BOOK CLUB EXPRESS

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The Glassmaker

by Tracy Chevalier

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Discussion Questions

1. Time flows differently in THE GLASSMAKER's Venice. Characters skip across centuries while aging only a few years at a time. They live through several eras and major historical events, including a plague, two world wars and a global pandemic. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story of Orsola and the Rosso family in this way? What did you think of this decision?

2. Early on in the novel, Maria Barovier tells Orsola, "Beads fill the spaces between things....
They are inconsequential, and women can make them because of that." Did you agree with the reasoning behind Maria's statement? Consider the shifting roles of women and beadmaking in the Rosso family business over time. At what point did you feel that Orsola's beads became "consequential"?

3. Marco, Orsola's stubborn and hot-headed eldest brother, ridicules her plan to help support their family by selling beads. Nevertheless, Orsola forges her own relationships with the family's business partners and manages to sell her beads independently from their other glassware. What barriers did Orsola have to overcome --- within her family, her line of work and society at large --- to successfully advocate for herself as a businesswoman? Do women today face similar challenges in vying for their work to be taken seriously?

4. Poor business decisions and a tough economic climate drive the Rossos to the brink of financial ruin. What tensions among the members of the Rosso family emerge during this time? On the other hand, how do they draw strength from one another? Why do you think familial bonds can endure even in the face of situations that threaten to tear them apart?

5. The Muranese are fiercely loyal to their island, and Orsola herself displays a clear disdain of terraferma --- the world beyond her beloved Murano. How does Orsola's love for Antonio clash with her love for her home? If you were in her situation --- torn between following the man whom she loves or remaining with her family and the place where she had grown up --- which would you have picked?

6. Long after Antonio has parted ways with Orsola, she continues to collect the glass dolphins that are sent her way. Do you think that it was acceptable for her to do so? Do you feel that this impacted Orsola's commitment to her husband and daughter?

7. THE GLASSMAKER traces Orsola's life from girlhood into adolescence, motherhood, and beyond. How do her responsibilities to her family and her work expand as she ages? Do you believe the demands placed upon her are reasonable? How do the roles that the Rosso women are expected to fulfill compare to those expected of women today?

8. Orsola finds a steady companion in Domenego, the African gondolier who serves Gottfried Klingenberg, her family's longtime trade partner. What do you think was the significance of including his character in Orsola's story? What did he reveal about the world of THE GLASSMAKER that the Rosso family could not?

9. Marco, Giacomo, Antonio and Stefano --- some of the most important men to Orsola and to the Rosso family business --- have vastly different demeanors and ways of navigating life. Each of them, however, must contend with the pressure of leading in the absence of a maestro and the societal expectations that come with being men in business. How do each of these men uphold or subvert the standards of masculinity imposed upon them?

10. The story is told in close third person, looking over Orsola's shoulder. There is a big emphasis on her relationships with people: family, friends, the community, business. Which do you feel is the most important relationship in the book and why? Put another way, which scene is the climax and resolution of the story: Stefano's funeral, Domenego leaving, the revelation of the makers of the glass dolphins? Or something else?

11. Over the course of the novel, Venice declines from a booming hub of commerce to a tourist attraction overrun by novelty shops. Along the way, the Rossos reluctantly adapt to cut costs, such as when they pivot to making smaller and cheaper seed beads. Do you think that artistry and profit are inherently at odds with each other? To what extent do you feel it is acceptable to compromise quality for financial gain?

12. Orsola sees generations of Rossos pass away, move out of Murano, and abandon the family craft. She laments, "The Rosso family is falling apart," to which Stella replies, "No, it's not, it's just changing." With whose outlook do you feel more aligned? What do you think is the distinction between a family simply changing as opposed to falling apart?

13. THE GLASSMAKER ends in the present day, in a world recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. After traveling through time with the Rossos, how did it feel to see them navigate the pandemic, particularly compared to the plague of 1575? Did the Rossos' experiences resonate with your own?

Author Interview

Booktime: Interview with Tracy Chevalier, author of The Glassmaker

In this innovative novel from the author of The Girl with the Pearl Earring, we travel through the life of Murano glassmaker Orsolo Rosso, and we also experience the changing centuries, from 1486 to the present day. We interviewed Tracy Chevalier to discover her inspirations.

