



The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque

By Jeffrey Ford
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Introduction

This evocative fable, set in 1893 New York society, tells the story of Piero Piambo, a portraitist who is offered a commission unlike any other. His client is Mrs. Charbuque, a wealthy and elusive woman, who asks Piambo to paint her portrait. She has but one proviso: Piambo may question her at length on any topic, but he may not, under any circumstances, see her. So begins an astonishing journey into Mrs. Charbuque's childhood -- a world of ice where she aided her obsessive father in his study of the divine language of snowflakes -- and her history, marked with fame, despair, desire, and rage. Alternately seduced and repulsed by her stories, Piambo remains determined to unravel Mrs. Charbuque's mysteries, and divine her visage.

Discussion Questions

1. Judging by your own personal set of values, is the portrait work that Piambo is engaged in at the start of the novel (painting the wealthy as they would like to appear) ethical? Is the creation of "true" art still possible in a commission where money changes hands and mandatory stipulations are applied?
2. Both painting and photography can be used in the production of portraits. What are the benefits and drawbacks of each? Which artistic medium would you choose to be immortalized in? Why?
3. In the novel, the character of Samantha gives Piambo a list of questions to ask Mrs. Charbuque in order to "capture" the mysterious woman's essence. If you could ask only four questions of someone "behind the screen" (literally or figuratively) in order to quickly get a clear understanding of him or her, what four would they be?
4. When you read fiction, do you see the characters in your mind's-eye? If so, they are created by mere words. Why, in this story are Piambo, Shenz, and Samantha, so easy to "see" while Mrs. Charbuque remains enigmatic, even though she reveals so much about herself?
5. The theme of things being masked, screened, or hidden is pervasive throughout the book. What instances of this have you noticed? How does this theme add to the overall story?
6. At one point in the story, Piambo recalls his mentor, M. Sabbot, telling him that "Every portrait is, to some extent, a self-portrait, every self-portrait, a portrait." What does the old artist mean by this? What ramifications does this concept have for every day life outside the world of painting?
7. At least one reviewer posited the idea that *The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque* could be construed as a feminist novel. Do you agree or disagree with this interpretation?
8. It comes to light in the course of the story that this same commission has "destroyed" many artists (for instance, Shenz and Sabbot). Why would a task such as this -- depicting a woman one can't see--cause the artists to doubt themselves and their abilities?
9. Do you believe that Samantha and Piambo will eventually get back together? Why? Why not?
10. Did you at any time while reading the novel catch a glimpse of the true visage of Mrs. Charbuque? If so, what did she look like? Were her features reminiscent of those of anyone you know? Or was she a distinct individual whose face you have never before seen?

About the Author

Jeffrey Ford is a professor of writing and early American literature at Brookdale Community College in New Jersey, and the author of three previous novels: the award-winning New York Times Notable Book *The Physiognomy*, *Memoranda*, and *The Beyond*. He lives with his family in New Jersey.

Author's recommendations for further reading:

The Aspern Papers - Henry James
Grammercy Park: An American Bloomsbury - Carole Klein
Grimm's Fairy Tales
The House of Mirth - Edith Wharton
What Painting Is - James Elkins