



The Forest Lover

Susan Vreeland

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In her acclaimed novels, Susan Vreeland has given us portraits of painting and life that are as dazzling as their artistic subjects. Now, in *The Forest Lover* she traces the courageous life and career of Emily Carr, who, more than Georgia O'Keeffe or Frida Kahlo, blazed a path for modern women artists.

Overcoming the confines of Victorian culture, Carr became a major force in modern art by capturing an untamed British Columbia and its indigenous peoples just before industrialization changed them forever. From illegal potlatches in tribal communities to artists studios in pre World War I Paris, Vreeland tells her story with gusto and suspense, giving us a glorious novel that will appeal to lovers of art, native cultures, and lush historical fiction.

The Forest Lover Details

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From Reader Review The Forest Lover for online ebook

Rose says

If being completely honest, I wasn't taken or impressed with "The Forest Lover" in the long haul, and much of the reason isn't because that Susan Vreeland wasn't a talented writer in some respects or even that Emily Carr's story isn't remotely interesting to hear. I was put off by the mundane portrayals, wandering/fragmented portrayal and the stereotypical coats that plagued this work. Really - this woman has a absolutely interesting life and it's presented in this way? I learned more about Emily Carr reading about her in many other sources than this book, and there's no inrtigue that makes the reader want to continue in its progression. The book seems to drag its heels in many places, even as it's written in a series of mini-chapters that revolve around a particular experience or interactions within the artist's life. The problem is that despite this sectioning, the prose feels nice, but the portrayal feels stagnant and dry. She doesn't make use of it in ways that are inventive or even remotely close to being immersive. I felt I couldn't relate with the character much in her interactions, and the purpose of the story often meandered in several sections. Transitions from one measure to the next were not very good at all.

I give it an extra half-star for the strong prose within itself, but I wouldn't recommend this particular book for those who like Emily Carr's work and want to know more about her in an intriguing format. I'll probably look into Vreeland's other offerings because I know she can write well, but this particular story didn't do much more than offer itself in the coat of strong prose, particularly when there were so many other elements working against it.

Overall score: 1.5/5

Ron Charles says

Canadian painter Emily Carr once said, "Nobody could write my hodge-podge life but me." With self-effacing humor, she claimed that biographers couldn't "be bothered with the little drab nothings that have made up my life."

To Susan Vreeland, who's quickly become America's most popular biographer of famous artists, that must have sounded like an irresistible challenge. Her bestselling "Girl in Hyacinth Blue" followed the life of a single Vermeer painting from the 20th century back to its creation in 17th-century Delft. The feminist theme laced delicately through that novel's closing chapters became the heavy-handed impulse of her next book, "The Passion of Artemisia," about the Renaissance painter Artemisia Gentileschi.

Now, with "The Forest Lover," her story of Emily Carr, Vreeland has found perhaps the most appropriate venue yet to express her own exuberant feminism and spirituality. What's more, by immersing herself in Carr's extensive writings, Vreeland has picked up the tenor of the painter's language - her eclectic mysticism, emotional devotion, and single- mindedness. The result is a life story that's sympathetic to a fault.

Born in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1871, Carr grew up the youngest of five sisters. The death of her parents during her teen years left her exposed to the strict rule of her eldest sister, whom she strained against throughout her life. In part to escape that control, Emily dropped out of high school and went to San Francisco to study art at the age of 16. Three years later, she prevailed on her guardian to let her study in

England. But between her frustration with instructors who would teach "ladies" only water colors (not the manly oils) and 18 months in a sanitarium, her trip seemed largely a failure. Feeling weak and confused, she returned home "to the starched and doiled parlor of the yellow, two-story bird cage of a house in Victoria, B.C. where she'd been born, and found only hypocrisy and criticism."

Vreeland picks up the story here when Emily is 33, already a confirmed eccentric, an embarrassment to her prim sisters, who can't fathom why she wants to wander around the forest looking at pagan relics and "socializing with primitives." To Carr, the attraction is profound, though vague: She hopes to "discover what it is about wild places that call to her with such promise." Repeatedly, she canoes alone up the west coast of Vancouver Island to meet skeptical Indians whose knowledge of white people is confined to narrow-minded missionaries or cruel officials.

