwen John: A Painter's Life*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2001.