



Keeping the World Away

Margaret Forster

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Gwen, a bold and spirited young English artist, defies convention and sets out to study in Paris, where she has a tumultuous affair with the inspiring, controlling sculptor Rodin. But as the relationship cools, Gwen feels lonely and adrift as she awaits the ever more infrequent visits from her lover. Attempting to restore her artistic vision and recapture her true self, Gwen pours out her soul onto a canvas, creating an intimate painting of a quiet corner of her attic room.

Lost, found, stolen, sold, and fought over, the painting enchants all who possess it. First it falls into the hands of Charlotte, a dreamy intellectual with artistic leanings—though little talent. In turn the work finds its way to the lovely, bright Stella; the destitute but willful Lucasta; self-sufficient Ailsa; and, finally, young, curious Gillian. All of whom long for a tranquil golden place such as the one depicted in the painting, a haven where they can “keep the world away.”

Praise for *Keeping the World Away*:

“Evocative . . . an apparently simple yet potent work of art.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Highly recommended . . . One small painting, a still life of a corner of an attic room, is the thread that ties this moving novel together.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“It is the painting’s power to evoke tranquility that Forster so effectively celebrates.”

—*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

“Haunting . . . revealing . . . exquisitely drawn.”

—*The Washington Post Book World*

“An intimate, subtly crafted, satisfying read.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Keeping the World Away Details

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From Reader Review Keeping the World Away for online ebook

Anna Karras says

I was sent this book to review for Library Journal. I knew of Margaret Forster Margaret Forster but had never read anything by her. The premise of the story sounded familiar - a painting is the element that ties the stories of the owners together. Very *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. But this novel is anything but a ripoff of another story - this was so beautifully and quietly written. Each woman in turn is affected by this painting, and the quest for the quietness and solitude it promises is something many people can understand.

Sandra says

This book was really excellent! I couldn't put it down.

SPOILERS below:

When I got to a certain point in the "Gwen" section, the painting she gave to her friend Ursula began to sound very, very familiar. Something clicked in my brain. I knew I had bought a greeting card years ago of an attic, with a wicker chair, a window and a table with flowers on it. I bought it because it made me feel peaceful. I used to keep it on my bulletin board at work.

I ran upstairs to a file folder where I keep work mementoes, and sure enough, it was "A Corner of the Artist's Room" by Gwen John!

I was delighted that just a brief description in a book could spark my memory like that. And more pleased that I own a tiny copy of the painting that inspired this wonderful book!

Margaret says

I expect a book by Margaret Forster to be good and this one is no exception. It is essentially the story of a painting, a variant of Gwen John's *The Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, as over the years it passes from one woman to another. I knew very little about Gwen John before I read *Keeping the World Away* and now I want to know more. (Fortunately there is a list of books about her in the back of the book.)[return][return]The title of the book comes from a quotation from Gwen John's *Papers in the National Library of Wales*:

Rules to Keep the World away: Do not listen to people (more than is necessary); Do not look at people (ditto); Have as little intercourse with people as possible; When you come into contact with people, talk as little as possible & 3 March 1912

It seems from this novel that Gwen John was completely infatuated and in thrall to the artist Rodin. She became his lover and tried to please him by being tranquil and calm and striving for harmony in her life. Inwardly, however she felt volcanic, as though burning lava filled her and would explode with the force of what was beneath it, her overwhelming passion for him.

Her room was the image of how Rodin wished her to be and she painted a sunlit corner of it where it was all

peace and calm and serenity in contrast to Gwen herself who radiated energy . She rearranged the room and painted several versions; with the window open, with an open book on the table, with flowers on the table, with and without the parasol.[return]I wished that the whole book had been about Gwen John. However, it s about the painting and how its successive owners acquire it and what it means to each of them. It gets lost, is stolen, turns up on a market stall, is bought, given away and fought over. As each new owner is introduced there are links between them, but each time the painting passed to a new person I wanted to know more about each of them.

