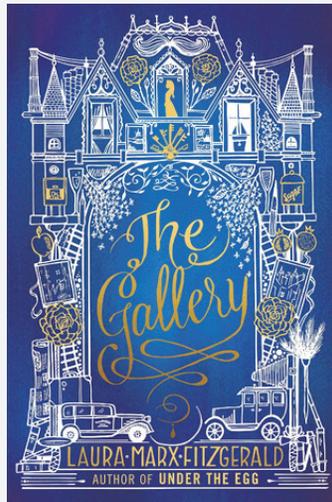


Second Reaction: Inside *The Gallery*: The Art of Falling Flat

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

Maggie Roby



A spunky schoolgirl-turned-maid, a priceless art collection, and an heiress held hostage in the top of a swanky Fifth Avenue mansion: Laura Marx Fitzgerald's *The Gallery* has everything it takes to hook an audience of mystery-hungry, middle grade readers. But while the intriguing premise and intricate blue cover are certain to attract students, the novel's fundamental misunderstanding of its readership means that this book is unlikely to hold their attention.

Described on the dust jacket as the "one girl [with] the moxie to see everything for what it is," protagonist Martha begins the book as no girl at all, but instead as a 100-year-old woman. The story unfolds as a bed-ridden Martha reminisces on the fateful events surrounding the 1929 explosion thought to have claimed the lives of her former employers, wealthy newspaper magnate J. Archer Sewell and his mentally ill wife Rose. Though clearly intended to connect with a contemporary audience by contextualizing the story's historical setting, this frame narrative is just as likely to alienate young readers, who are certain to have difficulty identifying with a "creaky and constipated" (1) centenarian.

Having reconciled adult Martha with the sassy and adventurous twelve-year-old she once was, students may very well find themselves swept up in the twists and turns of Martha's life as a maid in the Sewell mansion. However, as they navigate the emerging mystery of Rose's madness, readers must also navigate an elaborate maze of literary allusions. Indeed, much of Martha's detective work involves deciphering clues hidden within various myths and legends.

Rose's troubling backstory, for instance, only emerges once Martha decodes the similarly tragic tale of Proserpina, better known as Persephone. Fitzgerald's ability to weave feminist readings of cultural texts into the fabric of her mystery remains one of her greatest strengths as an author. However, the sheer volume of knowledge required of the audience is frankly daunting. While some of these references, such as the biblical story of Adam and Eve, will be familiar to most students; others, like *Jane Eyre*, will fly over the heads of even the most advanced middle grade readers. Though this does create an opportunity for classroom teachers to introduce some of these texts in a structured way, more easily discouraged students, as well as those attempting the book on their own, are likely to find *The Gallery* inaccessible.

The crux of any good mystery is a satisfying conclusion, and after all their hard work, readers of *The Gallery* certainly deserve one. However, in its climactic moments, Fitzgerald's novel breaks the cardinal rule of children's fiction: adults must never swoop in to save the day. Lured home for the final confrontation, the wicked Mr. Sewell finds himself faced with "the very picture of four people in complete control" (284). Unfortunately, none of these people are Martha. Her own attempts having failed several chapters earlier, Martha simply sits and watches as Rose outsmarts her scheming husband. Fitzgerald attempts to rehabilitate Martha's role in the story by having Rose insist that "it was you. . . . You believed in me. That was enough. That was what started it all" (302). But any reader savvy enough to have made it this far is sure to recognize this as a hollow gesture.

The child's disempowerment in the story's resolution is compounded by the novel's peculiarly morbid ending, wherein an ailing Martha, dreamily anticipating her own death, recalls that "Rose prepared a place for me in that crypt, back in 1929" (307). As if the thought of willing a grave plot to a twelve-year-old were not morose enough, the novel then proceeds to reveal that Martha's two younger brothers, the only other children in the story, were killed in World War II. Students who manage to read to the end of this novel will search in vain for an encouraging message, finding no reflection of themselves except at the bottom of a grave.

For all its shortcomings, *The Gallery* is not without its uses in the classroom. Fitzgerald's background in art history shines through in sumptuous descriptions of Rose's art collection, and her historical setting has been scrupulously researched. Teachers wanting to supplement units on art history or the 1920s may find that, despite its flaws, this novel serves as a useful point of entry. Perhaps the most instructive portion of the text is the author's note, wherein Fitzgerald describes the starting point of her writing process: "If you're ever bored, go online and search a random year and a topic that interests you. . . . You'll find yourself trawling old newspapers from around the world. . . . How can any fiction writer top this?" (311–13). While the novel might not entice youngsters with the characterization and plot, a teacher could use Fitzgerald's comments with an assignment concerning the web, newspapers, and resources for writing their own adventure.

About the Author

Maggie Roby, a former English language teacher with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program, is currently a doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh, where she studies contemporary publishing practices in children's and young adult literature.