Even as Carr dedicates herself to understanding, painting, and preserving these native cultures, the Canadian government is engaged in a blunt policy of assimilating what it calls the "First Nations," a process of cultural eradication that involves outlawing native ceremonies, evicting tribes from ancestral lands, and forcing the light of Christianity on a dark race.

The novel is made up of little episodes, sometimes only thinly connected, that hopscotch through Carr's life. We land on her efforts to teach prissy women how to paint, a trip to France that introduced her to Post-impressionism, arguments with her aesthetically dim sisters, her time as a landlady, and an affair that Vreeland invented to dramatize Carr's sexual ambivalence.

Carr's strangely childlike personality comes through well - her guilelessness, her straightforward devotion (or rejection), the enthusiasm that outstrips her diction. Asked how she can paint the wind, Carr answers, "By making the trees go whiz-bang and whoop it up." But in general, these scenes, which should be small gems, are merely small - inadequate to fill in the complicated itinerary of Carr's life and lacking the psychological depth to illuminate her mind.

Vreeland seems unwilling to put much distance between her and her subject, the kind of distance in which the author might have found room to explore the real complexity of this woman's animus. That's especially evident in the many scenes of Carr trekking bravely through the forest, talking only to herself or her dog, looking to paint new Indian totem poles before they're cut down for museums or allowed to rot on the ground. Vreeland repeatedly runs up against the narrow limits of Carr's vague spirituality. Asked why she wants to make pictures of these poles, she effuses, "Because they show a connection. Trees and animals and people. I want white people to see this greatness." Again and again, her misty-eyed enthusiasm for "something deeper," for "the spirit of a thing," fails to enunciate anything but a kind of sincere but gassy euphoria.

Not surprisingly, Carr was a great fan of Walt Whitman, but the many passages of "Leaves of Grass" quoted here are a reminder of how difficult it is to articulate that mystical sense of communion. Frankly, Carr's language can't do it, and Vreeland's determination to stay confined in her subject's vernacular keeps her from doing it either.

Ultimately, two very different friends of Carr emerge as more interesting characters than she is. One is Howard, a mentally impaired man who was brutalized as a boy for his interest in the Indians, and the other is Sophie, a Squamish basket maker who suffers the death of one child after another. Both these people, the kind of strange oddballs that Carr sympathized with, live stretched in painful suspension between cultures that won't accept them. Howard is eventually driven insane by his guardian's insistence that he abandon the Indian songs that animate him, and Sophie is wracked with guilt for alternately betraying her ancestral god

and her Christian God. These are sensitive portraits, drawn with all the necessary pathos, and they indicate the deeper mysteries of faith intimated by Carr's paintings.

But through most of this novel, Vreeland seems unwilling to mix the primary colors on her narrative pallet to produce anything equally suggestive or subtle. Only the final chapters rise to that challenge and provide some truly beautiful, stirring writing. Carr had to be patient for decades, waiting for critics to recognize the power of her dark, lush work. Readers of "The Forest Lover" won't be disappointed for exercising the same perseverance.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0127/p1...>

Cynthia Neale says

Susan Vreeland is a glorious author and a favorite because I love historical fiction (and write it myself). To learn about various artists (or events or people in history) of the past through story deepens my understanding and delights me. This book is about Emily Carr who was a pioneer woman artist in the Pacific Northwest and who sought to overcome not only the prejudices of a woman artist traveling into untamed country, but to overcome the prejudices against the indigenous, native people and paint their sacred, cultural artifacts before they were entirely destroyed and confiscated for museums. It also sorrowfully depicts the dark side of Christianity in seeking to destroy the spirit of the indigenous people through abolishing their culture. The Passion of Artemisia and Girl in Hyacinth Blue are also special books, but the story of Artemisia is especially a favorite.

Jana Bouc says

Stilted formulaic writing. A disappointment. More like a romance novel than good historical fiction.