The painting is seen as expressing a yearning for something unobtainable, having an air of mystery, conveying a sense of waiting, of longing, of anticipation of someone s arrival, painful, soothing or uplifting, empty, and symbolic of an independent, simple life free of entanglements. It becomes part of the lives of its owners. The novel starts with Gillian, the school girl reflecting that art speaks for itself, regardless of the artist s intention. She was convinced that art should be looked at in a pure way, uninfluenced by any knowledge of the artist or the circumstances in which it had been painted. It ends with Gillian, the aspiring artist, reflecting on the nature of art and the purpose of this painting - Had that not been its purpose? To keep the world away, for a few precious moments, at least every time it was looked at?

I can t quite agree with Gillian. I can see that seeing a painting in isolation from the artist can be a pure experience, but I'm always filled with curiosity both about artists and authors - who they were, when they lived, what was going on in the world they lived in and how it affected their work. However, I also think that a painting is like a book in that they can both be interpreted in many ways regardless of the artist's or author's intentions.

This is a remarkable book, which I m sure I shall read again and again.[see here](#)

Susan says

The biggest problem with this book is its structure. Purporting to be the story of a painting and its effect of various women who own it, each section is too long with distracting parts to it. It is as if there were seven novellas linked together. I know of the saying, Don't tell it, show it. But in this case, too much is shown when it would have been better to just refer to certain parts of their pasts.

Gwen, Charlotte, Stella, Lucasta, Ailsa, Gillian (and Claudette, who doesn't get her own chapter) each have the painting in their possession for awhile. I was also annoyed by how various characters keep running into each other though they don't know who these people are in relation to The Painting. I have not thought it all through how the painting helped each person keep the world away, and if that was or was not a good thing. We will be discussing it at the Arteast Book Club in a few days. It will make for a good discussion.

At the discussion, I was a bit surprised that members could not keep the characters and their stories straight. I had to go through them one by one. But we had fun.

Pat says

(3.5)Review to follow.

Christina says

Like *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, this story follows a painting as it's passed from woman to woman, beginning with the painter herself, Gwen John. The problems I had with this book were that parts of it felt very condensed, and sometimes from paragraph to paragraph, it was hard to figure out how much time was to have passed, making it feel like there were chunks edited out. I also felt that some of the connections between the characters were contrived and it took away from the *realness* of the book.

Celia says

One of my reading goals this year is to read (or at least entertain reading!) one book by each of 16 authors that died in 2016.

Well, I have found (in my opinion at least), a hidden gem.

Margaret Forster wrote four books: two historical fiction and two biographies.

I have just rcompleted this one: *Keeping the World Away*.

It is a fictional account of a painting - a real painting by Gwen John (1876 - 1939). The painting is given away, lost, found, fought over, bought and bequeathed. The stories of the women who are involved with this painting make this book.

The painting can be viewed at the following website:

[https://www.wikiart.org/en/gwen-john/...](https://www.wikiart.org/en/gwen-john/)

The title of the book is taken from a personal journal quote of John's: "Rules to Keep the World Away: Do not listen to people more than is necessary; do not look at people more than is necessary ; have as little intercourse with people as possible".

I think all of us, even those who love interacting with the world, find we sometimes want to *Keep the World Away*. From this book, we can get inspiration.

Jane says

I love Margaret Forster's books. I've read three now, and this one was as good as the other two, perhaps my favorite. It's based on a painting by Gwen John, an actual artist, an actual painting. The painting is given to a friend by the artist and then travels with other women, all of whom have reasons to "keep the world away." It's an extraordinary perspective on the ways in which women need to carve out their own space, their rooms, their worlds. I loved it. Very different from any book I've read about women, not "romantic" at all although it aches with longing. But these women sense what they need to live their lives, and men are only part of that story, and for most of the women, not the major part. If you haven't read any of Forster's books, this is where I'd start. She is so different, and so daring. All of her books are worth reading.

Yak says

A painting by Gwen John passes from owner to owner over the course of 100 years. Forster is a good storyteller, but somehow I wasn't as engaged as I felt I ought to be. Maybe because I'm one of those people that doesn't get mesmerized by many paintings. The back cover shows the picture in question, and frankly it doesn't do a whole lot for me. Also there were too many characters; I'd prefer more details about fewer people.

