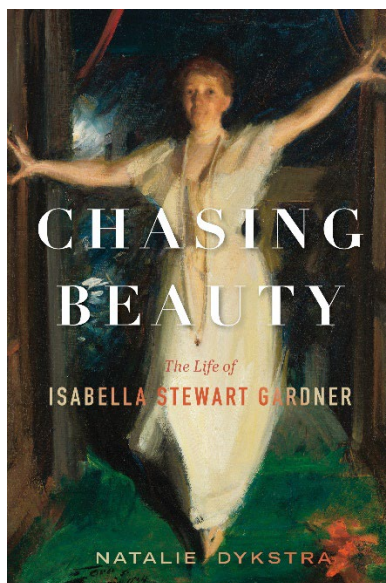




MARINER BOOKS

A PUBLISHING TRADITION SINCE 1832

READING GROUP GUIDE for
CHASING BEAUTY: *The Life of Isabella Stewart Gardner*
by Natalie Dykstra



Mariner Books

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“Isabella Stewart Gardner has found the ideal biographer in Natalie Dykstra, who gives Gardner, her nerves of steel, her expert eye, and her singular curiosity their due in this **wise, sparkling** book.”

—Stacy Schiff, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *The Revolutionary: Samuel Adams and Cleopatra*

“An **absorbing, deeply researched biography** that is also a travelogue, Edwardian period drama, and art history primer, with a supporting cast that includes Henry James, John Singer Sargent, Edith Wharton, and Henry Adams... **a feminist pathbreaker finally given her due.**”

—Heather Clark, author of *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*

Introduction

In *Chasing Beauty: The Life of Isabella Stewart Gardner*, award-winning author Natalie Dykstra delivers the definitive biographical portrait of the ambitious, innovative—and until now misunderstood—woman behind one of America’s most distinctive and stunning art museums.



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Born in 1840 to a privileged New York family, Isabella Stewart married Boston Brahmin Jack Gardner before she was twenty. She was not warmly welcomed by Boston's insular society and suffered the death of her only child, a beloved son not yet two years old. But in time came friendships, glittering and bohemian; awe-inspiring world travels; and the keen and competitive pursuit of beautiful things. All these were balm for loss. Henry James and John Singer Sargent, whose portrait of Isabella was a masterpiece and a scandal, came to recognize her originality. Bernard Berenson, leading connoisseur of the Italian Renaissance, was her art dealer.

Chasing Beauty illuminates the ways Gardner's ultimate creation, Boston's beloved Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and its holdings, can be seen as a kind of living memoir—as the place where the complex and singular Isabella “put herself on display...her taste, her passions, her sorrow, her nerve, her capacious curiosity, her relationships.”

See more at nataliedykstra.com.

Questions for Discussion for *Chasing Beauty*

1. In “Prologue: Notes on a Museum,” the reader learns that a friend once wrote of Isabella Stewart Gardner that “You have her when you have the museum.” How is *Chasing Beauty* a portrait of Isabella's life *and* the story of the museum? How does Isabella grow as a person alongside her vision of the museum? Have you read other books that blend biography with the story of a building or a place?
2. The book's notes on sources in *Chasing Beauty* show how the story draws on archival holdings—including thousands of letters and unpublished records—at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and other repositories in Boston, Paris, Venice, and more. Did you spot any “imagined” scenes in the book? How does Dykstra convey/write about Isabella's innermost feelings?
3. What details of Isabella's girlhood, first in New York City and then in Europe, stay with you or seem prescient, as you go on to read about her long life?
4. Dykstra writes that, after Isabella suffered a miscarriage soon into her marriage, “Suffocating social isolation compounded her loss.” What can be understood, and guessed, about why Boston matrons did not “take to” Belle Gardner? How did she cope with this rejection and how did Jack Gardner respond?



