



The Vanishing Point

by [Mary Sharratt](#)

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"A passionate, spell-casting story . . . I was unable to put this book down." — Sandra Gulland, author of the Josephine Bonaparte trilogy

About the Book

Hannah and May Powers could not be more different. Hannah is the learned, though shy, dutiful daughter whom their widowed father treats more like a son, and May is the reckless, vibrant, beautiful spirit who pushes the boundaries of life and love. After a series of sexual misadventures in their English town, May is betrothed to a distant cousin in Maryland. Eventually Hannah follows May to the wilds of America, but upon arrival Hannah learns that her sister has mysteriously disappeared.

Equal parts adventure, love story, and dark mystery, *The Vanishing Point* is a hauntingly vivid novel that will leave you in suspense until the final pages.

"A truly captivating novel. It wears its history lightly, in the best tradition of great historical fiction. Mary Sharratt has a marvelously deft touch . . . She keeps the reader completely engaged, from first page to last." — Katharine Weber, author of *The Little Women*

About the Author

Mary Sharratt spent ten years researching such topics as seventeenth-century pharmacology and colonial cooking for *The Vanishing Point*. She is also the author of the novels *Summit Avenue*, which was selected as a Book Sense Pick, and *The Real Minerva*, a winner of the Willa Literary Award and a finalist for the Minnesota Book Award. Sharratt lives in Lancashire, England.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *The Vanishing Point* for every reader.

1. May and Hannah lost their mother when they were very young, and in her absence their lives followed very different paths. While May often spent her time in the care of Joan, the housekeeper, Hannah was educated by her physician father, despite laws that forbade women from studying medicine. Why do you suppose the sisters were raised so differently? What prompted Dr. Powers to train his younger daughter in the sciences?
2. Dr. Powers arranges the marriage between May and her American cousin, Gabriel Washbrook. Do you agree that this is the best solution to May's problems? Would you have reacted as May does when she realizes that she and her only sister will be separated by an ocean? Do you believe that May, on leaving England, truly expects to see Hannah again? Why or why not?
3. At its core, *The Vanishing Point* is about the relationship between two sisters, each in her own way constrained by the social standards of the time. How might their lives have been different if they had been born at another time? Which sister was better equipped to handle life in the New World — May, with her sense of adventure and feminine wiles, or Hannah, with her medical training and scientific reasoning?
4. Mary Sharratt evokes life in colonial Maryland in rich detail. Fascinating descriptions of social customs, recipes, and medical practices are woven throughout the novel; how do they add to your understanding of Hannah's world? How do they enhance your reading experience? What surprising differences did you find between life then and today?
5. After a long, lonely journey from England to America, Hannah arrives at the Washbrook Plantation only to discover that her sister is missing. Indeed, nothing is as she thought it would be. Why does Hannah stay on the estate? Would you have stayed? How is Hannah's life in Maryland governed by May's absence?
6. What prompts Hannah to bake the apple tansey and take it to Gabriel in the field? How does this small exchange alter the course of their relationship? When do other large decisions hinge on small actions in *The Vanishing Point*?
7. As you learn more about May's marriage to Gabriel, what do you think of their pairing? Does this knowledge have any bearing on the way you view Hannah's relationship with Gabriel? Are you surprised by Hannah's choices in that regard?
8. How do your feelings about Gabriel evolve as you read the book? Do you sympathize with him?
9. Hannah and May are two very different sisters whose lives and destinies are shaped by the same man, Gabriel. Yet these sisters, one after the other, both irrevocably change Gabriel's life. In what ways do these three characters transform one another? If *The Vanishing Point* is a story of love and betrayal, who commits the ultimate betrayal — and against whom? What relationship marks the emotional center of the book for you — the relationship between Hannah and May, or between Hannah and Gabriel?

- 10.** As the only women on their wilderness homestead, May and Adele forge a tight bond that transcends class and race. Does Adele eventually usurp Hannah's place in May's heart? Who ultimately shows May the greatest love and loyalty — Adele or Hannah?
- 11.** Given what you know of life in the colonies — its moral codes, double standards, and hardships — do you think Gabriel and Hannah are at an advantage or a disadvantage living so far away from society? How might their lives have been different if the Washbrooks had stayed in Anne Arundel Town after Gabriel's mother died?
- 12.** What are Banham's motivations for visiting Hannah on the plantation? Do you think Gabriel's reaction to his visits is defensible? Are the Banhams as reprehensible as Gabriel makes them out to be?
- 13.** How does Hannah succeed — or not — in fulfilling her highest purpose? Does she finally achieve her full potential in pursuing an independent life, or does she betray her own heart?
- 14.** What do you think about the revelations at the end of the book? Which character — Hannah, May, Gabriel, or Adele — comes closest to achieving an independent, self-governed life in America?

