



A Painter's Life

K. B. DIXON

Made up of biographical scraps, journal entries, review excerpts, and interviews, A Painter's Life is a life told in pieces. It is the life of fictional artist Christopher Freeze and in the course of this unique novel we learn about his interests and obsessions, feel his struggles, and come to know those around him—his family and friends, his dealer and fellow artists, and his would-be monographer. Ultimately, the scattered pieces come together, revealing a complete portrait of an artist trying to make his way through the art world and through life.

- 1.** In one of his journal entries, artist Christopher Freeze writes “I hate watching people look at my pictures. I never like anything about the way they do it.” (ch. 2) If you knew that the artist of an artwork you were looking at was, in turn, looking at you, would you change the way you looked at the work? How?
- 2.** The image of the artist as an eccentric bohemian is one of the most enduring biographical traditions of modern times. From the beginning of *A Painter's Life*, however, we read about the artist shopping for toothpaste, and getting an ergonomic studio chair to help with a bad back. He then writes, “There are no betrayed mistresses to unveil, no famous friends, no hidden homosexual adventures, no bad behaviors caught on the front page of anything.” (ch. 2) This concentration on the mundanities of everyday life persist throughout the book. Does this unusual view of the artist make Freeze more or less endearing to you?
- 3.** “This new picture should work.... I know it exists—a way—and when I find it, it’s going to seem easy and commonsensical and I’m going to wonder what took me so long.” (ch. 5) Have you seen great art that has a sense of ease, and simply seems to make sense, as if it couldn’t have been done any other way? Could this be the definition of all great art, to be commonsensical or inevitable, or as Freeze writes in ch. 18, “unavoidable”?
- 4.** One of the threads running through the book is the interviewing of Freeze by his would-be biographer/historian, Alan Barnes. Freeze worries, “How will [readers] knowing this me—the me concocted by Mr. Barnes—affect their subsequent assessment of my pictures.” Have you read a real artist’s biography? Did it change the way you looked at their work? How?
- 5.** Following up on the previous question, have you ever *met* an artist? Or would you like to? Freeze says, “I don’t really understand this itch people have to meet the painter.... Painters are best met in the gallery—framed, silent, hanging on the wall.” (ch. 18) Would you agree?
- 6.** “The first job of a painter now is not to paint—it is to get noticed.” (ch. 7) True?
- 7.** “Funny when I think about it—and sad—how almost every extended conversation I have ever had with a non-artist contains a reference to Picasso.” Do you talk about art often with friends? What do you talk about? Particular artists? Current exhibitions? Would you like to talk to people more about art, or less?
- 8.** Dixon has included “excerpts from various reviews” throughout the book. And there are many other instances where Freeze describes his work in his own words. What are the differences between these two descriptions, that of the critics and that of the artist? Do they see different things? Do they have different concerns or interests? Do they have a different tone or use different kinds of language in their descriptions?

9. Did you have a picture in your head of Freeze's work? What did it look like? Was it like other work you've seen in museums and galleries?

10. Did you get the sense that Freeze is purely fictional, or not?

11. Near the end of the book, Chapter 24, Freeze writes of his latest painting, "I was going to call it *The Selling of My Shadow*, but I think I've changed my mind. I'm leaning towards something simpler—*A Painter's Life*, perhaps." How does *The Selling of My Shadow* as an alternative title to the book itself inform what the book is about?