

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

A STUDY GUIDE



The Vanishing Point

A Novel by Louise Hawes

0-618-43423-2 • \$17.00

An exciting tale of historical fiction about Italy's most famous female painter: Lavinia Fontana

Father has dismissed his apprentices for their evening meal and, her heart thudding in the silence, Vini has the whole shop to herself. She sneaks into the center of the room and lets the smell of the oil paint fill her chest and nose. It works like wine, only faster . . .

Prospero Fontana expects his daughter to love art, not make it. Vini's aunt has taught her to embroider and to dance; she has tutors for reading, for science, and for music. Already Prospero boasts that his daughter would make a better wife than half the full-grown women in Bologna.

But none of those women, Vini reminds herself, knows what this is like. Solid and exotic at once, earthy and forbidden, this place where men roll up their sleeves, tie on aprons, and turn work into beauty.

—an excerpt from *The Vanishing Point*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louise Hawes has written several novels for young adults. But she never expected to write about a protagonist who lived four hundred years ago. An amateur sculptor and painter, Louise stumbled onto the work of Lavinia Fontana at an art gallery in Washington, D.C., in 1998. She fell in love with the humor, lush textures, and natural storytelling she saw in the paintings. Three years later, when she was offered a chance to serve as a visiting author in ten American high schools in Italy, Louise found herself packing in record time! As she walked the streets of Bologna, the town where Fontana grew up, she felt closer and closer to the spirit of the young artist. It wasn't long before she was hard at work on *The Vanishing Point*.

"Historical fiction," Louise says, "is the most demanding writing I've ever done. Every description, every meal, every fact has to be checked and then rechecked." On the other hand, she claims it was easier to write about the young girl she calls Vini than about any other character she has created. "Vini and I think alike," she says. "We love the same things, lose patience with the same types of people and situations. The time that separates us? What's a few centuries between friends?"

ABOUT THE BOOK

History tells us a good deal about Lavinia Fontana, the famous female painter who became a legend in her native Italy and throughout Europe. *The Vanishing Point* tells us what we don't know; it is a fictional account of the young teenager who grew into the legend. When we meet Vini at the novel's opening, she is passionate about art but forced to hide her ambitions from her father. Like most of his contemporaries, Prospero Fontana believes women have no place in the street or the workshop. A respected portrait painter, he enjoys wealth and social status but is deeply bitter because he has no male heir to whom he can pass on his work.

Although Vini's dreams are threatened time and again, she is sustained not only by her own unquenchable ambition but also by her mother, who teaches her about love and loyalty, and by a tender romance that develops between her and a young apprentice in her father's shop. As the book ends, we have a glimpse of the wise and talented artist Vini is destined to become, thanks to the struggles and tests she has survived.

THE WORLD OF THE NOVEL

Renaissance, which means “rebirth,” is the name given to the time when the sciences, crafts, and arts flourished throughout Europe from the 1400s to the 1600s. In the middle of this creative growth, the painters of Italy were probably the most gifted, the most famous of all. The Catholic Church, which had discouraged learning and original thought during the Middle or Dark Ages, became the patron of many celebrated Renaissance artists, including Raphael, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Titian, and lesser-known painters like Vini’s father, Prospero Fontana.

Born into what is now known as the Counter-Reformation, Vini lived during a time when the church, threatened by the Protestant Reformation of Martin Luther, was striving to create new standards for education, family life, music, literature, and the visual arts. The daughters of the wealthy, while not permitted to attend schools, were encouraged to study with tutors and prepare themselves to be dutiful, intelligent wives and mothers. The proper study for women, then, included music, dance, sewing, and even Latin. The “weaker” sex, however, was not considered fit for careers or for productive crafts and art. Even in Vini’s hometown of Bologna, which had a history of women scholars and artists, females were not allowed to attend studio classes or to join artisan guilds.

BEFORE YOU READ

- **Focus on a theme**

Most stories that grip us are about a character who wants something and about the obstacles (human, social, or natural) that stand between this person and his or her dream. Think about a time when you had to work or struggle to achieve a goal on which you’d set your heart. What were the obstacles you faced? How

did you get through the experience? How did you feel afterward? Do you think you were changed? Would you rather have had your goal accomplished without a struggle? Why or why not?

