BOOK CLUB EXPRESS

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All the Beauty in the World:

The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Me

by Patrick Bringley

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Discussion Questions

1. Why did Bringley find his “low skill” job as a museum guard more stimulating than his prestigious position at The New Yorker magazine? Have you ever encountered such a paradox in your own life? Can you think of other jobs that might be surprisingly interesting or nourishing?

2. Bringley is discussing a Lamentation painting when he writes: “Much of the greatest art, I find, seeks to remind us of the obvious. This is real, is all it says. Take the time to stop and imagine more fully the things you already know.” What does the author mean by this? Have you ever used a work of art in this way? Did anything in the book make you “stop and imagine more fully” something obvious?

3. Bringley is discussing Peter Bruegel’s painting The Harvesters when he writes: “I am sometimes not sure which is the more remarkable: that life lives up to great paintings, or that great paintings live up to life.” How do you interpret this line? Can you think of aspects of your life that have reminded you of art, or art that has exquisitely described a part of your life?

4. Bringley writes: “The more time I spend in the Met, the more convinced I am it isn’t a museum of art history, not principally. Its interests reach up to the heavens and down into worm-ridden tombs and touch on virtually every aspect of how it feels and what it means to live in the space between.” What sorts of things do you think you can learn by visiting an art museum? How would you apply the lessons of the book when you next visit a museum?

5. When discussing his role as a guard, Bringley writes: “I can’t spend the time. I can’t fill it, or kill it, or fritter it into smaller bits. What might be excruciating if suffered for an hour or two is oddly easy to bear in large doses.” What is your own relationship to time like? Does it ever slow down for you and allow you to perceive more than you usually do? When?

6. Was there an artwork in the book that you looked up and found particularly interesting or beautiful?

7. What surprised you about the way that the Met operates, either in the galleries or behind the scenes?

8. Bringley writes: “I like baffled people. I think they are right to stagger around the Met discombobulated, and more educated people are wrong when they take what they see in stride.” Why does he think this? Out in the wider world are we sometimes too blasé for our own good?

9. In his chapter on Michelangelo and the quilters of Gee’s Bend, Bringley writes: “Meaning is always created locally. The greatest art is produced by people hemmed in by circumstances, making patchwork efforts to create something beautiful, useful, true.” What parallels exist between the Renaissance master and these quilters in rural Alabama?

10. On the last page of the book, Bringley writes: “Sometimes, life can be about simplicity and stillness, in the vein of a watchful guard amid shimmering works of art. But it is also about the head-down work of living and struggling and growing and creating.” Why do you think Bringley ultimately left his job at the Met? Do you have each of these aspects in your own life in some sense: on the one hand, simplicity and stillness; on the other hand, struggling and growing?ous position at The New Yorker magazine? Have you ever encountered such a paradox in your own life? Can you think of other jobs that might be surprisingly interesting or nourishing?

From: https://www.patrickbringley.com/book-clubs

Author Interview

SCOTT SIMON: Patrick Bringley suffered a profound loss and decided to seek shelter in the most beautiful place he knew. He would spend a decade there as a guard. Let's ask him to read from his new memoir, "All The Beauty In The World: The Metropolitan Museum Of Art And Me."

PATRICK BRINGLEY: (Reading) The mornings are church-mouse quiet. I arrive on post almost a half hour before we open, and there is no one to talk me down to earth. It's just me and the Rembrandts, just me and the Botticellis, just me and these vibrant phantoms I can almost believe are flesh and blood.

SS: Patrick Bringley joins us now from Brooklyn. Thank you so much for being with us.

PB: Thank you so much for having me.

SS: I want to begin with your brother - 26 and died of cancer. You were working in events planning at The New Yorker. What do you think the loss of your brother set off in you?

