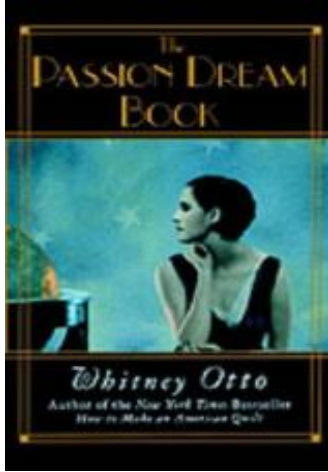


# The Passion Dream Book

by Whitney Otto

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## About the Book

A blending of fiction with history, **The Passion Dream Book** is a love story about artists and their tendency to migrate and colonize.

Beginning in Florence during the Italian Renaissance, the novel portrays a young girl named Giulietta Marcel, who is unconventionally apprenticed to her artist father. Dressed as a boy, she is engaged to spy on a famous artist who is at work on his masterpiece sculpture, David. She grows to want the artist and, at the same time, wants to be the artist.

Four hundred years later, Giulietta's descendant, Romy March, struggles with similar artistic aspirations in the sheltered comfort of her California home. For her, to embrace the life of an artist would be quite unorthodox in the early part of the 20th century. Her love affair with Augustine Marks, a black photographer, provides the novel's structure: they are together, they break apart, they reunite, they move on as they drift to various artists' colonies - a movie studio in silent-era Hollywood, the Harlem Renaissance, the end of the twenties in Paris, London in the thirties, and San Francisco at the start of the Beat Generation. Although Romy's devotion to Augustine remains constant, her artistic progression as a photographer grows at a different rate from her lover's and she must pursue her vision. She does not have her first show until she is forty-one, and is not recognized as an "important" photographer until her fifties.

**The Passion Dream Book** examines the time-honored dilemma of how an artist, a female one in particular, can reconcile her need to work with her personal desires. The most abstracted love triangle there is involves the artist, the work, and the lover.

## Discussion Guide

1. Why is the prologue set in Renaissance Florence?

2. Does it matter that Romy never understands the events behind Giulietta's Renaissance box?
3. Why do artists tend to colonize or otherwise congregate?
4. In the Renaissance section of the novel, art is funded by private patrons, the church, and the government. Can artists make a living from their work today? Should the arts be funded? How?
5. During the Depression, the government created an agency that employed out-of-work artists. Should a society pay artists to contribute their art to the public? Should there then be controls on what the artist creates?
6. Is there a conflict between love and work? Can it be resolved?
7. Romy and Augustine never have children. How hard is it to have a career and a family? Can a career stand in for children?
8. Do you think that the desire for immortality propels most artists?
9. If Romy and Augustine had never broken up, would they still be together in later life? Or are they together because they spent so much of their lives away from each other? Is love from a distance easier to sustain than love with someone who shares your day-to-day life?
10. How realistic is the manner in which Romy and her father finally comes to terms with each other and the past?

## **Author Bio**

"I was born and raised in California. My childhood was almost a casebook for the post-war suburban nuclear family, right down to the mid-1960s divorce. That is to say, it was all very uneventful. As much as I loved living there, I always had a sense of slight displacement, as if my real home were elsewhere. This combination of an ordinary childhood, which was conducive to imagination, and feelings of being on the outside, or not quite belonging, is more or less how I came to be a writer. I attended very good public schools, before a statement like that became an oxymoron, and went to three different colleges: the University of the Pacific, San Diego State University, and the University of California, Irvine, where I received an MFA in Writing. I call my post-high school education "The California College Tour," since I went to a private university, a state school, and UC. My husband, son, and I now live in Portland, Oregon, having moved from San Francisco. I love being a writer. That is probably the most fundamental thing I can say about myself."

## **On the Novel as Collage**

My work is like a collage: the images feel like found objects, and they reoccur from story to story. The structure of each novel is almost architectural, as if it is "built" or "assembled." Although my novels follow a certain plan, or logic, in my mind, there is room for the accidental or inspirational. As a writer, I cannot count on lucky accidents; I have to work at what I do. I toss out more pages than I keep and sometimes the transition from the story in my head to my hand is more approximate than exact. I write from my own curiosity. Something attracts me-a quilt, the idea of disappearing, the photographs of Madame Yevonde and James VanDerZee - and soon this interest expresses itself in my writing.

By writing a book that is not overtly about art - *The Passion Dream Book* is a love story, after all - but about two people involved in the arts, a casual discussion of art arises. The conversation is neither academic nor scholarly, but is thoughtful. If at all possible, I would like the reader to join in the matter. I want the reader to consider art as accessible, a part of everyday, ordinary life, because that is how I think art should be, and that is how I think about it.

To carry this idea further, another aspect of *The Passion Dream Book* is portraying the artist as a "working stiff." The photographers in my novel have to eat, so they have to work. And photography, like writing, can be a service or an art. Sometimes it can be both.

## Critical Praise

*"The Passion Dream Book* is a thrilling achievement."

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### **The Passion Dream Book**

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