

Marta Maretich Interview: *The Merchants of Light*

By Jo Swinnerton

JS: What was your inspiration for writing *The Merchants of Light*?

MM: I've always been fascinated with painting. My husband, Michael, is a painter and spent the early part of his career painting large decorative murals, which is a fun job. Tiepolo is the quintessential example of a Baroque painter, and he was Michael's go-to reference when he got a commission to paint that kind of mural. That was my first introduction to Tiepolo's work.

Looking at Tiepolo's work over time, I began to notice that the central female figure was always the same woman; a handsome blond wearing a necklace of pearls. She was his Venus, Cleopatra, the Virgin Mary, Salome, Armida, Rachel...I began to wonder about this, and when I started researching I quickly learned that the woman in the paintings was, at least at first, based on Tiepolo's wife, Cecilia. When I learned that this real-life woman was also the sister of painters Francesco and Antonio Guardi, I began to see the possibility of writing a novel about painting families.

Painters are so often depicted as being lone geniuses, but that's a 20th-century notion. For most of history, painting was a family business. It certainly was in 18th-century Venice, when the Tiepolos were living. Since I am part of a painting family, I wanted to write about how artistic life and family life work together to make a whole life. I don't think they are at odds with one another, which is another popular notion you often see in novels about painters.

JS: Was it unusual for a painter to do this, to have one key model?

MM: My research showed that it wasn't. Once you become aware that painters use favorite models over and over again, you begin to see the practice everywhere. For example, I went to a wonderful Veronese exhibition at the National Gallery in London, and it was evident that he had a small number of models he used constantly; one particular woman and a male figure who is known to be his brother.

It's quite common for painters to use their family members in the way Tiepolo and Veronese do, because they're there and handy, and because models have always been expensive. This is something else that came out of my research. Models have always cost a fortune – they do now. They may just stand there, but they're not just people off the street: if they're good, you have to pay them.

One of the things I wanted to write about in this book was the relationship between artists and models. It's often portrayed as a romantic or sexual, obsessive relationship. But the reality of real painters using models is that they're like tools: painters need something in particular from models.

Some people are good at being models and some people are crappy at it – they just don't have the knack. The most beautiful woman in the world can be the worst model. People think that painters choose models because they're beautiful, but painters choose the models they choose because they're good models. What does that mean? They have natural poise, they can sit still, they are patient and flexible in that they can be used in a number of ways, and they are unselfconscious.

I've modelled for Michael; I've been on the other side of the canvas and I've seen it from their perspective. I'm certainly not a beauty model; I'm the figure he needs in the painting.

JS: Are you a good model?

MM: So-so. I'm impatient and usually busy, but I know what to do. I always say I'm his female figure of last resort.

JS: Many people will know the story of the Girl with a Pearl Earring. How well does that portray the artist/model relationship?

MM: As I read that book, I kept thinking: When painters start painting dark little portraits of their servants and family members, it doesn't mean they're in love, it means they don't have enough commissions. I'm really talking here about pre-20th-century painters. Late Rembrandt is one example, Vermeer is another: regardless of how beautiful those paintings are to us today, they speak of professional trouble. Painters with thriving careers, like Tiepolo, did use members of their household as models, but mainly they used them in paintings they did for clients. That's not the same as painting intimate portraits of them that never sell. When I see artists just painting their wives or servants or painting themselves – especially small paintings – I think that this is someone who is in trouble in his career. When my husband is having a hard time with work, he does little drawings of his own feet on the backs of envelopes. That's how I know things are getting serious.

JS: How did you begin your research?

MM: With the paintings. I began reading Tiepolo art historians like Levey, Knox, Whistler, Baxandall and Alpers. They did a lot of the hard work for me. I went and looked at the paintings in Venice, New York, and Würzburg – that was amazing. Once I had a sort of mental map of Tiepolo's career in images, I went through other documentation like wills and contemporary accounts to look for human stories about my characters. I also repainted some Tiepolos – very, very badly, in gouache – to learn more about the paintings. I was trying to work more in the visual, because that's the way visual artists live. It's not about words for them. We writers think in words. Artists think in pictures.

JS: When did Skilton come into the story?

