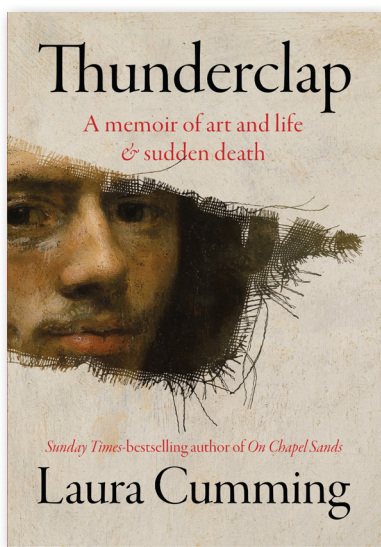


Thunderclap

A memoir of art and life & sudden death

by Laura Cumming



PLOT SUMMARY

On the morning of 12 October 1654, a gunpowder explosion devastated the Dutch city of Delft. The thunderclap was heard over seventy miles away. Among the fatalities was the painter Carel Fabritius, dead at thirty-two, leaving only his haunting masterpiece *The Goldfinch* and barely a dozen known paintings. The explosion that killed him also buried his reputation, along with answers to the mysteries of his life and career.

What happened to Fabritius before and after this disaster is just one of the discoveries in a book that explores the relationship between art and life, interweaving the lives of Laura Cumming, her Scottish painter father, who also died too young, and the great artists of the Dutch Golden Age. *Thunderclap* takes the reader from seventeenth-century Delft to twentieth-century Scottish islands, from Rembrandt's studio to wartime America and contemporary London. Cumming homes in on details like a Dutch painter herself: from town to street to courtyard and kitchen, from Fabritius' goldfinch on its perch to De Hooch's blue and white tile and the smallest seed in a loaf by Vermeer.

This is a book about what a picture may come to mean, how it can enter your life and change your thinking in a thunderclap. For the explosion of the title speaks not only to the precariousness of our existence, but also to the power of painting: the sudden revelations of sight.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *Thunderclap*, Cumming provides an enthusiastic and detailed deep dive into Dutch art, explaining the context and culture surrounding a number of paintings. However, it's her ability to connect the reader to the detail of why these paintings are considered masterly which is so valuable. Cummings' sensual connection to the artworks – the quality of light, the colour, the emotions that each painting portrays – brings them alive for the reader, and lights a path that many may have felt inaccessible beforehand.

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“I love this book because of the way she intertwines a subtle and tender love of her father with a deep understanding of Dutch art.”

ANNE SEBBA, 2024 JUDGE



As well as this, *Thunderclap* is a memoir. Cumming weaves in her own memory and experience to her investigation of Carel Fabritius’s work, relating her relationship with her father and her children to her thinking about the artworks. She considers the lives of Fabritius, Rembrandt and the other artists, thinking about their marriages, their children, their losses and, in the case of Fabritius in particular, their deaths. In so doing, she is considering how art and life interact, and how art is never produced in a vacuum. This provides the reader with a humane, accessible insight into Dutch art, using one little-understood artist’s life and work as a bridge.

DISCUSSION POINTS

In *Thunderclap*, Cumming describes how Rembrandt’s wife Saskia served as his muse for many drawings and paintings, as well as being painted by other artists in his studio. Saskia, like many other women, was immortalised in art and acted as a muse for her husband. Yet, her life ended early, as did many women’s lives in the past, from childbirth and other gynaecological-related conditions that were misunderstood – as well as being due to the lack of medicines and hygienic practices that we have today.

Therefore, though we might romanticise the depiction of women in art – Cumming describes one painting where Saskia is represented as a goddess, for instance – we would do well to remember the reality of life for women in the seventeenth century as well as most other times in history, which was far from being treated as a goddess.

Discuss women as subjects in art, and women as “muse”. How much of our thoughts about women might be shaped by the convention of us looking at women in paintings, in advertising, in photography, etc? Does art from the past accurately represent the lives of women, or is their material reality being elided by artists such as Rembrandt who are only ever representing women as beautiful and happy?

Does art posit women as objects to be looked at rather than active participants? Can you think of artists that have subverted this approach? How have they done it?

QUESTIONS

Cumming unearths the life of a relatively obscure Dutch artist. Why is it important to know about Carel Fabritius?

What did you think of Fabritius’s painting *The Sentry*? Do you agree with Cumming that it is ‘a public painting of inward emotion’ (p162), speaking immediately to us in the present? What is it about the emotion implied by that painting that might seem current to us now?

>

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

Do you enjoy seeing artist's self-portraits? Do you think there is a human need to document our own faces, in the way we do now with selfies? Why might an artist have painted a self-portrait?

Do you like the style of the Dutch artists featured in Cumming's book? Why, or why not?

NEXT STEPS

Laura Cumming describes how her father, an artist, believed that all children could draw, and that drawing is a universal skill. When was the last time you drew anything? What are your beliefs about how well you can draw? Do you think it's a natural talent, or a skill that anyone can learn? Inspired by Carel Fabritius's self-portrait, see if you can capture a likeness of yourself in whatever medium you choose – pencil, ink, charcoal, paint, pen. How do you find the process? Does it make you want to draw more?

Choose a Dutch painting that you like – one of Fabritius's paintings, or a Rembrandt or Vermeer – and research its provenance. Who has owned it, when was it painted, was it ever lost, or perhaps rediscovered at some point? Can you visit it now? Is it in a gallery, or a private collection? Or, is it lost altogether? If you can visit it, how does it make you feel? Is it fun to investigate a painting's history? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Cumming has been chief art critic of the Observer since 1999. Her books include *A Face to the World: On Self-Portraits* (2009) and *The Vanishing Man: In Pursuit of Velázquez* (2016) which won the James Tait Black Biography Prize. Her family memoir, *On Chapel Sands: my Mother and other Missing Persons* (2019) was a *Sunday Times* bestseller and shortlisted for the Baillie Gifford, Costa and Rathbone's Folio prizes.



If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

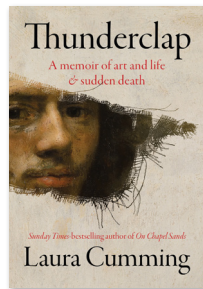
In *Women in the Picture: Women, Art and the Power of Looking*, Catherine McCormack examines how women's identity has long been stifled by a limited set of archetypes, found everywhere in pictures from art history's classics to advertising, while women artists have been overlooked and held back from shaping more empowering roles.

The Vanishing Man: In Pursuit of Velasquez by Laura Cumming is an eloquent and passionate homage to the Spanish master Velázquez, bringing us closer to the creation and appreciation of his works than ever before.

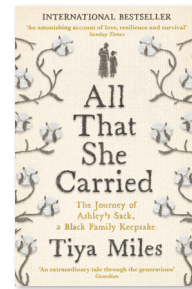
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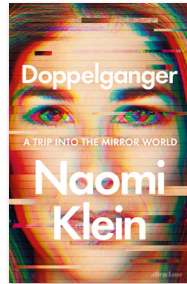
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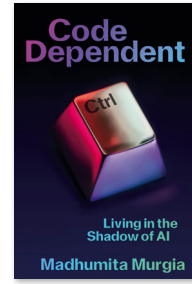
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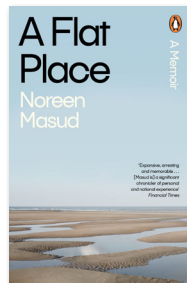
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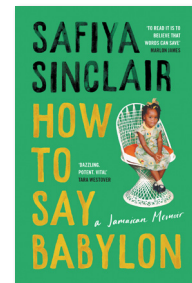
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