PB: Well, when I was working at The New Yorker, of course, I - it was an office job, and I had my mind on office politics, and I thought I was sort of doing big things. But then, your brother gets ill, and you're spending all this time in quiet hospital rooms. And you realize that something momentous is happening in those quiet rooms that maybe makes what's happening over at the office feel not so momentous. And it set off in me a kind of desire, a need, to be more in touch with just fundamental things that are maybe painful, but beautiful as well.

SS: Because I think a lot of people will understand seeking a day or two of solace at a great museum - but you were a security guard there for 10 years.

PB: That's right. Time works differently when you're a guard. And I think when I was inside that place and you have an hour and then another hour and then a day and another day and another month, your mind works on a bit of a longer wavelength. And I was very happy to have all that time to sort of soak in that place that's inexhaustible and kind of develop a more profound relationship to what's inside of it.

SS: How did you begin to relate to the art, seeing it day after day? I mean, were there old friends that you would look up?

PB: Yeah. When I first started, my home section was the "Old Master" paintings wing. And I was very happy to be there because many of those paintings, which are sometimes very sad - but they're also so beautiful. They're sort of luminously sad. And I was happy to be there because it sort of reminded me of the atmosphere sitting in those hospital rooms. And there was something very consoling about that.

But you develop all different relationships with different works of art. And just like you said, in some ways, they're your companions. They sort of hang around on the walls, and you are

leaning on the walls. And there are some that I thought of in my mind as kind of long-lookers, meaning ones that you keep returning to, and they get better. If you view them sort of passively, they shine a little bit more than they would if you just look at them, you know, briefly with concentration.

SS: Like?

PB: Like, I always think of Pieter Bruegel's "The Harvesters." One thing I say is sometimes paintings feel like a window that just sort of cut a hole through the wall, and you're just looking into this other world. And this is a landscape from 1565, and it's quite large, and it has these gold and green sweep off to a distant horizon. So it seems like a picture that just encompasses the world. But then, your eyes follow the path forward, and you also have these peasants in the foreground, who are having a meal under a pear tree. And that also seems so relatable and so human. It just kind of encompasses it all.

SS: Is your job when you're a guard to watch the art or the people?

PB: It's a little of both. I mean, they tell you, protect life and property, in that order. So if the place was burning down, we'd protect you before we'd protect the Rembrandts.

SS: You began to put labels on certain kind of visitors. Can I ask you about a few?

PB: Sure.

SS: The sightseer?

PB: The sightseer. So that's someone who is sort of galloping through the museum. They've got maybe five things on their checklist. They want to see "Washington Crossing The Delaware." They want to see the Egyptian temple. And that's great. You know, it's a big part of their trip to New York City.

SS: Yeah. What about the dinosaur hunter?

PB: So this is going to be a parent with small children. Maybe it's their first visit to New York City. And they are peering around corners and thinking that they are in The Museum in New York City, and they're saying, why is there all of this art? And of course, they're thinking about the Natural History Museum right across Central Park. So they'll come up to me, and I'll say, I'm sorry, you have to go across the park to the west. But hey, here, we've got mummies. We've got arms and armor. Maybe your kids will enjoy that.

SS: (Laughter) I didn't know until reading this book that a lot of people who come to the Met just can't keep their hands off the art.

PB: Oh, absolutely. I mean, the ancients who had their Greek and Roman statues, surely they touched those things. Those things sort of call out to be touched in a way. They seem so smooth, and the stones seem so cold. So it's understandable. People just slap their hands down

on it. But also, people just don't know. They don't know. I had a young man - he tried to climb a Venus statue. And I stopped him. He looked at her, and she had a missing head and missing arms. And he looked all around, and he said, so all this broken stuff, it broke in here?

SS: (Laughter) I wondered the same thing. At one point toward the end of the book, you find yourself rehearsing some advice that you would give to visitors. Can I ask you to rehearse a little of that out loud for us?

PB: Absolutely. In some ways, it tracks the course of my 10-year career that I think you want to start out speechless. You want to just wander that place. Don't say anything to anybody, maybe not even a guard, and just lose yourself. Kind of shed whatever it is that you brought into the museum, your more sort of narrow thoughts. And you wander from Egypt to Rome to Mesopotamia just feeling tiny. There's a great sort of relief in that.

