

The physician at the movies



Girl with a Pearl Earring. Johannes Vermeer, ca. 1655–1656. Oil on canvas. Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, the Hague, Netherlands. Photo credit: Album/Art Resource, New York.



Scarlett Johansson plays Griet in *Girl With A Pearl Earring*. © Pathe Distribution Ltd. Photographer: Jaap Buitendijk.

Girl with a Pearl Earring

Starring Scarlett Johansson, Colin Firth, and Tom Wilkinson. Directed by Peter Webber. Rated PG-13. Running time 100 minutes.

Growing up, I lived in a cold water flat on the Lower East Side of New York on Water Street between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges.¹ Cold water flats consisted of rooms sequenced like railroad cars, with a kitchen at one end containing a wood stove that served as the apartment's main source of heat as well as for cooking, an icebox, and a toilet on the landing. In 1948, when I was eleven, our building, dating at least from 1811, was slated for demolition to build the Alfred E. Smith housing project, a soulless complex of banal high-rises that persists until this day. We were relocated by the city to a tenement built in 1819 five



blocks away on Madison Street above a Greek cafe. This apartment had radiators for heat, as well as hot water, with a toilet and bathtub/shower that had been added in separate corners of the kitchen to comply with evolving New York City tenement laws. The shower curtain was essential—the apartment door opened directly opposite the shower. When I was thirteen we were again relocated, this time to housing projects (my grandparents to one downtown and my parents and I to another uptown). It wasn't until I graduated from medical school that my parents could afford a home of their own.

Count me as one of those who, having grown up in a loving home, never considered himself poor and was spared the pangs of class envy. I in fact appreciated those wealthy so-called "robber barons," whose largesse left New York an arts and humanities legacy that includes the art deco masterpiece of Rockefeller Center, the Carnegie Library at Chatham Square, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I took a survey course



Girl with a Pearl Earring, directed by Peter Webber. © Pathe Distribution Ltd. Photographer: Jaap Buitendijk.

in art history. My particular favorite was the Frick Collection with its stunning selection of old masters. When I needed to decompress from medical school, I retreated to the Frick, where its elegant sun parlor and burbling fountains provided a peaceful setting and a source of respite. Whenever I'm in New York City, I make it a point to visit "my" Vermeers, Delatours, Holbeins, and other treasures. I especially take time to sit on the benches and enjoy the gift from Henry Clay Frick whose descendant was a teacher of mine in OB/GYN. The recent statement by Bill Gates denigrating the use of wealth for museums, as opposed to the medical research he funds gave rise to these reflections.² Don't both serve worthy purposes?

That thought was reinforced by my recent trip to New York City to welcome our ninth grandchild, the lovely Lumina Belle Dans, who literally popped out of her ex-ballerina mother's womb the day after Christmas. After visiting the family, I made a side trip to the Frick Collection to see the marvelous exhibition starring Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* on loan from the Mauritshuis in The Hague while it undergoes renovation. This was one time when the adage "membership has its privileges" was borne out for me. While the line of visitors stretched around the block, members were allowed in first and in numbers that allowed us to get up close and personal with the young lady known as the "Dutch Mona Lisa."² I'd seen her at the National Gallery of Art in 1982 but this was much better. I had avoided seeing the movie of the same name or reading the best-selling novel by Tracy Chevalier³ on which it was based because I didn't want to spoil my appreciation of the painting by interposing a fictional and imagined treatment of Vermeer, of whom very little is really known. It's not for nothing that he has earned the sobriquet "the Sphinx of Delft." What we know with certainty is that he was born in 1632, spent his entire

life in Delft, and died at the age of forty-three.

This time, the exhibition stimulated me to check out the audio book³ and then to view the movie. I enjoyed the former and was disappointed in the latter. The book employs a first person narrative telling the story of Griet, whose impoverished family is forced to hire her out as a maid in the Vermeer household. On the Vermeers' visit to seal the deal, the illiterate Griet (Scarlett Johansson) is cutting vegetables and Johannes Vermeer (Colin Firth) notices that in doing so she demonstrates a sense of color and order. She seems to take after her father, who was a tile painter before being blinded in a work accident, which has led to their economic constraints. We

are introduced to Catharina (Essie Davis), Vermeer's pregnant wife, portrayed as rather shrewish, who will ultimately have fifteen pregnancies and bear eleven living children; Maria Thins (Judy Parfitt), Catharina's mother, who runs the household and acts as Vermeer's agent; and five children, two of whom figure in the story. The principal one, the bratty Cornelia (Alakina Mann), becomes Griet's nemesis, and the other, Maertge (Anna Popplewell), becomes a friend. The other household member is Tanneke (Joanna Scanlan), the senior maid, whose loyalty is to Maria Thins. Much of the book is devoted to describing domestic life in Holland of the 1600s. Griet spends considerable time doing never-ending loads of laundry, which she scrubs and then dries and bleaches in the sun. On one occasion Cornelia dirties a sheet of laundry so Griet has to redo it. She must also make daily visits to the fishmonger and the meat market where she meets Pieter (Cillian Murphy) who will later be part of a presumed romantic quadrangle including Griet, the painter, and his patron.