MM: I read early on that an American soldier was involved in saving the Würzburg frescoes, but I didn't learn Skilton's name until I actually went to Würzburg. There they had a exhibition about what happened to the city and the Residence during the war. I saw Skilton's face for the first time in a painting done of him by a local artist. One of the things he did to keep art alive in the city after the bombing was to obtain materials for artists who had lost their homes and livelihoods. I imagined the painter was one of these, but I don't know that for sure. Once I knew Skilton's name, I was able to locate his memoir, *Memoirs of a Monuments Officer*. Everything about Skilton in the novel comes, more or less, from this account he left for us. His achievement is remarkable – you realize just how remarkable when you go to the Residence and see the scale of his challenge. His name should be better known.

JS: How much of the novel is fact?

MM: The majority of the novel is grounded in fact. All the places and most of the dates are correct, the characters' backgrounds, their jobs, their family structure: all that is factual. The dialogue, thoughts and personal details are made up, obviously. Dealing with the 18th century is not like dealing with the Victorians where you have to read through libraries of original documentation to cover the subject. So really there wasn't that much in the way of first-person accounts, especially not from a bunch of painters who didn't tend to write much.

What I did was to pin down solid facts like birth dates, death dates and travel dates, and I used the works of art to anchor the story in fact, because they are facts, they still exist. From

them you can understand a lot about what the Tiepolos were doing at a given time, what was happening in their world. And then I used other sources such as Algarotti, who wrote prolifically, documentation about Frederick the Great, documentation about Joseph Smith the art collector, to flesh out the context they were living in. The other thing that was helpful were works of theatre from this time, especially the works of Carlo Goldoni, who wrote about normal Venetians' manners and customs, and the memoirs of Casanova. Unlike a lot of commentators at the time he thought it was amusing to record daily events.

JS: Did anything surprise you in the research process?

MM: Everything surprised me. Before I started this book, I knew most about France during the 18th century. To me it's always been an attractive period full of really bright sparks and interesting developments and exciting things, but I didn't know much about Italy and I didn't know much about Venice.

As I researched this book, every time I looked into a character or opened up a contemporary document, I just found so much *life*. I felt the people were right there. Their little concerns, the things they liked, the things they hated, their ambitions – it's just a great period. The thing that surprised me the most was how much they are like us. Because if you look a little bit farther back at the Tudors, even the early Renaissance, those people can seem very remote to me. Eighteenth-century people are recognisably us. Their economics, their ideas about freedom and liberty, the growing secular vision, the beginnings of science and the backlash against science, the love of silly fun, the way states were starting to develop. They are definitely us. That struck me.

JS: Writers often have a hard time knowing when to stop researching. How do you know when to stop researching and start writing?

MM: What happens for me with novels is that I get a framework in my head and I start to write it and then I find holes in it: things I need to know, things I don't know, things I'm not sure about, and I'll go back and fill the holes. Once you get a complete sense of the story you have a framework that controls the amount of research you do. Because if you don't, you know it will get away from you, you know that it will never be finished.

It's hard to do, though. You have to say no to real jewels. What I tend to do when I uncover wonderful things I can't use is I have a little file and I put them there and I promise that I will come back for them and use them somewhere, sometime. And then I can feel okay about leaving them aside.

JS: Did you write the novel at a stretch, chronologically, in one go?

MM: The central part, about the Tiepolos, yes. I set out to span the 50 years of the Tiepolos' marriage and the key 50 years of Giambattista's career. Very early on I painted an outline with each section of the novel defined by a different color, narrator and key works. I made only one significant change later, which was to switch the narrator for the part in Würzburg from Tiepolo to Lorenzo, his youngest son. Once I had that outline, I worked from beginning to end, though I had to do a lot of rewriting and go back and research some things further.

JS: What do you find most difficult about writing?

MM: Trying to find a form for life. Real human lives, most of them, don't have a clear structure. Maybe some writers are able to see structure in life but I can't. The other challenge was to make a compressed version of the lives of the characters that was meaningful, to represent whole spans of lives without being too reductive. Figuring out what to leave in,

what to take out, when to break the story, when to keep it flowing – those were really the most difficult things for me.

