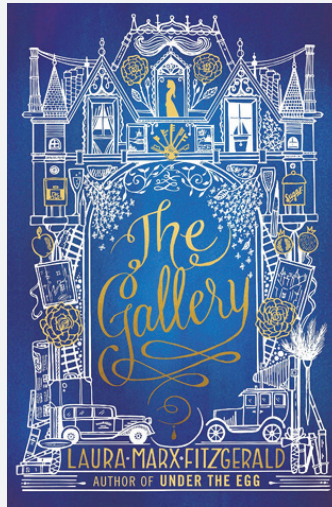


First Opinion: Monsters, Lies, and Truth in *The Gallery*

Fitzgerald, Laura Marx. *The Gallery*. Dial Books, 2016.

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Things are rarely what they seem in life or in Laura Marx Fitzgerald's novel *The Gallery*. The book opens with Martha O'Doyle, an arthritic, creaky, constipated, and outwardly senile, 100-year-old woman. When asked by a tabloid journalist what the secret to happiness is, readers glimpse into the centenarian's thoughts and quickly realize that there is more to Martha O'Doyle than what appears on the surface. Unable to speak or write, Ms. O'Doyle decides that it's time to set the record straight. With an 87-year-old secret waiting to be shared, she journeys to a time when women have just won the right to vote but men hold little faith in their ability to do so, to a time of speakeasies and flowing alcohol despite prohibition, to a time of females' wealth controlled by dominant men, to a time of newspaper magnates and railroad tycoons, to a time of wild parties and complete devastation. It is during this time, the Roaring 20s, that the story of Wild Rose, heiress to the Union-Eastern railroad fortune, and husband J. Archer Sewell, newspaper publisher and "staunch defender of traditional American values in today's rocky times," (Fitzgerald 3) unfolds. A bomb takes out priceless art by the likes of Rembrandt and Picasso, killing Wild Rose and Sewell. Or so everyone believed . . . until now.

The real adventures begin when Fitzgerald flashes back to 13-year-old Martha, who is no stranger to trouble. She, in fact, appears to thrive on it. Kicked out of a parochial school for questioning the status quo, Martha goes to work for the Sewells as a maid. Her mother, the manager of the lavish Manhattan estate, rules the house with an iron fist. Shrouded in mystery, Wild Rose is kept behind locked doors with limited interaction with others. Because Martha

has discovered that “if you ask an adult for the truth, usually you get a story,” (9) she elects to unravel the mystery of Wild Rose herself. She learns that truth-seeking will lead her to more than Rose’s secrets, and that sometimes what one uncovers through their search for truth is something that was better left undiscovered.

The reader quickly sees that life at the Fifth Avenue mansion seems serene and positive. Archer Sewell’s servants are devoted to him; his voice rings loud and true in the newspaper he publishes; and his friends admire—and pity—his dedication to his wife. His life, in essence, is beyond reproach. However, as the story unfolds, the reader sees that Archer is actually only devoted to himself. He has a good deal, yet he wants more. His extravagant lifestyle depends upon Rose’s inheritance, and it is not enough to keep him happy. The power that comes from his being a newspaper publisher is not enough. Determined to remove any obstacles (in this case, his wife Rose) that stand between him and what he really wants, Archer and his naïve servants, who are unaware of their actions, poison his wife. When years pass and Rose is declared unstable and unable to remain at home, Archer strives to gain control of Rose’s vast wealth and the power that comes with it—the one thing that he can’t live without.

The reader will be caught up in the suspense, acting as armchair detectives who, along with Martha, solve the eight-plus decades’ mystery. J. Archer Sewell’s power alludes him; he gets what he deserves. Wild Rose, after years of abuse by her husband, is set free. The secret harbored by Martha’s mother is revealed, and Martha faces difficult truths, growing wise through the years. The 1920s give way to modern day. One is left wondering if what is portrayed in the book could, if not did, actually happen. Swept into believing the tale, one can imagine history unfolding as it is portrayed. Told primarily through the eyes of young Martha, the mansion with a secret and the 1920s come to life.

Using *The Gallery* as a classroom resource, students could:

- Investigate the historical time period of the novel (i.e., the women’s suffrage movement, the stock market crash, immigration practices, and art history);
- Examine truth in newspaper and media publication and equate it to examples from the novel with those currently in practice (i.e., internet “truths”);
- Scrutinize the mystery presented, comparing it to other well-known ones, and then “solve” various mysteries from history (the Lost Colony of Roanoke, Amelia Earhart’s disappearance, the Mary Celeste, etc.); or
- Create an online newspaper, discrediting the March 26, 1929 (2–5) account of the book’s mystery with what actually unfolds in the novel. Try these newspaper templates:
 - <http://www.educatorstechnology.com/2013/03/wonderful-free-templates-to-create.html> (Microsoft Word, Adobe, and Illustrator templates);

- <https://www.presentationmagazine.com/editable-newspaper-portrait-2800.htm> (PowerPoint template);
- <https://www.fodey.com/generators/newspaper/snippet.asp> (Editable online template; "The Newspaper Clipping Generator");
- <https://drive.google.com/templates?type=docs&q=newspaper&sort=user&view=public&urp=https://www.google.com/&pli=1&ddrp=1#> (Google Docs templates)

Fitzgerald weaves the cloak and dagger tale in *The Gallery*. At times humorous (Martha as a centenarian: "Most folks . . . won't take rooms on the cemetery side. But I requested this side for the same reason I always ride in the front seat: I like to see where I'm going" (6–7)), at times anger-inducing (Mr. Sewell's wisdom: "That's the problem with you ladies: you get the vote, but you don't necessarily get the brains" (31–2)), *The Gallery's* mystery, at all times, is one worth solving.

About the Author

Melissa Comer, Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Tennessee Tech University in Cookeville, Tennessee, teaches literacy courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. Working closely with in-service and preservice teachers, she investigates methodology and pedagogy centering on innovative and active engagement strategies. Presenting and publishing at the local, state, regional, national, and international levels on various literacy topics, Comer's current focus is on exploring culture through personal stories and integrating technology and instruction within the literacy curriculum.