

MFAH Book Club

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
Summer 2011
Susan Vreeland, *Clara and Mr. Tiffany* (2011)

Use the information and discussion questions on the following pages to facilitate your book club's conversation.
Then visit www.mfah.org/bookclub to sign up for a scheduled drop-in tour or make a group reservation.

BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- [1] How do Clara's goals and expectations change from the beginning to the end of the novel?
- [2] In chapter 9, Clara attends the first Tiffany Ball with Edwin. She makes the observation: "We straddled a double world." How does that play out in Clara's experience? What did she learn from Edwin?
- [3] Clara loved five men: Francis Driscoll, Louis Comfort Tiffany, George Waldo, Edwin Waldo, and Bernard Booth. Was it true love—whether intimate or Platonic—in each case? What prompted her love them? How did her love change over time?
- [4] Throughout the novel there are social contrasts—rich and poor being the most obvious, but also creative and uninspired, traditional and modern, steady and unstable, American and immigrant. How does Clara relate to these? How are these themes relevant today?
- [5] The poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are excerpted in the novel. What do they add to the understanding the characters or the period, or is it a caprice of the author?
- [6] In what way are Tiffany *objet d'arts* icons of the time? Do you feel Tiffany was trying to extend the Gilded Age or anticipate the Progressive Era, and how?
- [7] In chapter 47, Mr. Tiffany makes a surprising concession to Clara. Should she have remained working at Tiffany Studios? Was her decision right or wrong for her? Would you have done the same?
- [8] Reflect upon the tragedies in the novel, especially Wilhelmina's suicide, Edwin's disappearance, and George's death. Is there something tragic about Clara's personality or situation, as a "modern woman" living with strictly defined social or personal boundaries?
- [9] How is vision—the act of looking and description of appearances—emphasized by Vreeland's writing style? Does the writing style match the Tiffany aesthetic, or is there a more modern (or contemporary) sensibility?

[These questions are based loosely on those by Susan Vreeland on the Random House Reader's Circle web site at <http://www.randomhouse.com/rhpg/rc/2010/12/16/susan-vreelands-clara-and-mr-tiffany-a-reading-guide>.]



Louis Comfort Tiffany, manufactured by Tiffany Studios, *A Wooded Landscape in Three Panels*, c. 1905, Glass, copper-foil, and lead, The MFAH, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 96.765.A-C

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

After graduating from San Diego State University, Susan Vreeland taught high school English in San Diego beginning in 1969 and retired in 2000. Beginning in 1980, she began writing features for newspapers and magazines, taking up subjects in art and travel, eventually publishing approximately 250 articles. Her first venture in fiction, *What Love Sees* (1988), was a biographical novel of a woman's unwavering determination to lead a full life despite blindness. Vreeland's short fiction has appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *Ploughshares*, *New England Review*, *Confrontation*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Manoa*, *Connecticut Review*, *Calyx*, *Crescent Review*, *So To Speak* and elsewhere. Since 1999, her focus has been near exclusively on fine art, providing well-researched historical fiction.

MORE BY SUSAN VREELAND

- *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (1999) | Tracing an alleged Vermeer painting through the centuries revealing its influence on those who possessed it.
- *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002) | Disclosing the inner life of Artemisia Gentileschi, Italian Baroque painter who focused on female heroines.
- *The Forest Lover* (2004) | Following the rebel Canadian painter, Emily Carr, seeking the spiritual in British Columbia by painting its wild landscape and its native culture.
- *Luncheon of the Boating Party* (2007) | Illuminating the vibrant, explosive Parisian *la vie moderne* surrounding Renoir as he creates his masterwork.



Robert Spencer, *The Exodus*, 1928, Oil on canvas, The MFAH, Gift of Houston Friends of Art, 30.2

ADDITIONAL READING

The following novels also feature prominent “modern” women during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Louisa May Alcott, *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) | Set immediately following the Civil War, this semi-autobiographical novel describes Christie Devon, a young woman pursuing a variety of careers, from the domestic to the dramatic to the depressing. Eventually, she achieves a balance between public and private work and between work for her own profit and work for the profit of others. By the end of the novel, the heroine is on the verge of a new career, as a voice and activist for other working women.

Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900) | First published in 1900, suppressed until 1912, and now a “classic.” This is a story of a rudderless but pretty small-town girl who comes to the big city with vague ambitions. She is used by men and uses them in turn to become a successful Broadway actress, only to suffer personal tragedy. *Sister Carrie* was the first masterpiece of the American naturalistic movement in its grittily factual presentation of the vagaries of urban life and in its ingenious heroine.

Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905) | The ill-fated socialite Lily Bart rises above the traditional crop of “marriageable girls.” She is desired by any number of men who could ensure her place among the moneyed elite, but she deflects their courtship in favor of her more modestly endowed true love. She makes too many assumptions about her station, offends her aunt, falls into a financial obligation to a manipulative investor, is ostracized by a friend, and refused help from her most prominent would-be suitor. All of these gaffes combine to forge Lily's downfall in this devastating portrait of class cruelty.

Lester Goran, *Mrs. Beautiful* (1985) | Roxanne, a tough heroine from West Virginia who, in 1909, comes north to the boomtown of Pittsburgh. There she becomes involved with characters like Diamond Jim Brady, Lillian Russell, William Trautmann, as well as with events of the Pressed Steel Car Strike in nearby McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania.

Marge Piercy, *Sex Wars: A Novel of Gilded Age New York* (2006) | Post–Civil War New York City is the battleground of the American dream. In this era of free love, emerging rights of women, and brutal sexual repression, Freydeh, a spirited young Jewish immigrant, toils at different jobs to earn passage to America for her family. Learning that her younger sister is adrift somewhere in the city, she begins a determined search that carries her from tenement to brothel to prison—as her story interweaves with those of some of the epoch's most renown and notorious figures.

Beverly Swerling, *City of Promise: A Novel of New York's Gilded Age* (2011) | This is the story of Joshua Turner, who returns from the Civil War with only one leg destined to rise in wealth and social circles of the Gilded Age, and Mollie Brannigan, whose upbringing in a whore house teaches her more than she wants to know about men—but makes her the perfect Mrs. Turner. Peopled with working characters from pickpockets to pawnbrokers, seamstresses to Macy's clerks.