One interesting note that is touched on at a few points is the segregation of working class Protestants like Griet's family from the Catholics like the Vermeers (he converted to Catholicism before marrying Catharina Bolnes in 1653). Griet covers the crucifix at the head of her bed each evening so she can sleep. Chevalier has a fine eye for detail and the book's description allows the reader to fill in the pictorial settings. The movie has a clear advantage in being able to create a beautiful and sumptuous background, especially in its best scene: the patron arrives at the Vermeers' home by boat on a canal lighted with torches for the party celebrating the surrender of a finished painting.

Cleaning the Master's studio, which must be left exactly as she found it, allows Griet to grow in her appreciation of art.

In one interesting scene that appears differently in the film, a friend of Vermeer's lends him his *camera obscura* to visualize a painting. In the film, Vermeer is alone with Griet and they come close to one another. In the book, Chevalier handles their developing relationship much more subtly, showing that while the impressionable seventeen-year-old is falling for her Master, he is more concerned with his painting and sees himself as a tutor for a knowledgeable assistant who also serves as an inspiration for his muse. She begins to mix paints and even suggests a different positioning for the table in a painting that he is doing. He shows her how white clouds are not just white but a blend of colors.

Vermeer is a slow painter and, given his burgeoning family, taking three to six months to complete a painting leads him into substantial debt. To satisfy his patron, lecherous merchant Pieter Van Ruijven (Tom Wilkinson), Vermeer takes a commission to paint Van Ruijven and his maid. Van Ruijven takes the opportunity to seduce the maid, leading to her pregnancy and subsequent ostracism. He envisions the same thing for Griet. He convinces Vermeer to paint Griet and, as a cover for his intentions, he also commissions a second painting using him and his family as musicians. Vermeer refuses to allow him to be in Griet's painting, a "tronie"—a painting not meant to portray a specific sitter.⁴ As reviewer Jonathan Lopez notes, "the term encompasses close-up images of established character types—the jolly fisherman, the saucy servant girl—as well as faces displaying strong emotion or otherwise lost in thought."⁵

The book covers the intrigue very well as Van Ruijven is kept away from Griet with such success that he is forced to surprise her and chase her around the laundry. Vermeer's wife is prevented from knowing that he is painting Griet because she would be upset that a maid was chosen instead of herself, as well as that Vermeer is using her own earrings for the painting of the maid. Chevalier adds a nice touch with the earrings, not replicated in the movie, when Vermeer insists that she wear both earrings even though the one on the right won't be seen by the viewer. Presumably, the artist will see it.

The director calls the film a "domestic thriller" but it is hardly that. To me the film is very slow moving and has very long shots of Griet walking from errand to errand with lots of pregnant pauses. Inexplicably, the director chose not to include scenes of the onset of plague and the subsequent quarantine during which Griet's sister dies, nor does he include the subplot of her brother's unhappy apprenticeship in a tile factory. These would have added more action to the film. As it is, it's literally and figuratively like watching paint dry. To give the film its due, it was appropriately nominated in three Oscar categories: Cinematography, Art Direction, and Costume Design. If you are a Scarlett Johansson fan, by all means see it. I'm not. Since she is in just about every scene, for me this constituted Johansson overload. My main problem with the film, however, is that one probably can't understand the film and the intrigue that is going on without reading the book. The screenwriter

had to condense 240 pages of text into less than two hours, whereas the reader can pick up the book or listen to the audiobook sporadically and be transported back to seventeenth-century Holland without losing the thread. As for my fear that the book would spoil things for me by cluttering up appreciation of the painting with an imagined backstory, it never happened. I appreciate Chevalier's inventiveness but I doubt the veracity of the portrayal of the principals. If we know little about Vermeer and his wife, we know nothing about the maid. So I suggest you read the book, skip the movie, and enjoy the painting.

References

1. Dans PE, Lepkoff R, Wasserman S. Life on the Lower East Side: Photographs by Rebecca Lepkoff, 1937–1950. New York: New Princeton Architectural Press; 2006.
2. Gelernter D. Dutch Masters: The greatest of whom is much in evidence here. Weekly Standard 2013 Dec 23: 37.
3. Chevalier T. Girl with a Pearl Earring. Phimister RA, narrator. Prince Frederick (MD): Recorded Books; 2000.
4. Van Der Vinde L, editor. Girl with a Pearl Earring: Dutch Paintings from the Mauritshuis. San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; 2013.
5. Lopez J. Fantasy made flesh. Wall Street J 2013 Oct 19-20; C13.

Mister 880 (1950)

Starring Edmund Gwenn, Burt Lancaster, and Dorothy McGuire.

