

Praise for The Painter's Daughters

‘It’s beautifully written and I raced through it. Research is filtered through contemporary consciousness and deployed with skill. It’s a polished performance’

Hilary Mantel, Booker Prize-winning author of *Wolf Hall*

‘Beautifully written, moving and skilfully handled, *The Painter's Daughters* is as exquisitely and tenderly rendered as a Gainsborough painting’

Tracy Chevalier, author of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*

‘A wonderfully powerful and haunting novel about sisterly love, art and betrayal, with a hugely gripping plot. I absolutely loved it’

Deborah Moggach, author of *Tulip Fever*

‘A feast for the senses and the joy of a story well told – a beautiful debut’

Jo Browning Wroe, author of *A Terrible Kindness*

‘A beautifully written, impressively researched novel about sisterly love, art and sacrifice, *The Painter's Daughters* is historical fiction at its finest. Both entertaining and enlightening, it swept me along in its galloping pace while teaching me about a world I never knew. Howes is a talent to be reckoned with. Wonderful’

Emma Stonex, author of *The Lamplighters*

‘A deeply touching tale of two sisters that probes the difference between love and self-sacrifice. Fascinating’

Priscilla Morris, author of *Black Butterflies*

‘Emily Howes is a talented writer who vividly evokes Regency England but doesn’t shy away from exploring how its glittering society could constrain and threaten young women. An engaging and enjoyable mix of historical fact and beautifully imagined fiction’

Joanna Quinn, author of *The Whalebone Theatre*

‘A marvellous novel, up there with some of my favourite works of historical fiction. Emily Howes’ evocation of the Gainsborough sisters’ relationship is truly remarkable and the novel is a sensory delight, full of evocative descriptions that bring the past to life. I loved it’

Whitney Scharer, author of *The Age of Light*

‘I loved *The Painter’s Daughters* – a vivid, sad, beautiful novel about sisters’

Amy Key, author of *Arrangements in Blue*

‘A mesmerising and at times quietly devastating tale of two sisters, art, shared suffering and love. With *The Painter’s Daughters*, Emily Howes has pulled off the finest of balancing acts, combining rich and evocative historical detail with a light and contemporary writerly touch’

Chloë Ashby, author of *Second Self*

‘A fantastic debut . . . *The Painter’s Daughters* is a beautiful, heartbreaking, stunningly perceptive read about love and art, hope and expectation. And so gripping too – I devoured it’

Caroline Lea, author of *The Glass Woman*

THE PAINTER'S DAUGHTERS

Emily Howes



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For my mother

‘And as for sweet Peggy Gainsborough, she lived her own unselfish life, and found her full complement of happiness in the love of those so dear to her, and never regretted the position and title which had been, as it were, almost forced upon her.’

Emily Baker, from *Peggy Gainsborough:
The Famous Painter’s Daughter*, 1909

‘If you have no dreams, you will live within them.’

Robert Burton, from
An Anatomy of Melancholy, 1628

PART ONE

PEGGY

Patina

First, the canvas.

Not one, but many. Great oblongs carried in and out, wrapped carefully in shrouds. Like bodies, we always thought as we watched them from the window. Like great stiff bodies, short, tall, thin and wide, one for each of them as they came in their carriages and swept away again. And underneath the shroud, stripped back in privacy, the sheer blank expanse of it, the bareness of it, like naked skin.

The tools in his studio are meticulously arranged, like instruments in an orchestra; easel, palette, smudge pan, straining frame, primed cloth, maulstick, pencils as sharp as a pin or as fat as a finger, Dutch quills and swan quills, jewelling pencils and bristle pencils; a brush for every fleck in your eye, to smooth every coarse hair. Devices to conjure life, and then soften it back into perfection.

It is Saturday afternoon. Late August, the air hot and still in the shuttered house. And my father is beginning something, beginning someone.

The door of the studio is ajar. All is quiet. We loiter, Molly and I, hoping to be seen.

