

JOY McCULLOUGH

BLOOD WATER PAINT



READING GUIDE

Introducing the stunning debut novel based on the teenage years of the painter and feminist icon Artemisia Gentileschi, who persisted through one of history's first documented sexual assault trials to claim her place as a master artist.

ABOUT BLOOD WATER PAINT



RAISED ON HER MOTHER'S STORIES and her father's paintings, Artemisia Gentileschi grew up to be one of the most important painters of the seventeenth century and a feminist icon. However, none of this seemed likely when Artemisia was twelve years old, the year her mother died and she faced a stark choice: a life as a nun in a convent or a life grinding pigment for her father. She chose to paint.

By the time Artemisia is seventeen, she does more than grind pigment — she is one of Rome's most talented young painters, but her father's name is on all of her work. When her father hires another painter to teach her more technique, she thinks she might actually have found someone who understands her, until the unthinkable happens. Her tutor, Agostino Tassi, rapes her in her father's studio, and Artemisia is left with another terrible choice: a life of silence or a life of truth.

Armed with only her story and the guidance of Susanna and Judith, the heroines from her mother's stories, Artemisia faces the prospect of losing everything in order to speak her truth. In a time when women had no agency, Artemisia Gentileschi's story is a powerful example of strength in the face of all-too-familiar violence.

Joy McCullough's bold debut novel in verse is a portrait of an artist as a young woman, filled with soaring highs of creative inspiration and the devastating setbacks of a system built to break her. McCullough weaves Artemisia's, Judith's, and Susanna's stories together with a deft hand, and creates a beautiful novel out of unspeakable horror.

ABOUT ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI



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ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI (1593–1656) was an Italian Baroque painter and today is considered a feminist icon and one of the most progressive and expressive painters of her generation. Her most famous masterpiece, which is featured in *Blood Water Paint*, is *Judith Slaying Holofernes*.

Gentileschi was one of the few women painters to make a successful career in the seventeenth century, an achievement made more remarkable by the fact that she was raped as a teenager, and then participated in one of the first recorded sexual assault cases in history. After the trial, which found her rapist Agostino Tassi guilty of damaging Artemisia's father's property, Artemisia left Rome and was married to a painter in Florence, where she learned to read and write, became the first female member of the Academy of Design in Florence, and worked under the patronage of the powerful Medici family.

STORYTELLING

“BUT MY MOTHER GAVE ME STORIES.
THE ONES SHE CHOSE TO TELL
WERE NOT AN ACCIDENT,
NOT FEVERED RAMBLINGS
BUT THE SHARPEST BLADE
THAT SHE COULD LEAVE ME ON HER DEATH.” (p.216)

1. Discuss the repeated phrases “words have power” and “speak your truth.” How do these phrases relate to each other, and in what ways do they differ, specifically when talking about the different characters in the novel?
2. How does the act of speaking change things within the novel. On page 62, Artemisia says “what’s new is / I’ve given it voice.” How does this statement influence the rest of the novel?
3. Artemisia was not taught to read or write, but storytelling was one of her central passions. Talk about the differences between storytelling and reading/writing.
4. Discuss how Judith’s and Susanna’s stories lend understanding to Artemisia’s. Why did Artemisia’s mother choose Judith’s and Susanna’s stories to tell only to her daughter?
5. During Susanna’s story, Artemisia’s mother says, “If you remember nothing else of Susanna, remember how she speaks her truth. She knows it will cost her something. She’s not aware yet quite how steep the cost will be, but still, she speaks her truth.” (page 36) List the costs that Artemisia must pay when speaking her own truth.
6. Artemisia’s mother says, “The boys have all the tales they need of brave warriors and army captains.” (page 142) How do Judith, Susanna, and Artemisia become the feminine answer to this statement?
7. How does the structure of the poems reflect Artemisia’s mindset? Reference the differences between Poems 53–55 and the surrounding poems.
8. How does Artemisia’s father straddle multiple identities as owner and parent, abuser and champion, artist and fraud? How do these identities change throughout the novel?

