

The Magnolia Palace

A Novel

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THE LIONS OF FIFTH AVENUE



DUTTON

Book Club
Kit



Dear Reader,

The Frick Collection is unusual among New York City museums. Unlike the sprawling Met or the swirling Guggenheim, the Frick mansion housed a family first, starting in 1914, before it was dubbed the Frick Collection and opened to the public in 1935.

And what a fascinating family lived within its walls: steel magnate Henry Clay Frick—a union-busting, art-loving patriarch; his sickly wife, Adelaide; and his adult daughter, Helen, who was described in a 1939 *New Yorker* profile as a woman of “extremely robust prejudices,” known for dropping friends if they bobbed their hair, and who steadfastly refused to employ Germans long after WWI. This was a household of three served by a staff of twenty-seven, surrounded by some of the most beautiful art in the world, yet haunted by a terrible tragedy that occurred years before they arrived in New York.

Before I started writing, I was lucky to get a marvelous behind-the-scenes tour of the building. We wandered past the Turner seascapes and Vermeer portraits on the main floors, down into the basement with its state-of-the-art bowling alley (circa 1914), and up to the top floors bursting with fur vaults and trunk rooms. As I left, I was struck by the nude figure carved in stone above the museum’s entrance. A quick search uncovered that her name was Audrey Munson, and that she was considered the supermodel of the 1910s, her image gracing more than a dozen statues across New York City. Unfortunately, Munson was drawn into a sordid scandal at the height of her fame, and eventually died in an asylum in 1996 at the age of 104.

Helen Clay Frick and Audrey Munson were two very different women, from very different walks of life, connected by this glorious Fifth Avenue mansion. As I headed home after that first tour, I couldn’t help but wonder, “What would an encounter between the free-spirited Audrey Munson and the notoriously prickly Helen Clay Frick have been like?”

The plot for *The Magnolia Palace* quickly unfolded from there. With the help of the remarkable staff and archivists at the Frick, I was able to do a deep dive into the history of the building and the family, accessing dinner party menus, employee payrolls, and photos of the original rooms. Armed with everything I learned from these documents, I decided to set the story in 1919, when the mansion was a residence, and also in 1966, after it had become a museum.

This book, my sixth, pits two strong-headed, very different women against each other, while exploring ideas of beauty and womanhood, and how they’ve changed (or not) over the past many decades. I’m so thrilled to be able to share it with you.



*Happy reading,
Fiona*

Discussion Questions

1.

If you could meet any of these characters and have a conversation with them, who would it be? What would your conversation be about?

2.

When Miss Helen meets Lillian, she says, "I like to make things difficult for other people. You should know that right off: I'm known to be difficult." How does their relationship evolve over the course of the book?

3.

While trying to convince Lillian to pose for his statues, Mr. Konti says that if the people of New York "walk by one of my statues and look up and see something beautiful, an idea or person who inspires them, then I have done my job. I do this not for me. It's for humanity." What do you think of this statement? Does it resonate with you and the role public art plays in your life? Why or why not?

4.

Miss Helen seems disconnected from reality, and is frequently oblivious to the feelings and motives of those around her. Why do you think that is? How do you think her wealth and position have altered her worldview? How did it affect the way she treated people like Lillian, or the way her father regarded people like Bertha?



Helen Clay Frick



Audrey Munson

5.

How do Joshua's experiences as a Black man in the art world affect the way he views the art at the Frick? Do his experiences alter your views of art history in any way?

6.

How do Lillian's and Veronica's experiences working as models in two different decades compare? In what ways does the novel explore the difference between being looked at versus being seen?

7.

The tenuous friendship Joshua and Veronica build during their stay in the Frick Collection is almost destroyed when Veronica betrays his trust. What are the stakes for each of them in that moment? What makes Veronica's actions dangerous for both and how do their situations differ? What would you have encouraged Veronica to do with her find?

8.

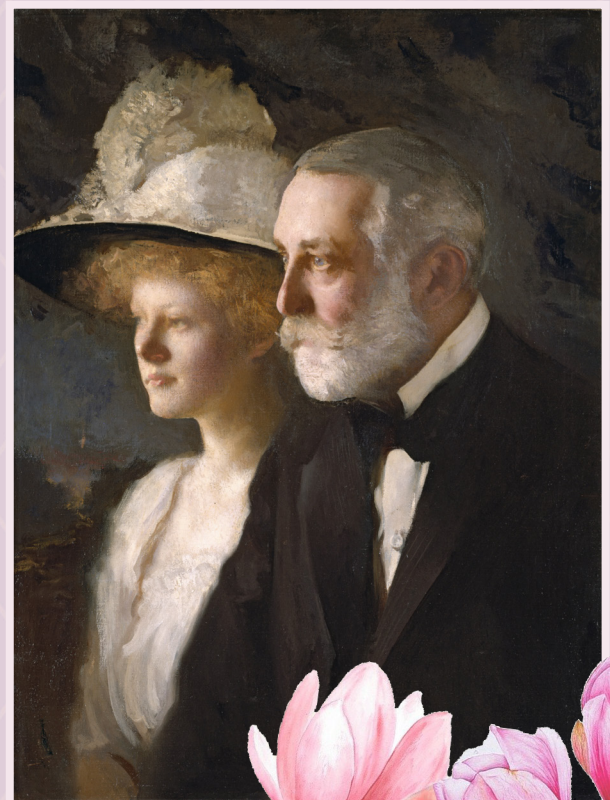
Did the ending surprise you? How do you think the truth of what really happened to Henry Clay Frick and the Magnolia diamond affected the different characters at the end?

9.

If you could go back in time to one of the eras Fiona Davis writes about in *The Magnolia Palace*, would you? Which would you choose?



The Frick Collection, courtesy of Fiona Davis



Helen and Henry Clay Frick

Self-Guided NYC Walking Tour of Audrey Munson Statues

All photos courtesy of Fiona Davis

Memory,
Straus Memorial
W. 106th ST. & BROADWAY



Duty,
Firemen's Memorial
RIVERSIDE DR. & W. 100th ST.



Truth, Frick Collection
5th AVE. & E. 71st ST.



Columbia Triumphant,
USS Maine National Monument
BROADWAY & CENTRAL PARK SOUTH



Pomona, Pulitzer Fountain
5th AVE. & GRAND ARMY PLAZA



Beauty, New York Public Library
5th AVE. & E. 41st ST.



Civic Fame, Manhattan
Municipal Building
CENTRE ST. & CHAMBERS ST.



Manhattan, Brooklyn Museum
EASTERN PKWY. & WASHINGTON AVE.



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