Eli Brooke says

I wasn't sure I liked this novel at first, but kept reading anyway, and came to like it very much in the end. The first character, whom I just found out is the fictionalized but real painter Gwen John, was my least favorite. She creates a small painting of a corner of her attic room in Paris that passes through the hands of several women over the course of about 100 years, all of whom are drawn to it because of factors in their own lives. The women are all very different from one another, but have in common a desire for the sort of peace that only isolation can give, hence the title.

LindyLouMac says

'Keeping The World Away' is a novel about a painting and the women whose lives it touches, original and a fabulous read, a perfect example of why I have been enjoying the novels of Margaret Forster since the late nineteen sixties. This is not an exaggeration, I find her work just as appealing now as I did all those years ago. What makes 'Keeping The World Away' so fascinating is the fact that it has taken the painting of a real life artist Gwen John (1876-1939) as its subject with the novel's title coming from the artist's own notebooks. She was a known recluse and to quote from those notebooks "Rules to Keep the World Away: Do not listen to people more than is necessary; do not look at people more than is necessary; have as little intercourse with people as possible".

I like stories where the author has used characters from real life inspiration as although it is fiction I still feel I am learning something from reality at the same time. For example reading this novel has led me to research about the artist.

The story is divided into six sections to track the painting's journey and Forster manages to link each one by an almost imperceptible link known only to the reader. The journey starts with the painting's artist Gwen John herself before she has produced this small and intimate painting of the attic room, where she spends so much time waiting for her lover Rodin. A complex and determined young woman from an artistic background, Gwen had persuaded her father to let her study at the Slade, which led her to later live in Paris and become a model for the great master Rodin.

Gwen gifts the painting to a close friend and hence we move on to the next woman in the story, although not the one you might expect. Owned by five women, Gwen, Charlotte, Stella, Lucasta, Ailsa and Gillian whose lives the painting touches as it is lost, found, sold, bought, inherited, given away and stolen. You learn how this painting affects their respective lives as each woman has an interesting connection to the previous one. I felt the story flowed across the time period exceptionally well, leaving me with the feeling that the painting had done the job the artist originally intended. Which was of course to keep the world away, even if only for those few cherished moments when one was gazing at it.

As I said at the start of my review an original read that I think will appeal to anyone that enjoys art and creative women. Margaret Forster draws you into the lives of these women, especially as the source of the story is all based on a wonderful little painting.

Lots more here

<http://lindyloumacbookreviews.blogspot...>

Kristin Gleeson says

This novel takes a hackneyed structure--follow a life of an object, in this case a painting, and take it through the lives of first the creator and then the people who owned it-- and does nothing original or particularly interesting with it. It begins with Gwen, the Victorian woman who struggled to express her passion through her painting only to shift it to Rodin. It moves on to similar women who 'want to keep the world away' until it comes to its modern setting. The narrative is mostly telling so that it gives the reader little chance to be anything but annoyed with the characters. We pause for scenes on very few occasions and rush through the life to get to the next one.

Moya Smith says

I have read almost everything Margaret Forster has written. I love her quiet penetrating gaze into human relationships, and especially into families. I was saddened to read recently of her death. We have lost a great voice for women.

Freda Lightfoot says

This is the kind of book that pulls you in the more you read of it. Based on the story of Gwen John, the artist who painted a soulful picture of a lone chair and table in a small room, we follow the life of that picture through its different owners. All of these women have in common their desire to retreat from the world in some way, and their characters as always with a Forster novel are finely and beautifully drawn. Each one logically follows the other and is linked in some way, proving that the artist's purpose in producing the picture, was fulfilled. Unusual, and a wonderful read.

Rachel says

I liked the idea of this book. Much like the movie "The Red Violin", the story of this painting starts with the artist who pours her heart and soul into this painting in order to please her lover. The book is based on an actual painting (at least a version of it) and artist. This painting is lost, found, sold, bought and passed on to many different women through the ages, and the book tells the story of how it affects their respective lives.

My main problem with the story is though "passion" is brought up quite often, and each woman is described as highly passionate, I never feel any passion while reading it. Gwen's affair with Rodin is written about so matter of factly that I felt a little like I was reading a textbook or at least a very dry biography. Plus, each of the women seemed to be very distant and isolated - maybe that's why they liked the painting so much. But,

for me at least, the book seemed to be lacking something.