A Conversation with Mary Sharratt

What inspired you to write *The Vanishing Point*?

Many years ago, as a tourist in Philadelphia, I visited a tiny row house where two eighteenth-century seamstresses once lived and plied their trade. I felt immediately drawn into their world. It was inspirational for me to learn that even in that era, when nearly every factor of the dominant religion and economy herded women into marriage and domesticity, some women still succeeded in carving out independent, masterless lives, ruled by neither father nor husband.

This sparked the idea of using fiction to explore women's lives in early America. What might happen to a late-seventeenth-century woman who was determined to carve out her own destiny and who demanded the same liberties, both social and sexual, as a man? This was how May's character was conceived. I read Antonia Fraser's *The Weaker Vessel*, a groundbreaking study on the lives of seventeenth-century women, and *A Maggot*, John Fowles's fictional investigation of the woman who was to become the mother of Mother Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers.

This manuscript stretched me to my utmost through a period of considerable upheaval, as life circumstances took me from Germany to California and then to the north of England. Finally, in the Lancashire countryside the novel took root and gained a life force of its own. My characters' surnames were lifted from grave markers in old village churchyards. I found myself living at the foot of Pendle Hill. The yew trees and hawthorn hedges that May longs for in her American exile grow outside my door.

It dawned on me that my Maryland settlers were displaced English people, completely out of their element, and that this was the key to portraying them with confidence and authority. The Andrew Marr quote I selected for the flyleaf of the novel expresses it best: "Once upon a time the Americans were the British, lost." One of the core texts I discovered in my research, David Hackett Fischer's monumental *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, drove the point home.

How did you research the book?

I researched the material extensively over a period that stretched for roughly ten years. I visited living-history museums in the Chesapeake, including Jamestown, Williamsburg, and George Washington's birthplace. I visited exhibits of early American history at the Smithsonian. I learned about spinning and fiber craft, contraceptives of the period, butchering animals, tanning hides with brain and bark, tobacco planting, the lives of indentured servants, sea travel and the triangular trade, and Afro-Caribbean magic and folk religion, among other things.

While living in Germany, I studied alternative medicine, particularly phytotherapy (plant/herbal medicine), and the history of medicine. This background knowledge went into the book. Many of the herbs I wrote about are ones I grow in my own garden and have used on myself, albeit in a different way than portrayed in the book.

What were the most surprising facts about colonial America that you gleaned from your research?

One of the things I learned that struck me most was the high rate of mortality and disease in the Chesapeake during this period. The slave trade brought both malaria and yellow fever to the region. Whereas the much healthier climate of New England produced longevity and extended families in which people lived to see their grandchildren, in Maryland and Virginia whole generations grew up not knowing their parents, who died young, particularly mothers. Families became fractured; orphans were raised by stepparents and servants. The number one cause of female mortality was childbirth and the second was cooking accidents; women used to stand directly in the huge open hearths where their long skirts came in close contact with the flames.

Also explored in the novel was the enormous double standard when it came to gender and sexuality. Whereas New England Puritan society at least attempted to enforce the same moral code on both men and women, in the Chesapeake free men could do largely what they wanted, while adulteresses and unmarried women who bore bastards were punished by whipping and public humiliation. If a woman had sexual relations with an African slave and bore a child as a result, both she and the child were forced to become slaves.

Another thing that amazed me was that there were no physicians in the Chesapeake during this time. People made do with homemade remedies or, when surgery was called for, the services of the local blacksmith. To see a qualified physician, one had to sail back to England.

For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers of *The Vanishing Point*.

[The Real Minerva](#) by [Mary Sharratt](#)

[The Song of the Lark](#) by [Willa Cather](#)

[Wild Life](#) by [Molly Gloss](#)

[Empress Orchid](#) by [Anchee Min](#)