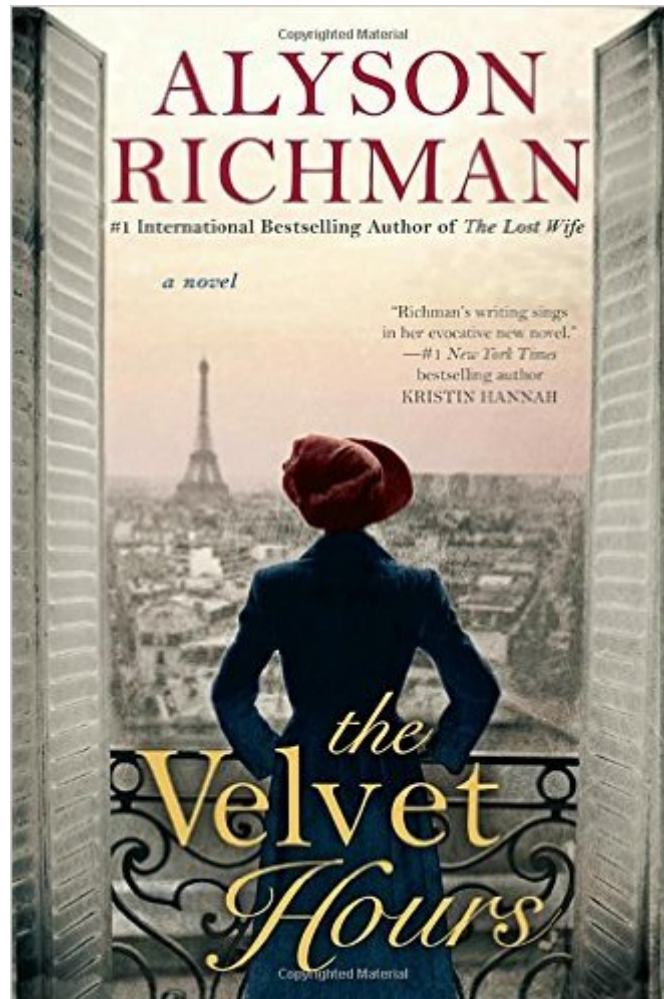


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The Velvet Hours



Synopsis

From the international bestselling author of *The Lost Wife* and *The Garden of Letters*, comes a story "inspired by true events" of two women pursuing freedom and independence in Paris during WWII. As Paris teeters on the edge of the German occupation, a young French woman closes the door to her late grandmother's treasure-filled apartment, unsure if she'll ever return. An elusive courtesan, Marthe de Florian cultivated a life of art and beauty, casting out all recollections of her impoverished childhood in the dark alleys of Montmartre. With Europe on the brink of war, she shares her story with her granddaughter Solange Beaugiron, using her prized possessions to reveal her innermost secrets. Most striking of all are a beautiful string of pearls and a magnificent portrait of Marthe painted by the Italian artist Giovanni Boldini. As Marthe's tale unfolds, like velvet itself, stitched with its own shadow and light, it helps to guide Solange on her own path. Inspired by the true account of an abandoned Parisian apartment, Alyson Richman brings to life Solange, the young woman forced to leave her fabled grandmother's legacy behind to save all that she loved.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

While I really liked the entire book a lot, the beginning and the ending were outstanding. The start of the book perfectly set the stage for the entire story, and the ending wrapped it up beautifully. The *Velvet Hours* focuses on the lives of two women: Marthe de Florian, a member of the demi-monde, whose story begins in the late 1800s and Solange, a young woman living in Paris during World

War II. As the story unfolds, Solange learns she is related to Marthe and begins visiting her regularly. During these visits, Marthe relays the story of her intriguing life and the magnificent painting of Marthe that hangs in her spectacular Belle Epoque-era apartment. Alyson Richman's focus on detail really makes this book. Her in-depth descriptions of the fashions worn by Marthe, the collections of art accumulated by Marthe and even the apartment itself are incredible. The author clearly did her research, and her ability to so vividly depict the characters and the setting is just fabulous. As always, one of my favorite parts about historical fiction is learning more about the time period involved and placing people and culturally significant items from an era in their context. Richman focuses a lot on fashion and haute couture from the Belle Epoque era, and I enjoyed looking up and learning about some of the famous designers from this era in Paris such as the Callot Soeurs. She also threw in a reference to H.A. and Margret Rey, the creators of Curious George, who fled Europe during Hitler's reign. I have always loved Curious George and had no idea that the Reys had left Europe with so many others in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

In 2010 an apartment in Paris was opened, untouched, after 70 years. Inside was a treasure trove of furnishings and art ranging from the 1880's to pre-World War II. The apartment was owned by Marthe de Florian, a little-known courtesan, and inherited by her granddaughter, Solange Beaugiron. Among the treasures inside was a portrait of Marthe by Giovanni Boldini, a famous portrait painter of the era. In *The Velvet Hours*, Alyson Richman has fashioned an extraordinarily beautiful and moving imagining of the story behind the apartment. The facts known about Marthe de Florian and her granddaughter, Solange, are sparse and sometimes contradictory. Born Mathilde Beaugiron, in Richman's telling she came from an impoverished background and worked as a seamstress until she gave birth out of wedlock to a son, Henri. She knew that she was not able to support the child and gave him to a co-worker who was married and was unable to conceive. She moved on to become a chorus dancer and attracted the interest of a nobleman, Charles. Their arrangement was more than financial but was a true love affair lasting ten years. During this period she developed her natural taste and love for beauty. Charles not only encouraged her but in the end provided her with the means to survive and sustain herself. There were men after Charles, but none who truly captured her heart. Even the painter, Boldini was more of a friend and mentor than a lover. She reconnected with Henri when he was eighteen but the two remained estranged. She did not even meet her granddaughter until Solange was nineteen. It is the telling of her life story to Solange that forms the bulk of *The Velvet Hours*. I read a lot of books but it is rare that I find one as memorable as *The Velvet Hours*.

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