

The Lady with the Dark Hair

Erin Bartels

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Dual storylines connect across time in Erin Bartels's historical novel *The Lady with the Dark Hair*, about women who expand their visions of themselves through art.

In midlife, Esther cares for her schizophrenic mother, a reclusive artist. Esther was raised to believe that she descended from a minor impressionist, Francisco Vella. Vella's enigmatic portraits of a woman are the focus of a family museum, whose continuing viability is uncertain. When Esther encounters a former professor, Perez, he revitalizes her intellectual interests. But as Esther spends time with Perez, she discovers that her knowledge of the Vella art collection is incomplete—and that her desires have grown.

In nineteenth-century France, Viviana is a Catalan servant who meets Vella, a traveling merchant. When her past deeds threaten to derail her, she flees to Paris under the guise of being Vella's sister. There, she sharpens her newfound artistic talents and meets period icons, including Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot. Suspicion about the real artist behind Vella's signature forms long before the truth occurs to Esther, resulting in winding anticipation.

The women's alternating storylines emphasize their differences: Esther feels trapped and subdues her desires because of loyalty to her mother. In contrast, Viviana is bold and travels to Gibraltar (a lively, evocative background shaped by armed conflicts), where she makes an effort to train herself and to find her distinctive style. She is not alone among women artists who are underestimated; she perseveres despite challenges. What binds her to Esther most is that she, too, holds the open-ended hope that she can shape her future to her liking.

In the alluring novel *The Lady with the Dark Hair*, questions about a portrait's origins inspire a search for personal meaning.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2024)

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