Paula says

The Forest Lover is historical fiction by author Susan Vreeland about the life and paintings of Emily Carr. Emily was born in British Columbia to a well-to-do family but was not content to spend her days going to church and becoming a high society woman. At the age of 7, her father gave her a paint set and from then on painting was her passion, as was the British Columbia countryside and the indigenous people who lived there. Against her families wishes, Emily sets out into tribal villages to paint Totem poles before they all disappear. It's a time of unrest, with the country making native Potlatches illegal and many of the villages dying out due to disease. Standing totem poles are being purchased or stolen by collectors and are quickly disappearing from the native culture. Emily marches in with her paints, makes friends with the people of the villages, and paints away with her watercolors. Hearing about a new, vibrant technique catching on in Paris, Emily persuades her eldest sister to let go of some of their trust fund and she heads off to Paris for a year of learning. Back in British Columbia, she applies her new skills to her paintings but they are not well accepted by local society. Years later, Emily's paintings are finally revered for the wonderful art that they are. Historical fiction is my favorite genre and this novel was excellent. Vreeland did a fantastic job of portraying Ms. Carr's personality and passion, making her a very 3 dimensional character and bringing us right into her life. I loved Emily's spirit; I loved her friend Sophie, even as my heart broke for her; I loved her friend

Harold, though he broke my heart as well. It's a rare and great novel that can make us bleed for the people involved. How I want a piece of Emily Carr's work to hang in my house and remember her by.

Duane says

I love good historical fiction, especially art history. The Forest Lover is the story of Emily Carr, Canadian artist at the turn of the 20th century, who travels deep into the forests of British Columbia to paint the indigenous people and the symbols of their culture. She also paints landscapes of the dark forests with a style uniquely her own. I've read 5 of Susan Vreeland's novels and she is on top of her game in every one.

NocturnalBlaze says

Un romanzo storico che racconta la storia di Emily Carr, pittrice canadese realmente esistita, ponendo l'accento sulla sua carriera artistica, sul suo sviluppo personale come donna, sul suo rapporto con la cultura indigena e sulle difficoltà che ha dovuto affrontare a causa delle sue scelte di vita. Una storia appassionante, un interessante spaccato su un personaggio poco studiato, che in queste pagine si impara a conoscere ed apprezzare, sia come artista che come figura di donna femminista.

Elemento importantissimo di questo romanzo è, ovviamente, l'arte, che viene affrontata in maniera perfettamente comprensibile anche da chi non ha grandi competenze in materia, permettendo allo stesso tempo di sentirsi ugualmente immersi in ciò che Emily crea, nel suo processo creativo, nella crescita che la sua tecnica ed i suoi contenuti subiscono. I suoi quadri sono elemento vivo e vibrante della narrazione ed il suo rapporto con la pittura fa da filo conduttore in tutta la narrazione, creando un percorso di maturazione della protagonista veramente interessante.

Aspetto piacevolissimo e fresco all'interno del libro, poi, l'attenzione enorme che viene data all'elemento della cultura indigena, in particolare quella degli indiani canadesi, popolazioni con cui la protagonista entra in contatto e le cui tradizioni vengono spiegate in maniera approfondita, aprendo una finestra su un mondo sconosciuto ai più, fatto di connessione con la natura, superstizioni, usanze e simbologie ricche di fascino. In generale, il libro affronta moltissimi temi che ho trovato davvero interessanti. Oltre ai già citati pittura e cultura indiana, si parla della relazione fra cristianesimo e tradizioni indigene, di femminismo in varie forme (ruolo della donna nell'arte, modi in cui viene percepita una donna che decide di sfidare le convenzioni), di rapporti familiari conflittuali, di amore - sia in senso romantico che nei confronti della propria vocazione di vita.

Qualche piccola pecca può essere trovata a livello stilistico, con diverse scelte lessicali (forse anche a causa della traduzione) che risultano quasi stonate o con la presenza di scene che vengono sviluppate in maniera un po' brusca, ma nel complesso si rivela una lettura scorrevole, coinvolgente e molto interessante, che permette di entrare in contatto con una figura di artista perlopiù sconosciuta ed allo stesso tempo, nel piano della fiction, di leggere semplicemente una bella storia. Un romanzo storico a tema artistico che mi ha aperto le porte di questa sfumatura del genere, un'esperienza di lettura certamente positiva.

Sunshine says

This is my favorite Vreeland book! It was given to me by my boyfriend's Grandmother. She said it's a book worth passing on. She was right! Living in British Columbia, where Emily Carr found her love of painting, just makes this book even better! After reading this book, I went to the gallery to gawk at her paintings. This

is one Canadian artist that everyone should know about. Vreeland does a wonderful job of creating Emily Carr. I only wish I could have known her!