JS: You have said that Tiepolo was the last painter of his kind. Did you feel you were recording the end of a particular era?

MM: Yes. In our times, Tiepolo is practically a forgotten genius. He doesn't tend to be included in the canon of greats like Da Vinci or Titian or Veronese. I think there are several reasons for that, but one of them is definitely that he did come right at the end of an era both in painting and in European history and his achievements were instantly superseded by a whole new view of what art should be and do. And especially what historical painting should be, which is the kind of painting Tiepolo did.

As a result he was quickly dismissed and devalued after his death – it happened almost instantaneously. But he shouldn't be forgotten. The more time you spend with Tiepolo's work, the more extraordinary you can see it is. It's joyful and endlessly inventive. He's such a skilled draftsman and colourist and he's funny; his works are full of little asides and delightful visual entertainments. There are so many wonderful things in them that I can't think of any reason why he shouldn't have more of a reputation today.

JS: One of the things I found most interesting about reading the novel was about Tiepolo's working methods, the difficulties of painting, the techniques he uses. Has the process of painting changed much since Tiepolo's time?

MM: No it hasn't. The materials, with some exceptions, haven't changed at all. The techniques haven't changed. Drawing is still at the heart of everything. If you could paint like Tiepolo at all, you could paint like Tiepolo today, if you see what I mean.

JS: You sound as if you have painting experience.

MM: I do have some. I've often worked with my husband, especially when we were younger and I didn't have so much of my own work, but I still do it from time to time, when he needs a hand. I've spent a lot of time at the top of scaffolds. We've done domes together, we've done big ballrooms, vaults. I tend to be more in the assistant role, because I'm not trained the way my husband is. I can do things like drapery, shading, foliage. But I'm working under Michael's direction – a bit like we see Lorenzo doing in the Würzburg section. He leads because he knows what he needs and I try to do what he wants me to do.

For the book I also read technical manuals and asked painter friends questions. Michael has only painted fresco a few times, but we have a friend who does it regularly. I hoped to wade in and try myself, but I didn't actually get to do that. Quite recently there was a complete restoration of the frescoes at Würzburg, and the team published a really good book about the restoration process, about Tiepolo's techniques, how they reproduced them. So I was really grateful to these professionals for sharing this knowledge with me.

JS: Is *The Merchants of Light* similar to your previous books?

MM: It's a departure. I've never written a historical novel before. But I've always been fascinated by the intersection of words and images and that plays out in a lot of my work. I wrote my honors thesis at Berkeley on ekphrasis in poetry, the depiction of works of art in words. This is a source of enduring fascination for me and it's one of the things that made me want to write this book in the first place.

JS: What is your working routine like?

MM: My husband and I have very similar habits. We get up, we eat breakfast together. He goes to his studio and I go upstairs to my desk. When I'm working on a draft of a novel I try to do 1,000 words per day. If I'm doing research, I can spend the whole day doing that. And revising takes a long time for me. I revise a lot.

JS: Do you have a sure-fire way of getting through blocks and difficulties?

MM: I write through it. I say to myself, okay, this isn't working out but I'm going to bash through it and look at it again in the context of the whole draft and maybe then I'll know why. I get to the end of it thinking, this is terrible, but I commit to working on it later, not in isolation, but as part of the whole book.

JS: Having written a novel that's firmly based on fact, do you want to do it again? Is your next novel based on facts?

MM: Not in the same way. I think my next novel will be a comical romp through modern manners in contemporary London. That's a sort of fact, I guess. Is observation fact? After that I think I will do some more historical writing.

JS: What historical writers do you admire?

MM: I think we're living in a golden age of historical fiction, partly because of the free availability of information on the internet. The writer that I thought of all the time when planning and writing *The Merchants of Light* is Beryl Bainbridge and especially her novel *The Birthday Boys*, about the Scott expedition. It's this very slender book told in the voices of the five people who died on the final push to the Pole. It's such a triumph of whittling down a huge amount of information into voices and experiences and sensory detail. You might think there was nothing new you could say about the Scott expedition, but Bainbridge manages it. I love this novel and I thought if I could do something that concise and that edgy, I would be proud. I'm not sure I've managed it!