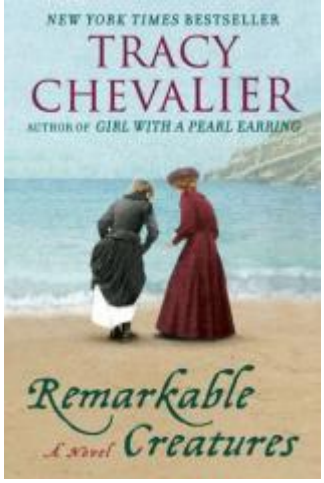
Remarkable Creatures

by Tracy Chevalier



About the Book

From the moment she's struck by lightning as a baby, it is clear Mary Anning is marked for greatness. On the windswept, fossil-strewn beaches of the English coast, she learns that she has "the eye" --- and finds what no one else can see. When Mary uncovers an unusual fossilized skeleton in the cliffs near her home, she sets the religious fathers on edge, the townspeople to vicious gossip, and the scientific world alight. In an arena dominated by men, however, Mary is barred from the academic community; as a young woman with unusual interests she is suspected of sinful behavior. Nature is a threat, throwing bitter, cold storms and landslips at her. And when she falls in love, it is with an impossible man.

Luckily, Mary finds an unlikely champion in prickly Elizabeth Philpot, a recent exile from London, who also loves scouring the beaches. Their relationship strikes a delicate balance between fierce loyalty, mutual appreciation, and barely suppressed envy. Ultimately, in the struggle to be recognized in the wider world, Mary and Elizabeth discover that friendship is their greatest ally.

Remarkable Creatures is a stunning novel of how one woman's gift transcends class and social prejudice to lead to some of the most important discoveries of the nineteenth century. Above all, it is a revealing portrait of the intricate and resilient nature of female friendship.

Discussion Guide

1. The first sentence of the novel is, "Lightning has struck me all my life." What did you expect after reading that? What does Mary mean?

2. What attracts Mary to fossil hunting? How is it different from Elizabeth's motivation?

3. How would you characterize the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth --- mother/daughter, sisters, or something else?

4. On page 39 Elizabeth says, "After little more than a year in Lyme I'd come to appreciate the freedom a spinster with no male relatives about could have there." Why is that? What did "freedom" mean for a woman of the time? Who had more freedom --- Elizabeth or Mary?

5. What role does religion play in Elizabeth's life? In Mary's?

6. How does the notion of "God's intention" affect their fossil-hunting?

7. Why do you think that in the novel, the women are fossil hunters, while the men are fossil collectors? What

point is Chevalier trying to make?

8. At different points in the novel, both Mary and Elizabeth have reason to think that they, themselves, might become fossils. What did each woman mean by that?

9. How does Colonel Birch come between the two women? What are his motives? In the end, do you consider him a decent man?

10. After Birch's auction, on page 203, Elizabeth cries, "Not for Mary, but for myself." Why?

11. Which woman needs the other more? Why?

12. Why does Elizabeth go to London? What does she hope to achieve?

13. Regarding her time on the Unity, Elizabeth says, "I did not expect it, but I had never been so happy." (page 250) Why does she feel that way?

14. After Mary agrees to sell a specimen to Cuvier, Mam accuses her of becoming a collector, no longer a hunter. What does she mean by that? Is she right?

15. Upon Elizabeth's return from London, Mary says she "was like a fossil that's been cleaned and set so everyone can see what it is." (page 298) What happened to change her?

16. What was your response to the ending?

17. Have you read any of Tracy Chevalier's other novels? What similarities and differences do you see?

Author Bio

Tracy Chevalier was born in Washington, DC but has lived in England all her adult life, and now has dual citizenship (but kept the American accent). She has a BA in English from Oberlin College, Ohio, and an MA in creative writing from the University of East Anglia, Norwich, England. Tracy lives in London with her English husband and son. Before turning to writing full-time, she was a reference book editor for several years. She has written seven novels. Her second novel, GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING, won the Barnes and Noble Discover Award, sold 4 million copies worldwide, and was made into a film starring Colin Firth and Scarlett Johansson.

Critical Praise

"A stunning story, compassionately reimagined... Chevalier turns a warming spotlight on a friendship cemented by shared obsession and mutual respect."

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