But at some point, too, you want to flip the switch, and you want to say, well, you know, the Greeks and the Egyptians, they were people just like I'm a person. And they had hands and hearts kind of like mine. And I'm going to use my head and my heart, and I'm going to think through these questions. And I'm going to pick favorites and decide what I like and what I don't like and decide what I think is true about the world. Learn from art, not just learning about the arts.

SS: Now that you're out of the Met, you have to pay for your own socks?

PB: Oh, I do. Yes. I no longer get the $80 hose allowance in my paycheck. Simon & Schuster did not provide that.

SS: So there's an $80 sock subsidy.

PB: There is. There is. I can't say that you have to put in receipts. So maybe some of those guards are spending it on beer at Carlow East. But, no, you get that $80 for socks.

SS: Patrick Bringley, his book, "All The Beauty In The World: The Metropolitan Museum Of Art And Me." Thank you so much for being with us.

PB: Thank you so much for having me.

From: https://www.npr.org/2023/02/11/1156306061/patrick-bringley-on-his-book-all-the-beauty-in-the-world

Author Biography

Patrick Bringley is the New York Times bestselling author of All the Beauty in the World, named one of the best books of the year by the New York Public Library, the Financial Times, Audible, the Sunday Times (London), and others. The book, a memoir, recounts his decade working as a guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Patrick has performed All the Beauty in the World as a one-man play, which premiered at the Charleston Literary Festival and was directed by Dominic Dromgoole, formerly the artistic director of the Globe Theatre in London. The New York Times published a feature on the play, which is likely to see more productions — stay tuned. Patrick leads public and private tours of the Met and lectures at museums and other venues around the world, including the National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the University of Virginia, the Saint Louis Art Museum, the National Arts Club, and the Emirates Airlines Festival of Literature in Dubai. All the Beauty in the World is in its tenth printing in hardcover and, upon its paperback release, was named Barnes & Noble's nonfiction pick of the month for November 2024. It's been published in translated editions around the world and is a number one national bestseller in South Korea. Patrick lives with his wife and children in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. All the Beauty in the World is his first book.

From: https://www.patrickbringley.com/about

Reviews

A former museum guard recounts the decade he spent at one of the world's iconic museums.

Disenchanted with a seemingly glamorous post-graduation job at the New Yorker and heartbroken by the untimely death of a beloved brother, Bringley deliberately sought solace in art. At the Met, he gradually forged connections with co-workers from a wide variety of backgrounds, finding a kind of home at the museum. While the author employs the rather hackneyed formula of jumping between past and present, one can't help but be moved by connections he makes between the works over which he stood guard, and the childlike simplicity of the prose suits his sense of wonder. Amused by the ghoulish questions posed by a parade of schoolchildren through the Egyptian mummy section, he reflects on the futility of the mummification process. "The body doesn't make it," he writes. "Believe all you want that some piece of a person is immortal, but a significant part is mortal, inescapably, and mad science will not stop it from breaking down." The author is also intrigued by museumgoers who lack a sense of direction. "I like baffled people," he writes. "I think they are right to stumble around the Met discombobulated….None of us knows much about this subject—the world and all of its beauty." While some of Bringley's personal responses to masterworks are informative and relatable, others border on the saccharine. Writing about a Monet landscape, he notes, "When I experience such a thing, I feel faint but definite tremors in my chest." If these musings sometimes fail to stir us, the accompanying illustrations by McMahon strike just the right balance between simplicity and emotional complexity. Readers seeking sophisticated insights into the inner workings of the Met should look elsewhere, but Bringley offers enough interesting backstories to keep the pages turning.

An emotionally cathartic stroll through the hallowed halls of a beloved institution.

From: https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/patrick-bringley/all-the-beauty-in-the-world-metropolitan/