- **Journal your feelings**

Write about an unrealized dream you have now. Describe the obstacles you currently face and any you think you may encounter in the future. How will you deal with them? How does this dream relate to the one you thought about above? Do you believe this current dream can be realized? Why or why not? How do you think trying for this dream will change you? How will you feel if you realize it? How will you feel if you cannot?

- **Read with a goal**

Read to find out how Vini pursues her dream of being a painter. What stands in her way? How does she deal with each obstacle? How is she changed by every new struggle?

AS YOU READ

- **Chart the story’s movement**

In the beginning of the novel, it is clear that the goals Vini’s father and mother have for her are very different from the ones she has for herself. Fill in flow charts to show how each obstacle to Vini’s plans changes all three characters’ goals and their attitudes toward each other. Although you may want to use your own words, the sample charts on the next page will get you started by suggesting the attitudes and dreams of all three characters at the story’s opening. Prospero Fontana’s reactions to the first two events have also been filled in. As you read along, complete the rest of the boxes, making a larger copy of the charts if you need more space. Keep the copy nearby and jot down brief notes as you move through the story.

PROSPERO FONTANA

wants Vini to marry. Even more, he wants a son to inherit his studio.

LAVINIA FONTANA (VINI)

aches to be a painter and to win her father’s approval. She finds her mother weak.

ANTONIA FONTANA

craves her daughter’s approval and wants to give Prospero a son.

Paolo shows Vini’s work to Prospero, representing it as his own:

continues to ignore Vini. He decides to focus on Paolo and to train him to be an expert painter

Prospero finds the anatomy book in Vini's room:

is angry and ashamed of his daughter. He assumes Paolo and Vini are lovers. He will not let Antonia speak.

Vini confesses the work is hers, not Paolo's:

Antonia announces she is pregnant, hopefully with a boy child:

Vini contracts measles, then loses her sight:

Antonia's baby is stillborn, but she is unable to accept her loss:

Vini refuses to paint unless her father treats Antonia with compassion:

AFTER YOU READ

• Between the lines

Break into groups to discuss the topics below. After a half-hour, let one “scribe” from each group summarize the group’s response:

Vision and sight are emphasized throughout *The Vanishing Point*: the title refers to a system of perspective or vision in space; Vini becomes blind during her bout with measles; “Look first with your eyes” is Prospero Fontana’s credo; Vini’s mother looks at a wooden puppet and sees a flesh-and-blood child. Discuss vision in the book. What role do Vini’s blind drawing and the scarf game play? What are some of the differences between the puppet shows Vini can watch and the one Paolo must “narrate?” How does Vini look at the world after her sight is restored? What do you think of the modern expression “Seeing is believing,” after reading this story?

Miracle cures were accepted in Vini’s time and are still occasionally reported today. Contemporary physicians know that when corneas are inflamed and damaged during measles, temporary blindness can occur until the scar tissue eventually heals. In the novel, though, several other explanations are offered for the return of Vini’s sight. Discuss Antonia’s prayers to Saint Lucy, Prospero’s prayer to God, the scorpion’s sting, and Paolo’s kiss. What is the power behind each of these “cures”? Does it matter which is the one that healed Vini? Why or why not? Do you think modern miracles can have more than one explanation?

Before and after: In the book’s “After Words,” the author describes the career of the adult painter Lavinia Fontana. Discuss the ways in which the famous painter might have been shaped by the events in this book: How did each of the obstacles in the novel prepare Vini to become a famous artist in a world in which few women were even allowed? What role did Paolo play in Vini’s adolescence and then in her adulthood? A biblical theme the adult painter handled several times was the beheading of Holofernes, an enemy soldier, by the beautiful widow Judith. This heroine did what a troop of soldiers could not, and might be compared to the female warrior Bradamante, mentioned in this novel. In what sense could Vini be said to be a warrior? What sort of weapons does she use? What armor protects her?

• Research and write

Using the books and/or Web sites listed at the end of this guide, write a report on one of the subjects below. You might want to team up with a research partner if you find someone interested in the same topic:

Medicine: In the book, the doctor uses a leech to bleed Vini. Find out about the medical theories of the Renaissance and about the surgical and other procedures used to treat patients. Compare this treatment to the potions and cures sold by the *ciarlatani* (street vendors who sold household remedies). How has medicine changed since Vini’s time? How have patients changed?