Clarissa Simmens says

Imagine painting with mosquitos thick as fur on your hands. Or standing in a deserted village of silence, surrounded by trees with ancient coffins splitting apart. Or staring up at 60-foot totem poles carved with Eagles, Ravens, Bears and Whales trying to communicate their message. Or being scrutinized by a 20-foot ogress—Dzunukwa—with nipples carved into Eagles' heads with eyes and beaks. In *The Forest Lover*, Susan Vreeland gives us more than a biography of the painter Emily Carr. She gives us an unforgettable experience.

Leaving the loneliness of the Pacific Northwest, Emily Carr goes to Paris to see and learn Impressionism. The description of her changes in painting style—including trading “female” watercolors for the more advanced medium of oil—is so intense that the reader can feel the paint piled on the canvas. This reader could not resist looking down at her hands, expecting to see red mixed with deep violet and sun-stroked cadmium yellow.

Emily Carr is the kind of person I would have loved to know as a friend. A rebel, she befriends Native American women, some who have lost their children to the white man's legacy of Small Pox and other diseases, attends an outlawed (by the Canadian government) Potlatch ritual and comes close to taking a fur trapper as a lover as she is seduced by the feel of the mink furs lining the floor of his tent. And anyone who has ever loved a dog will understand the type of person the artist was. Snubbed by art patrons she nevertheless continues to document the totem poles that are being sold by non-Natives and bravely enters villages emptied by government “relocations” of the Native population in order to do so. This is a book about the artist, Emily Carr, but also about art, women, and government greed, powerful men who are able to decimate populations when the Missionaries fail. I have the Kindle version and my only complaint is that there were not enough pictures of her work, but Google images are just a tap away on a Kindle Fire and magically, there are her works, big, bright and bold like the book about her.

Jgrace says

The Forest Lover - Susan Vreeland

3 stars

Emily Carr was a post impressionist Canadian artist who died in 1945. *Forest Lover* is an uneven fictionalized biography of her life as a struggling female painter. I find the woman and her work to be fascinating, but this retelling of her life leaves much to be desired. The story begins with Emily as a grown woman trying to scratch a living as an artist. She teaches art to well-to-do ladies and their children, but is continually dissatisfied with the limits placed on her life and her art. Throughout the book Vreeland creates some fictional relationships for Emily, but none of these friendships seem to have depth and they continue to feel fictional as the story progresses.

After reading this book, I read more about the life of Emily Carr. The more I know about her, the less satisfied I am with *The Forest Lover*. Apparently, Carr first studied art in San Francisco and later in London. These experiences get only passing reference in Vreeland's book. Vreeland does capture the depth of Carr's

interest and sympathy for native people, but again, I felt the personal relationships were improbable. The redeeming feature of this book was Vreeland's descriptions of the physical difficulties Carr had to endure to create her master works. I couldn't believe the relationship with the French Canadian trapper/trader, but the details of the constant rain and the pestilential mosquitoes made me want to run for cover.

Kathy says

This was the book that inspired my interest in Emily Carr, a famous early 20th century artist from British Columbia, who traveled up the coast to paint the Native American villages and totem poles. She also painted dramatic scenes of old growth forest and depressing scenes of cut forest landscapes. Her painting evolved from representational to a more "Fauvist" style as she became acquainted with other artists, and her own sense of emotional connection with her subjects grew. This is a fictional account, but includes many historical facts about her life and travels, the Native Americans she befriended, and the art world she eventually joined. Vreeland really captures well Carr's personality and quirks, as well as her interactions with friends and family. I have read all of the Carr's diaries (she wrote a lot, including several books) and Vreeland's story is a great tribute to a wonderful and underrated artist and a powerful and gutsy lady.

Joje says

Quite a lot about the place and time is woven well into the fictionalized biography. The characters become real in the course of the action and preparing the setting, which does not always happen in this sort of biographical writing. A very upbeat read, too.

Citation that might give a feeling for the best and less best: "On the last night before Emily's return to Paris to collect her canvases and winter clothes, she and Frances lingered at the restaurant on the quay, sharing a tureen of mussels and a carafe of red wine. Emily gazed at the harbor. Lights winked on anchored boats and the moon cast a column of dancing silver on the water.

"You saved me from a lonely summer," Frances said.

"You saved me from a wasted one."

"It's the loneliness of what we've chosen that..."

"Cuts into the joy?"