What drew you write a novel following the life of a female glassmaker on Murano?
A reader suggested it! Normally I politely ignore suggestions from others. But after an event a man came up and said I should write about Venetian glass beads, as they were used in trade worldwide and were made mainly by women. He even gave me some books on them. I filed the idea away and brought it out again when my husband asked when I was going to set a book in a place we actually wanted to visit. 'How about Venice' I said, and reached for those bead books.

How did you develop the unusual timeline in the novel?
I wanted to cover 500 years of Venetian history, from the height of the city's prosperity to its transformation into a tourist destination. At the same time I wanted to follow the fortunes of one family. I wasn't keen on them dying and readers having to care about their descendants. I was pondering this problem and thought, 'Well, they just don't die, then. They skip through time. It felt right to have time run differently in Venice; it's a unique, magical place where you feel disconnected from the rest of the world. I wrote much of it during the pandemic, when we all experienced time differently, so it didn't seem crazy.

The book charts the many changes in Murano and Venice through the centuries. Did you do a lot of research into both the place and the history?
Thousands of books have been written about Venice, so the hard part was choosing which to read. I spent a lot of time in Venice and especially on Murano, watching glassmakers work. I got to know an American glass artist and her Muranese glass maestro husband, and they were incredibly helpful answering questions and introducing me to people. I also tried my hand at making beads, so I could describe the process more accurately.

The novel also takes us through both the plague and the pandemic. Do you think there is a parallel between these two events?

Yes. This became clear when I was researching the 1575 Venetian plague. The lockdown had just lifted and I was able to do research at the British Library, sitting two metres away from others and wear a mask. It was so strange reading about all the things the Venetians did that we did too: quarantines, tracing contacts, quack 'cures'. By comparison, we had it easy, with our ventilators, medicine, and eventually a vaccine. In Venice a quarter of the population died.

At the heart of the novel is a love story between Orsola and Antonio. Do you think that Orsola would have had to give up some of her freedom if she'd followed her heart?
I don't want to give too much away here, but if Orsola had chosen differently she wouldn't have been able to continue working with glass. As it was, even on Murano women were not part of the glass community, except in making beads, which were considered inconsequential.

The character of Domenego is an interesting one – was he inspired by a real person?
I saw Domenego in a 15th-century painting by Carpaccio called 'Miracle of the Holy Cross at Rialto.' It's full of crowds by the Grand Canal, and right in the centre is a solemn African gondolier. I knew immediately that I wanted to make him into a character, as a reminder both of the varied Venetian population, and of the tangible presence of the slave trade – which glass beads were a part of.

Which other authors inspire you in your work?
I learned a lot from Rose Tremain, my tutor at University of East Anglia when I did an MA in creative writing. I've also been impressed by Maggie O'Farrell's successful pivot to historical novels. On a sentence-by-sentence basis, no one does it better than Sarah Waters: beautifully drawn characters, unabashedly great plots, and not a cliché in sight.

What do independent bookshops mean to you?
It's like the difference between shopping at a supermarket and a deli. The supermarket may have more, but the deli person behind the counter has chosen carefully and knows their stock well, and has opinions. I love that.

https://www.nationalbooktokens.com/long-reads/booktime-interview-with-tracy-chevalier-author-of-the-glassmaker?srsltid=AfmBOor4xJpWbN_7svyhMgRNjQ-GuONBvxJSJycvcujYPtFvCwGoOOZi

Author Biography

I was born and grew up in Washington, DC. After graduating with a BA in English from Oberlin College in Ohio, I moved to London in the mid-1980s. I now have dual nationality, but my accent is still American.

I worked for several years in publishing as a reference book editor, while writing short stories on the side. Eventually I decided to focus on my own words rather than others', and left office life to do an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. There I began my first novel, The Virgin Blue.

After my second novel, Girl with a Pearl Earring, took off I was able to write full-time. I've written 11 novels so far, and am working on my 12th.

It's hard to write 8 hours a day; after a while words start to fail. So I do other things too. I've also been involved with various organizations: as a Trustee of the British Library, the Society of Authors, the Royal Literary Fund, and the Dorset Museum & Art Gallery; as a Patron of the Dorchester Literary Festival, Lyme Regis Museum, Fine Cell Work charity; and as an Ambassador for the Woodland Trust and First Story charity.