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5. In chapter 4, which covers the Civil War years, we learn that “Political fervor was not in the Gardner family’s nature.” Much later, in chapter 31, we see Isabella write to Bernard Berenson about World War I, saying that “I am pro only one thing and that is peace...I will not give money for ammunitions, and I will not make money (as people are doing to the bursting point) by owning stock in war weapons...Now you know my creed.” What do you think shaped Isabella’s attitudes toward the two great wars of her lifetime?
6. There is a story of two stained glass windows, one that appears in her early years and then another in her old age. Can you trace this story of stained glass and its themes for *Chasing Beauty*?
7. In chapter 4, we learn of a series of terrible losses for Isabella, a “ruin of private happiness.” How did these losses change her, and can you speculate on her pursuit of beauty in relation to them?
8. In chapter 6, Dykstra writes, “Belle’s dress and adornment signaled her place in society but also something more—her originality and her desire for a place apart.” What does *Chasing Beauty* tell us about how she used fashion, the “language of pearls” for instance, to signal self-identity? What do you think of her displaying a section of her pale-green satin gown under Titian’s *Europa* at Fenway Court?
9. Chapter 9 tells the story of Isabella’s relationship with the writer F. Marion Crawford, whom she called Frank. What drew her to him and what happened between them? Describe Jack’s reaction.
10. Several chapters recount Isabella’s worldwide travels. How did her travels through Europe, Egypt, the Middle East, and Asia shape her? Isabella’s first long visit to Venice in 1884 is described in chapter 11—why do you think she was soothed and inspired by Venice, and why did she return again and again to the Palazzo Barbaro? How does she reference her travels in Fenway Court?
11. At the end of chapter 12, Dykstra writes about a shadow box where she placed portraits of herself, Jack, and their son Jackie along with a photograph of Jack’s nephew Joe Gardner, Jr., who had died by suicide. Dykstra writes: “They would be a family. She would remember.” This is an example of Isabella taking pictures and composing a tableau to affix memory. Where else does she do this, and why?



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12. John Singer Sargent was one of her close friends—and his iconic portrait of her caused a scandal in 1888, as Dykstra depicts in chapter 13. How would you characterize their friendship and why was his portrait so controversial? Why do you think Jack said at the time that “It looks like hell, but it looks like you?”
13. Dykstra writes at the end of chapter 16 that “Belle’s inheritance from her father, \$2.75 million, was not a fortune on the scale of the Vanderbilts’ or J.P. Morgan’s or Henry Frick’s. It was, however, more than enough for her to launch headlong into her future.” What do we know about the sources of wealth on the Stewart and Gardner sides? How did Jack Gardner and Isabella negotiate spending during their marriage? What might this legacy from her father, when she was fifty-one, have meant to her?
14. How would you depict the long-lasting relationship between Isabella and Bernard Berenson? How did they both help and annoy each other, and why did Jack distrust him?
15. Anders Zorn (who painted the portrait shown on the cover of *Chasing Beauty*) wrote to Isabella that “the key to your heart is music.” Why did he think that? Describe some of Isabella’s responses to music and musical performances and how music connected to her art collecting. Another of her passions was horticulture, as seen in her large solarium at her Beacon Street home and the sprawling gardens at Green Hill. How does her time “grubbing in the earth” find expression at Fenway Court?
16. Isabella and Jack had differing interests and energy levels: “where Belle was fiery, Jack was calm; where Belle was instinctive, Jack was deliberate.” At which points in Isabella’s life did Jack’s slow and steady temperament help or hinder her? Chapter 22 tells the story of Jack’s death, and looks back on what the marriage gave Isabella—how would you characterize this?
17. Isabella carefully wrote many detailed lists to keep track of her vast collection. What do they reveal about Isabella? How does the photograph at the end of chapter 15, depicting her at her desk, represent something “far more threatening to the status quo” than her flamboyant persona, as Dykstra claims?
18. Describe Isabella’s relationship with Okakura Kakuzō. How does it compare to her other significant relationships with men?



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19. Spirituality is a through line in Isabella's story—how does her spiritual faith change over time and inform her decisions and relationships? What are some reflections of her spiritual understanding in Fenway Court? How did she express her appreciation for different religions?
20. In 1990, thirteen artworks were stolen from the Gardner Museum, including two paintings by Rembrandt and Isabella's prized Vermeer. The theft remains unsolved. Why do you think Dykstra waits to mention the notorious event until the very end of the book? Then, in what context does she relay the story?
21. *Chasing Beauty's* epigraph, a line from Virgil's *Aeneid*, depicts the sensation of being overwhelmed by a piece of art, which was likely a feeling quite familiar to Isabella. Can you think of a piece of art, music, or photography that stirred your emotions in a similar way?