"Like a claw in my chest." Frances leaned on her elbows on both sides of her cheese plate with sudden urgency. "Why don't you stay here, Millie? Paint with me in Paris this winter. We can share a studio. Live there together. I'll introduce you to the painters at La Rotonde. And dealers."

"And never paint another cedar or totem face to face? Give up the one relationship that has fed me for years///with a place? How many poles have been sold or destroyed since I've been gone?"

Of course the sections of her work on the totems and her place is engrossing, too, especially for someone who loves the Pacific Northwest.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

This is a biographical novel about the British Columbia artist Emily Carr. When I started this, I had never heard of Emily Carr. That is a loss now corrected. Vreeland takes some liberties about the life of Emily Carr:

in the novel she has four older sisters, whereas in real life Emily was the second youngest of nine children; she says in the author afterward that some of the characters "are inventions. or derivations of actual people."

I don't think Vreeland exaggerated Carr's passion for her art, which was pretty much all-consuming. She was driven to document the part of the earth in which she found herself, which was largely that of the Native peoples of the area. Their way of life was threatened by white settlement - first from disease brought by them and then from white domination both religiously and governmentally.

For many years Carr was not appreciated by most in British Columbia. Her use of color was new and not "English" and the very subjects of her work was not respected.

There are many examples on the web of Carr's work and this one is included in her Wikipedia article. While this specific painting is not mentioned in the book, several chapters and references are made to Kitkwancool. It was obviously dear to Emily Carr - and to Susan Vreeland who spent so much time chronicling one five day visit there.

This may not be literature, but I am most grateful to the online friend who brought it to my attention. Ketchikan has two of the largest totem pole collections in the world (or so it says on the internet), a third is in Sitka. Fortunately, totems are still being carved and raised and respected.

Cathy says

I started this book several years ago, before I knew anything about Emily Carr, and couldn't finish it. Not knowing that many of the characters and situations were based on fact, I found it all too maudlin. Discouraged artist, downtrodden native cultures, stereotypes galore. It was like looking at a reflection, feeling that you're missing something critical, but not sure you really care. Since then, I've "discovered" Emily Carr and rank her among my favorite artists. Her paintings of northwest coast forests and totem poles are unbelievable -- colors that seep into your soul and abstraction that renders objects more real somehow than a literal reproduction ever could. And you know what? Emily could write too. Anyone considering reading *The Forest Lover* should hold that thought and hunt down a copy of *Klee Wyck*, one of her collections of short stories. You'll get your fill of oppressive missionaries and wronged First Nations. You'll also get some astonishingly visual writing. It's true, she writes like she paints. So, *The Forest Lover*. I can't recommend it to anyone who doesn't know Emily Carr's work. It's not an entre book, it's more of a fictional commentary. I'm not sure of the value of this, when the original is available and so, so extraordinary.

Linda says

"Paintings are inspired by nature, true, but made in the artist's soul. That's why no two individuals see the same thing and express it alike. To attempt to reproduce France or Canada without filtering it through one's sensibilities is mere copy work, done by people worried over the number of leaves on a tree. Though they may have harmonized their colors, they have not plumbed for the feel." --- Emily Carr

And so Emily Carr answered her naysayers who critiqued her work. She was a woman far beyond her time in all things. Susan Vreeland captures the essence and the spirit of Emily Carr in her book. Emily is multi-faceted and Ms. Vreeland explores that in the aspects of her questionable childhood, her relationships with her sisters, her interactions with the local people, and her work as an artist.

I especially was drawn into Emily's constant search to explore the limited offerings to women as artists during this time period. Her diligence lasted a lifetime even in the sacrifices that played out in her disconnect with family members. Art was her craft, her means of breathing in and out. It was at the core of her being. All other life experiences paled in comparison.

The relationship between Emily and Sophie was touching. Emily desperately wanted a sisterhood connection that was lacking within her own family dynamics. But as Emily tended to do throughout the book, Sophie was set in the shadows as Emily's life revolved around her pursuit of the artistic moment. With canvas and paintbrush in hand, Emily moved on to the next challenge. And yet, we can't fault her for her hunger and deepset desire to bring the beauty and majesty of the forest and totems to the world.

This was a very satisfying read thanks to the skill of Susan Vreeland who traveled to many of the places that Emily, herself, traveled. Ms. Vreeland presented Emily in such a way that one could not help but envision the struggles that we all experience....the quest of presenting ourselves to the world in our purest form of self.