He is standing with his back to us, his fingers rubbing

his cheek where the afternoon whiskers are beginning to grow. The canvas in front of him, waiting. In one hand he is holding something small and white. He dips it into a shallow bowl and raises it, dripping.

A muffled giggle, a creaking floorboard. He half turns.

‘Now, who might that be?’

We try for silence, but Molly steps on my foot.

‘Reveal yourselves this moment or be tipped into the paste water!’

He knows it is us.

‘Hello,’ I say. My voice is too loud in the afternoon silence.

He sees us in the doorway, and stretches out his hand. He looks hot and weary.

‘Come in, you vagabonds, and let me see you for a moment before I work.’

And then he adds, as we push the door too eagerly and it bangs against the wall, ‘But I have a dreadful head on me, so absolutely no singing, dancing, shrieking, disagreeing, and most particularly, no dangling from my neck.’

Molly is fond of dangling from his neck although she is older than me, and heavier.

‘What are you doing?’ I ask him.

‘He is washing the canvas,’ Molly says. ‘I’ve seen him before.’

‘Not washing it, Moll, but getting it ready. Come here and I will show you.’

The studio smells of paint and soap and stale beer and some other smell I do not know, but that rests on my father’s hands and hair and on the sleeves of his jacket.

‘Now then,’ he says, ‘The Captain first, as she is the smallest. Hold out your hand, Peg.’

I stretch out my upturned palm, and into it he puts a stone, rough and white like bone. And then he wraps his own large hand around it, guiding, dipping the pumice down into the bowl of water, and bringing it out. Together we move it over the canvas, smoothing, working away at the knots and bumps. His hand is red and lined, a working hand, and mine is a shell inside it.

‘That’s it, my Captain,’ he says. ‘Gently now.’

We dip the stone again, and there is no sound but our breathing and the water sloshing gently in the bowl, and then the rasp of the stone against the skin of the canvas.

Molly hangs beside me, watching.

‘When is it my turn?’ she says. ‘When is my turn? Is it my turn now?’

‘Wait a moment, my Molly.’

‘It isn’t your turn, Moll,’ I say. ‘It’s still mine.’

Water trickles down my arm, tracking its way towards the sleeve of my dress, and I want to stop it tickling but I do not want it ever to stop being my turn.

Molly leans in, brown curls falling over her face, and she is reaching out to tap our father’s arm, to ask again, but sharp footsteps cut across the floor. It is our mother, fat beads of sweat on her upper lip, coming at us in a flurry of words.

Lady Astor is coming, she is saying, to see about a portrait and we must leave at once, and Peggy, go and change your dress immediately, it has splashes and drips all down the front of it, and what are we doing in here anyway, tormenting our father who has plenty to do that is not taking care of little girls and dear God, Thomas, must it always smell of beer in here, and out, out and find something else to do. Out, out, out!

And so we are banished, and hurry from the room, my hands still dripping. Together we slip back through the hallway, past the carefully hung portraits that say look what happens here, look who you can be – two small girls vanishing like twin ghosts up the stairs off to find another game, another way to pass the time. We are invited in together, we are conspirators together; welcomed, banished, summoned, always together. And when Molly forgets, I remember for her.

Later, when the canvas is smooth and dry, unmarred and unmarked and ready, he will show us how to paint the first layer, a rich, ochre red, the colour of earth and blood all mixed up together. Because the earth colour will not kill the other colours, he tells us, and we think it is funny, the red letting all the other colours live. Red for justice, virtue and defence, green for hope, carnation for subtlety and deceit, popinjay for wantonness. Hidden messages to warn, to praise, to flatter. Each one blended into the edge of a ribbon or the fall of the light from the sun. It is a form of magic that only he knows.

Ever since those early days I have thought of colours as having their own life, their own agency, as if they are characters in a story, clamouring to be heard. Now I am the kind of green you get in shadows, *terre verte*, perhaps, the muted underpaint. That is what secrets do. But as a child in our Ipswich days I was pink, the tender pink of flesh, pale and iridescent against the dark Suffolk earth. And Molly too. We were the same colour, then.