

Miles Franklin Literary Award 2009
Longlist

Fugitive Blue
Claire Thomas
Allen & Unwin

Reading Group Notes

Synopsis

A fluid, elegant and intriguing debut novel from a talented new Australian author.

Usually you can tell when something has fallen apart. You can see it deteriorating into awkward little pieces and you know, no matter what, it's a broken thing. But occasionally, it's not so obvious. Occasionally you find yourself clinging to a fragment that you've mistaken for a whole.

A beautiful, beguiling and multi-layered novel, *Fugitive Blue* tells the story of a young art conservator and her work on an unusual panel painting in striking ultramarine. As she restores the fragile artwork, she begins to speculate on its provenance - its controversial creation in Renaissance Venice and reappearance three hundred years later during a young nobleman's Grand Tour of Europe, passing through nineteenth-century Paris before its eventual arrival in Australia as one of the scarce possessions of a post-war Greek migrant family.

Threaded through the painting's progress is the story of the young conservator's own life in contemporary Melbourne, her developing passion for her work and the demise of her relationship with an actor named Mark.

I spent so much of my time restoring things, trying to reclaim their original beauty. All day, I looked at deteriorating objects with their parts exposed like a person with her heart on the outside. I could touch these paintings, make a decision and watch them transform. Done. But then there was us.

Captivating and intriguing, *Fugitive Blue* is a fluidly elegant novel that gets to the essence of love's fragility.

Claire Thomas on writing *Fugitive Blue*

Fugitive Blue germinated for me many years ago during an art history lecture about Renaissance artist materials when I first heard about lapis lazuli pigment and its immense mercantile value. I immediately thought – what if some of that got into inexperienced hands? What if a painting was created that was of substantial material

value but without inherent artistic status? What if people through history still cherished the painting and maintained its longevity?

In the writing of *Fugitive Blue*, I wanted to avoid traditional ideas about master painters and their masterpieces and instead highlight other ways of ascribing value to art. I wanted to look at the role of women in art, beyond that of the subservient muse. And in the contemporary sections, I wanted to expose the material vulnerability of artworks that are often assumed to be objects that should last forever. Of course, the more I researched these subjects, the more metaphorical resonance I found in relation to human beings – their personal frailties and relationships. I knew I was writing a novel about loss, love, the passing of time and what forever remains fugitive in our lives.

I think that one of the most exciting parts about writing fiction is the opportunity to immerse myself in a time, place or subject that would otherwise remain remote from my own life. So many different things fascinate me, and writing provides an opportunity to satisfy my curiosity in a way that would be impossible in almost any other 'normal' job. During the writing of this novel, I spent months inside each era, filling my head and my notebooks with all sorts of details and facts, whether it was transcribing eighteenth-century travel texts, quizzing professional art conservators, or driving to Albury-Wodonga to see its trees. Once I felt overflowing and desperate to process all the information, I'd finally write the related section. I wanted to know as much as possible about each milieu so that I could write the story fluidly, placing my characters into a clear world.

I wrote and re-wrote *Fugitive Blue* several times over several years after a lot of feedback and support. The contemporary sections, in particular, underwent the biggest changes. Somehow, I remained committed to the novel even though there were many times when I felt despairing and hopeless about the whole process. I am a passionate reader and I think it was my love of books that continued to motivate me. I just really want to write books and I felt that I had to 'nail' this one before I could give myself permission to write anything else.

Eventually, I made two important decisions that clarified the story and brought many of its themes together in a way that seemed almost inevitable in retrospect. The first decision was the fate of Mark, which is revealed at the end of the novel. The second decision was in regards to the contemporary narrator – to direct her story to the absent character using a second-person narrative voice. After years of frustration and with these crucial changes made, my novel was finished and I was finally able to let it go...

Suggested discussion points for *Fugitive Blue*

- *For five hundred years, the panel had been protected from any menacing liquid. While that wasn't necessarily strange, it struck me and made me paranoid. I glanced up at the fire sprinklers dotted across the ceiling of the lab, glared at their white spiked spirals poised to emit their spray, and willed them never to lurch into action. The weight of history hit like a pendulum, knocking my composure away. (p. 106)*

Water has a large presence in *Fugitive Blue*. What is its relationship to the themes of history and decay?

- Each historical section offers a new interpretation of the panel painting. Was there one with a particular resonance for you?
- *Remember what I used to claim when you teased me? I've got a thick skin. Say what you like. As if I were wearing armour. But there were many layers over me, smothering me, and not many of them protected. Some were just scabby and hard. Some were pliable, like an old bedsheet, waiting to be scrunched or torn. And some were utterly transparent: sliver-thin glass that could suddenly shatter its smudgy self into the rest of me. (p. 151)*

This is one example of layering in *Fugitive Blue*. Can you think of others, either literal or metaphorical? What do they denote?

- Each historical section begins with a quotation. How do these passages contribute to your understanding of the author's intentions?
- What is the narrator's motivation? Is it simply, as she writes, 'to find an answer to a story'? What is the story? Does she find an answer?
- *'I am a ballerina. If I cannot dance, I may as well be dead. And I think I'm lucky to have been given this purpose. So many people are forever trying to understand what they are meant to do with their lives...and I have always known.'* (p. 140)

Elise is passionate about her dancing career and sees it as intrinsic to her identity. Discuss the role of individual vocation and purpose throughout *Fugitive Blue*, particularly among the female characters. How do these things impact on the artwork's journey?

- How would you describe the tone and style of *Fugitive Blue*? Did you enjoy the writing?
- *'Maybe this is going to turn into a thrilling art mystery.'* Gillian smiled. *'An epic saga all about proving that we've got ourselves an undiscovered masterpiece.'* *'By some famous dead man?' I joined in.* *'Yes, yes! And in the end, we'll realise this small work of art is worth millions of dollars and Mrs Poulos will be encouraged to donate it to a public institution for the cultural wellbeing of future generations.'* *I rolled my eyes in mock horror. (p. 12)*

How does *Fugitive Blue* challenge traditional ways of ascribing value to artworks? How does the narrator's work as a conservator relate to this?

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- Discuss the tension between past and present in *Fugitive Blue*; how does the past weigh on the characters in the novel? How does the panel act as a metaphor for the way that we experience the passing of time?
- There are many kinds of relationships depicted in the novel – parent/child, lovers, work colleagues etc. Was there one you found particularly successful?

Recommended Reading

The Forgotten Garden, Kate Morton (2008)

Girl With a Pearl Earring, Tracey Chevalier (1999)

Amenable Woman (2008)