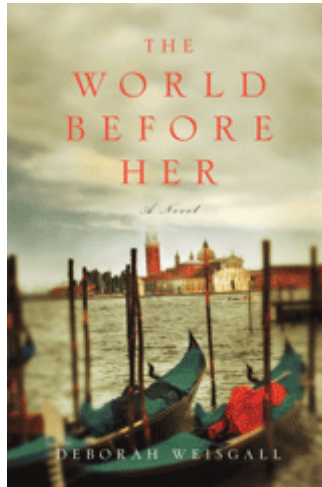


## A Reader's Guide



### The World Before Her

by Deborah Weisgall

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#### About the Book

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A stunning novel about two women and two marriages, by a writer who has been hailed as “exquisite” by Cynthia Ozick. Two women return to Venice: one in June of 1880, the other a hundred years later. The first is Marian Evans, the great English novelist whose pen name is George Eliot; she is sixty years old, and on her honeymoon with Johnnie Cross, her handsome forty-year-old husband. The second, Caroline Edgar Spingold, is a sculptor, whose powerful and brilliant older husband, Malcolm, has brought her, against her will, to Venice to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. Venice for both women represents a place where they were once happy, and both want desperately to be happy here again. Both women must act on what they know about themselves—and about their capacity for feeling. Marian can only look backward, Caroline can risk beginning again.

#### About the Author

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Deborah Weisgall has written extensively about the arts—painting, music, and performance—for the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *Connoisseur* and *The New Yorker*. Her first novel, *Still Point*, was set in the world of ballet and her family memoir, *A Joyful Noise*, focuses on the role of music, both opera and cantorial, in her father's celebrated lineage. Ms. Weisgall lives with her husband and daughter in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

#### Questions for Discussion

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1. How do the two stories in *The World Before Her* echo each other? Events? Emotions?
2. At what point in the narratives do the two heroines begin to

acknowledge their own feelings—and recognize the consequences of those feelings?

3. Venice itself is a character in the novel; how does place interact with the characters? How have perceptions of Venice changed over a century; how have they stayed the same?
4. Marian and Caroline in Venice are looking at many of the same works of art; how do they react to them, and how does art touch them? How do Johnnie and Malcolm react to art? What is the connection between art and artists and religion in each of the two stories?
5. How do Malcolm and Johnnie and George Lewes and Gilbert Pryce respond to their wives' ambition? Do the expectations of society play a part in these responses?
6. How does each of these women deal with the recognition that their marriages are impossible?
7. How have the options available to women changed in a century? Have their desires changed, or has how they deal with recognizing their desires changed? How has society changed in terms of recognizing women's ambition?
8. What are the differences in the ways each of these characters deal with desire—or the lack of it?
9. What are the differences in their ideas of marriage? Caroline has married for security and wealth; Marian for legitimacy. How does what they want from marriage change?
10. In the novel, Marian and Caroline reckon with memory; they have to come to understand what in their histories brought them to this point in their lives. How does each revise her past? How is this different from the ways Johnnie and Malcolm view their own histories?
11. This is a novel about choices. What are some of the choices, and what is the price that the characters pay for the choices they make?
12. How does Caroline's changing relationship with her mother affect the decisions she makes? How does Marian's imagination of her relationship with her family change?
13. A generation—including Caroline's twins—has grown up since 1980; how are women today dealing with ambition and desire? What do they expect from the men they love?