Art: The *bottega* (studio) was a way of life for artists in the Renaissance. Find out how a studio was run in Vini’s time. How were paints made? Vini’s father probably grew up using egg tempera but later adopted the “new” practice of oil painting. Learn the difference between these two techniques and discuss some of the famous painters of the period.

Food: During the banquet the Fontanas hold for their honored guest Pietro Catanio, Vini eats delicacies like peacock and eel; the Gypsy maid, Silvana, prepares rabbit, fennel, and pigeon for regular meals. There are lots of fun sites on the Internet where you can research Renaissance cookery. Describe a typical upper-class kitchen, telling how many servants it would employ and what sort of dishes would be served. Print out some recipes to try!

Clothes: Vini, the protagonist of the novel, and Lavinia, the famous artist she later became, both loved the textures and colors of clothes. In the book, Vini’s father is said to prefer the more elegant, somber fashions that swept Italy when the Spanish arrived. Capes, dresses, furs, and scarves are all mentioned in *The Vanishing Point*. Research the style and variety of Renaissance dress. Find illustrations, either from paintings or Web sites, to show what different classes of people wore both every day and to church or celebrations.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

ABOUT LAVINIA FONTANA

On the Web:

www.nmwa.org (Web site of the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Enter Lavinia Fontana in the SEARCH box.)

http://www.malaspina.com/site/person_484.asp (brief biography from a data base on Great Ideas)

<http://italian-art.org/women/artists/fontana/> (biography and links to several paintings)

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?eu=35414> (Encyclopedia Britannica article, also available in the library)

<http://www.cosmicbaseball.com/fontana02.html> (Yes! Lavinia Fontana was a pitcher for the 2002 season of cosmic baseball. Enjoy!)

NOTE: There are photos of Fontana's paintings available by searching the Web sites of the Metropolitan Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Cornell Fine Arts Museum, among others. But the best way to find dozens of paintings at once is to do a Google Image (not Web) search for "Lavinia Fontana."

Books and articles:

Fortunati, Vera. *Lavinia Fontana of Bologna 1552–1614*. (National Museum of Women in the Arts Catalog)

McIver, Katherine. "Lavinia Fontana's Self-Portrait Making Music," *Woman's Art Journal*, Spring/Summer 1998, pages 3-8.

Murphy, Caroline. *Lavinia Fontana: A Painter and Her Patrons in Sixteenth-Century Bologna*.

ABOUT WOMEN ARTISTS

On the Web:

http://www.csupomona.edu/~plin/women/16_17century.html (CSU at Pomona's database on women artists)

<http://womenshistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa021223a.htm> (biographies of female artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries)

Books:

Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*.

Fine, Elsa Honig. *Women and Art*.

Guerrilla Girls. *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*.

Heller, Nancy G. *Women Artists: An Illustrated History*.

Tufts, Eleanor. *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists*.

ABOUT THE RENAISSANCE

On the Web:

<http://www.twingroves.district96.k12.il.us/Renaissance/GeneralFiles/Introduction.html> (virtual tour)

<http://library.thinkquest.org/C005356/journey.htm> (Renaissance tour using flash animation)

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~sroczyms/food.html> (good links to medieval and Renaissance food)

http://www.nicomarin.com/ricette_e.htm (several wonderful Renaissance recipes)

<http://www.raveness.com/renaissance/italianrenaissancedress.html> (Renaissance fashions)

<http://alpha.furman.edu/~kgossman/history/italian/ital.html> (more clothes)

<http://members.aol.com/worldciv/renaissance.html> (survey of artists)

<http://www.st-mike.org/medicine/medicine.html> (good site on medicine; also see twingroves site above)

<http://www.teacheroz.com/renaissance.htm> (lots of good links!)

Books:

Cohen, Elizabeth S. and Thomas V. *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy*.

King, Margaret L. *Women of the Renaissance*.

Plumb, John H. *The Italian Renaissance* (American Heritage Library)

Sarti, Raffaella. *Europe at Home, Family and Material Culture 1500–1800*.

To find out more about Louise Hawes and her work
please visit www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com.
To order books please call 1-800-225-3362.