CULTURE

“WHEN A WOMAN RISKS
HER PLACE, HER VERY LIFE TO SPEAK
A TRUTH THE WORLD DESPISES?
BELIEVE HER. ALWAYS.” (p. 252)

1. Compare and contrast Artemisia’s story with rape culture today. How have things changed? How have they not?
2. Talk about the feminist tones in the novel. What does the author have to say about the place of women in the world in both 1600s Rome and today?
3. In Poem 13, Artemisia states, “one can’t truly tell a story / unless they’ve lived it in their heart.” (page 29) Talk about how this is exemplified throughout the novel and then discuss how it relates to the #OwnVoices movement in children’s literature today.
4. Discuss the setting of the novel. Does it always seem to take place during the 1600s, or are there elements that make it feel current? (specifically referring to page 49)
5. Artemisia’s mother says that Susanna deserves “a witness, one who says I see you, hear you, I’m better for knowing your story.” (page 175) Does Artemisia get such a witness through her trial?
6. Compare the lives of Rebecca, Abra, and Tuzia. How do these secondary women characters compare and differ?
7. Discuss the idea of punishment for crimes committed. In Susanna’s and Judith’s stories, the punishments are severe, while Agostino gets off without many consequences. How do systems of power affect the delivery of justice?
8. Talk about the idea of possession in the novel. How does it relate to inanimate objects, people, and intangible things like knowledge and virtue?
9. In Poem 69, Artemisia’s brother quotes a passage from Ovid describing Lucretia’s suicide after being raped as admirable. Given this context, how does this passage and Artemisia’s response inform your understanding of the time period? Compare the brother’s implicated message with his quote in Poem 73: “Don’t mind her / You know how girls can be.”
10. Talk about the idea of women being “beauty / for consumption.” (page 12) List the different forms of consumption in the novel (i.e. Artemisia’s rape, the consumption of stories, etc.). How do these different forms of consuming relate and differ from one another?

ART



Burkatoński / Fine Art Images

“THE DISCONNECT OF MEN TO WOMEN’S BODIES STANDS TO REASON. THEY’D HAVE TO CARE ENOUGH TO SEE THE OTHER AS A SUBJECT WORTHY OF THEIR EARNEST STUDY.” (p. 95)

1. Study each of Artemisia’s paintings above. Name specific ways that Artemisia’s own trauma could have given her a deeper understanding of each painting.
2. How do the paintings compare to Artemisia’s mother’s stories?
3. Gentileschi’s work overwhelmingly featured women as the protagonists and some art historians say they lacked stereotypical “feminine” characteristics. Looking at both Susanna and Judith in these paintings, do you agree?
4. After reading *Blood Water Paint*, what characteristics does Artemisia share with Judith and Susanna in these paintings?
5. How does the idea of possession relate to both paintings? Are there similarities between these paintings and the novel?



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6. One of Artemisia’s refrains is “I paint the blood.” How does this show itself not only in what she paints, but also in the story she tells?
7. Artemisia says, “I may not know how to read, / but I know how to overhear / the stories men / tell boys / of women’s lives.” (page 212) Relate this statement to Artemisia’s feelings on men painting Susanna and Judith.
 - How does this contrast with her statement “Prudentia Montone spent / the last of her strength / to burn into my mind / the tales of women/ no one else would / think to tell.” (page 24)
8. Art historians also seem to agree that Artemisia’s female forms were somewhat unusually realistic and free of some of the stylized and idealized touches of her contemporaries. Considering how she paints the female form and her own personal experiences, discuss the scene where Artemisia studies and sketches her body in the mirror (pages 91–92) and says “I sketched my own face, / working out proportions / my father couldn’t explain. / His grasp on female form — / a woman’s body— / is even less precise. / But Susanna deserves better / than a man’s idea / of what a woman should be.”
 - Discuss how this relates to her father using her as a model.

JOY MCCULLOUGH writes books and plays from her home in the Seattle area, where she lives with her husband and two children. She studied theater at Northwestern University, fell in love with her husband atop a Guatemalan volcano, and now spends her days surrounded by books and kids and chocolate. *Blood Water Paint* is her debut novel.

PRaise FOR BLOOD WATER PAINT

★ **“A THRILLING PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN** of character who refused to be dismissed; this belongs on every YA shelf.”

– *School Library Journal*, starred review

★ **“A CAPTIVATING AND IMPRESSIVE** debut about a timeless heroine.”

– *Booklist*, starred review

“AN INCANDESCENT RETELLING both timeless and, alas, all too timely.” – *Kirkus Reviews*

“TRAGICALLY RELEVANT AND UNFLINCHINGLY FEMINIST, *Blood Water Paint* is the kind of book all historical fiction should aspire to be.” – Mackenzi Lee, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue*

“Coming out of the novel, I knew I would be simultaneously HAUNTED AND EMPOWERED BY ARTEMISIA'S STORY for the rest of my life.” – Amanda Lovelace, bestselling author of *the princess saves herself in this one*

“FIERCE. NUANCED. COMPELLING. McCullough's debut is an unflinching tribute both to Artemisia and to all who dare to stand at the intersection of artistry and womanhood.”
– Melanie Crowder, award-winning author of *Audacity*



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