I do a lot of research for my novels since they are mainly set in other times and places. If possible I like to do what my characters do, as then it's easier to understand it and describe it. So I tried painting when I wrote Pearl Earring; quilting for The Last Runaway; needlepoint for A Single Thread; glass beads for The Glassmaker. I visited a weaving studio for The Lady and the Unicorn; spent time with redwoods and sequoias for At the Edge of the Orchard; looked for fossils on the beaches near Lyme Regis for Remarkable Creatures.

https://tracychevalier.com/about-me

Reviews

The Glassmaker by Tracy Chevalier review – time-skipping Venetian tour de force

A bead maker barely ages in 500 years in a subtle novel that wrestles with historic events while showing how much remains unchanged

Towards the end of Tracy Chevalier's sparkling new book, heroine Orsola Rosso, a Venetian glassmaker, considers the rearing horse figurines her fellow artisans churn out for tourists. "Why reach for the familiar?" she chides, before acknowledging that she, too, is occasionally guilty of replicating old work rather than creating something wholly fresh. "More and more this was the case as she grew older and more jaded."

It's not inconceivable that Chevalier herself, now in her 60s, might have experienced similar misgivings. Certainly, it would account for an altogether unexpected element to this, her 11th novel. The Glassmaker shares much with its predecessors, whose crafty female protagonists – among them embroiders and quilt makers, weavers and printers – are called upon to wrestle with societal constraints at various points in history, from the Dutch golden age to 19th-century Ohio. Like a glass marble's cats-eye of colour, however, it features a significant twist.

The story starts in 1486, when dark-haired Orsola is just 17, with "arched eyebrows and an air of impatience, as if waiting for something to happen". By the time it ends centuries later, circa the present day, much has indeed happened, yet Orsola is still only in her late 60s, and those she cares for have, by and large, been similarly slow to age.

Chevalier tethers this fantastical conceit of "time alla Veneziana", as she calls it, to the metaphor of a skimming stone, angled out over the waters of the Venetian lagoon to the famed glassmaking island of Murano, home to the Rosso family and their workshop. It's there that Orsola's father dies in a gruesome accident, pitching the business into uncertainty as her volatile brother, Marco, takes over.

To help make ends meet, Orsola learns bead making, mentored by a rare (and real-life) maestra, Maria Barovier. Beads, as Maria explains, "fill the spaces between things […] They don't get in the way. They are inconsequential, and women can make them because of that".

Like Chevalier's skimming stone, the narrative touches down at distinct moments over the course of more than half a millennia – events of local and often global significance, playfully recapped at the start of each section, from the plague years to the Age of Enlightenment ("Literature: the modern novel has been born. Celebrations!"), the Great War to Covid. As the

entwined economic fortunes of the City of Water and the Island of Glass rise and fall, there are vibrant cameos for Casanova and socialite Luisa Casati, while fictional characters, including an enslaved gondolier, illuminate lesser-known facets of Venice's history.

As for Orsola, she will experience love – a defining heartbreak, too – marriage and motherhood but it's her beads that will sustain her. The work that Marco dismisses as escrementi di coniglio (rabbit droppings) allows her to express her creativity, forge lasting alliances beyond her class and experience unprecedented agency. She is even commissioned to make a necklace for the empress Josephine.

Chevalier admits in her acknowledgments that it took multiple rewrites to make the book's successive time shifts work. They might easily have felt gimmicky. Instead, she uses them to highlight not just change but all that remains the same. And so Venice is a place whose essential character somehow endures, despite its loss of position as the world's trading hub, despite mass tourism, rising sea levels and floods. Likewise, Orsola, whose lot as a woman alters powerfully as the eras fly by, remains at heart her nimble, determined self, even if she now has a mobile in her hand and feels, finally, older.

Will Chevalier's readers find familiar elements here? Yes, but they seem less a failure of creativity than a triumph of craft. The sparing intensity to her scene-setting, her vital lightness of touch, her ability to show that historical fiction, at its strongest, always tells a story of the present as well as the past – these are qualities born of the kind of painstaking practice that requires not just talent but something every bit as amorphous as molten glass: time.

https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/sep/17/the-glassmaker-by-tracy-chevalier-review-time-skipping-venetian-tour-de-force