Directed by Edmund Goulding. Black and white. Not rated. Running time 90 minutes.

I attended Transfiguration School on Mott Street in New York City's Chinatown. Founded in 1853, it served the children of immigrants, first Irish, then Italian, and later Chinese, mainly from Hong Kong. Sister Mary Berchmans Flynn, a Maryknoll nun who taught a combined fifth and sixth grade, skipped me a grade by moving me over a row. She told my parents that she worried that the school could not meet my needs and that I might get into trouble being much younger than the other boys, some of whom played rough. My stepfather, who had spent half of World War II at sea as a merchant Marine from Murmansk to Anzio and New Guinea, was then working as a marine engineer for the Grace Line on two-week trips to the Caribbean. He apparently was a troublemaker in his youth and his father, who owned the Café Espana next door, intended to send him to military school, which had the reputation of being the place where you sent boys to "straighten them out." With his father's premature death, the plan was shelved and my dad shipped out when he was fifteen, but held onto that dream. After considering Peekskill, he agreed to send me, beginning in the eighth grade, to La Salle Military Academy, located on



Burt Lancaster and Dorothy McGuire in *Mister 880* (1950). © Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

the 160-acre Bourne estate on Long Island's South Shore on the Great South Bay.¹ The contrast with the Lower East Side made me feel that I had died and gone to heaven.

In order to pay the tuition, board, and uniforms, which came to \$1865, a lot of money in those days, he agreed to switch to six-week cruises to Valparaiso, Chile. I couldn't afford to go home on weekends, so I stayed at the school where, each Saturday, students who had not accumulated ten demerits were taken to the movies in Patchogue. Those weekly doses of Hollywood cinema resulted in my lifelong love affair with the movies.

Mister 880 was one of the films I enjoyed then; I was glad to see that Twentieth Century Fox had finally released it on DVD. A lighthearted entertainment, it's a good example of a case where truth is stranger than fiction. Based on a series of *New Yorker* articles by St. Clair McKelway, it tells the story of Edward Skipper Mueller (born Emerich Juetner in Austria), who worked for years as a building superintendent. After his wife died in 1937, he decided to retire at sixty-three and moved with his dog from their basement apartment to a sunny top floor apartment in a brownstone on 96th Street and Broadway. A friendly gentleman who was quite handy, he had been a very good "super" and was well-liked. He loved to stop and talk to people as he walked his dog in the neighborhood.

He tried to make ends meet as a junkman (or antique dealer as he preferred to call himself). Having been self-sufficient since first beginning work at age thirteen, he did not wish to go on "relief" or to trouble his son and daughter, who both had families of their own. During his business downturns, he took to counterfeiting one dollar bills on his printing

press, called "Uncle Henry." Beginning in 1938, Miller began printing dollar bills when he needed them but only gave them out one at a time; by 1943 he had distributed \$2841 bills. It took ten years for the Secret Service to solve the case—it had the distinction of being the longest open case in its history. What was frustrating to the agents was that he only cashed the one dollar bills intermittently and from various locations in New York City's five boroughs. Adding insult to injury, he used a retouched portrait of George Washington, spelling it "Wahsington," and used ordinary stationery. The agents came to describe him as "the most exasperating counterfeiter of all time and the least greedy."³

Mueller (or Miller as he is called in the movie) is played by the gentle, avuncular Edmund Gwenn. Walter Huston had originally been cast in the role, but died just before the filming began. Best known for his Academy Award-winning portrayal of Santa in *Miracle on 34th Street*, Gwenn also received an Oscar nomination for this role. The story is enhanced by a fictional romantic subplot with Burt Lancaster as Secret Service agent Steve Buchanan and Dorothy McGuire as Ann Winslow, an interpreter at the United Nations. They meet when she unknowingly passes a counterfeit bill and becomes a target of the investigation. Known as Skipper, Miller is a genial man who captivates even the Secret Service men who had been frustrated by not being able to track him down. The judge is not sympathetic to the crime but is persuaded by the agents to give him a light sentence and to levy a fine of one dollar (a real one). Residuals from the movie earned Mueller more money than his life of crime, consistent with the words of a popular radio program of the time, *Crime Doesn't Pay*.

References

1. Dans PE. La Salle Military Academy. Pro Deo, Pro Patria: The Life and Death of A Catholic Military School. Self-Published; 2013.
2. McKelway SC. Mister 880. In: Reporting at Wit's End: Tales from the *New Yorker* New York: Bloomsbury; 2010: 134–72.
3. Zacharek S. Mister 880. <http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article.html?isPreview=&id=770437%7C719869&>.

Dr. Dans (AQA, Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, 1960) is a member of *The Pharos's* editorial board and has been its film critic since 1990. His address is:

11 Hickory Hill Road
Cockeysville, Maryland 21030
E-mail: pdans@verizon.net