



## ***The Painted Girls by Cathy Marie Buchanan***

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### **About the author:**

CATHY MARIE BUCHANAN is the author of *The Painted Girls* and *The Day the Falls Stood Still*. Published January 2013, *The Painted Girls* has garnered rave reviews and been showered with special attention—everything from selection as a *People Magazine* pick to designation as a book “People Are Talking About” by *Vogue* to inclusion in *Entertainment Weekly’s* Must List. Also an IndieNext pick, *The Painted Girls* debuted on the *New York Times* bestsellers list and is a #1 national bestseller in Canada. *The Day the Falls Stood Still*, her debut novel, is a *New York Times* bestseller, a Barnes & Noble Recommends selection, and an IndieNext pick. She holds a BSc (Biochemistry) and an MBA from Western University. Born and raised in Niagara Falls, Ontario, she now resides in Toronto.

Source: HarperCollins Canada (<http://www.harpercollins.ca>)

### **About this book:**

Paris, 1878. Following their father’s sudden death, the Van Goethem sisters find their lives upended. Without his wages, and with the small amount their laundress mother earns disappearing into the absinthe bottle, eviction from their lodgings seems imminent.

With few options for work, Marie is dispatched to the Paris Opera, where for a scant seventeen francs a week, she will be trained to enter the famous Ballet. Her older sister, Antoinette, finds work as an extra in a stage adaptation of Émile Zola’s naturalist masterpiece *L’Assommoir*. Marie throws herself into dance and is soon modelling in the studio of Edgar Degas, where her image will forever be immortalized as Little Dancer Aged 14. Meanwhile, Antoinette, derailed by her

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love for the dangerous Émile Abadie, must choose between honest labour and the more profitable avenues open to a young woman of the Parisian demimonde.

Set at a moment of profound artistic, cultural and societal change, *The Painted Girls* is a tale of two remarkable sisters rendered uniquely vulnerable to the darker impulses of “civilized society.” In the end, each will come to realize that her salvation—her survival, even—lies with the other.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

1. *If I had a bit of nerve, I would tell him I want to look pretty instead of worn out. I want to be dancing instead of resting my aching bones. I want to be on the stage, like a real ballet girl, instead of in the practice room, even if it is not yet true.* Marie thinks this while pondering the paintings in Degas’s workshop. What kind of art is Degas interested in making? Why are his innovations so important for the history of art? Do you see empathy or hostility toward the dancers in his artworks?
2. In what ways is Degas sympathetic toward Marie? In what ways is he not? Does his interest in Marie ultimately give her feelings of hope and possibility, or feelings of inadequacy?
3. *“Tonight, roasted chicken in your belly,” Maman says, loosening her arms, stepping back from me. “And always, an angel in your heart.”* Marie’s mother often reminds her that the spirit of Marie the First, her older sister who died in infancy, is with her. How is Marie affected by her namesake? Why, at the end of the book, does she tell the old man at the tavern her name is Marie the First?
4. Is Marie deluding herself in believing her hatred of Émile is justified? Once she sees he cannot be guilty of the second murder, is it fair for her to destroy the alibi



provided by the calendar? To what extent is she looking after her own best interests when she burns it?

5. *Sometimes I wonder, though, if for the very best ballet girls, the trickery is not a little bit real, if a girl born into squalor cannot find true grace in ballet.* Marie thinks this while looking at her fellow ballet dancers on the Opéra stage. Does Marie experience true grace while dancing? Without the ballet can Marie be fully content?
6. *Antoinette was too bold in speaking her mind to end up with her legs spread open for a slumming gentleman.* Marie ponders this misconception after a posing naked with her knees parted on Monsieur Lefebvre's sofa. What leads her to such an idea? Are such misconceptions common among sisters?
7. Émile consistently mistreats Antoinette. He forces himself upon her, and then tells her it's her fault; he allows Pierre Gille to slap her, and then abandons her for him. Is Antoinette's blind love for Émile realistic? Of all his wrongdoings, why is it a lie that finally makes her see the light?
8. In what instances does Antoinette's bold temperament hinder her? When does it serve her well?
9. *"Both are beasts. The physiognomies tell us . . . those two murderers are marked."* Degas says this to Marie after Émile is declared guilty of a murder she knows he did not commit. Why does Degas feel it is fair to judge the boys' characters based on the way they look? What are some other moments in the book when people are judged based on appearance?
10. *"No social being is less protected than the young Parisian girl—by laws, regulations, and social customs."* —Le Figaro, 1880. Why did Buchanan choose



this quotation as the book's epigraph? How does it relate to the story? In what ways are the van Goethem sisters unprotected?

11. *I want to put my face in my hands, to bawl, for me, for Antoinette, for all the women of Paris, for the burden of having what men desire, for the heaviness of knowing it is ours to give, that with our flesh we make our way in the world.* Marie thinks this while waiting to see Antoinette at Saint-Lazare. Is she correct in such thinking? To what extent does the sentiment hold true today?
12. What role does honesty play in this book? Do you support Antoinette's decision to tell "one last lie" to Marie, the lie about Émile's guilt? Does she go overboard with her refusal to tell even white lies by the end of the book?
13. In what ways are Marie and Antoinette good sisters to each other? In what ways are they not? Would the power of sisterhood have prevailed had Antoinette not found out Émile was unfaithful to her?
14. Have you seen *Little Dancer*? What were your impressions? Have they changed after reading *The Painted Girls*? How?
15. Will you recommend *The Painted Girls* to a friend? A sister? Why?

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