

# A Penguin Reader's Guide to Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him –Danielle Ganek

## An Introduction to Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him



New York City is the white hot center of an art bubble and the prices just keep going up and up and up—quite literally—at the auction that opens Danielle Ganek's novel *Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him*. Narrator Mia McMurray watches breathlessly with the rest of the gawkers as the price of a single painting—Jeffrey Finelli's *Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him*—climbs from \$700,000 to \$4.3 million in a matter of minutes. As the auction closes, Mia casts back to the evening nine months earlier when the debut of a promising emerging (read: unknown) artist turned into an art-world maelstrom that entangled her with New York's most powerful gallery owner, a sexy superstar of installation art, the painter's beautiful muse, and two über-wealthy collectors.

Before the Finelli opening, Mia's life could not have been less eventful. Employed at the Simon Pryce Gallery in New York's Chelsea district for more than five years, Mia's biggest accomplishment to date has been "single-handedly trying

to overturn the stereotype of the nasty gallery girl." She also harbors a secret as deep as it is frustrating: she longs to be a painter herself. But that night, the artist himself sweeps into the gallery bearing a stinky Italian cheese and the canvas that will turn the art world—and Mia's life—upside down.

Despite being a figurative painting—and thus passé by current market tastes—Lulu's impact is huge. The celebrated installation artist Dane O'Neill is mesmerized by the portrait of Lulu, a wise young girl holding a dripping canvas, and the gallery audience is agog, but outside tragedy lurks. Ducking out for a smoke, Finelli is run over by a taxi and his death leaves unanswered questions about the ownership of the painting that everyone suddenly just has to have. Immediately after the accident, the grown-up Lulu appears. Stunning and enigmatic, Lulu Finelli has never met her uncle but it seems he promised her the painting, which Simon claims has already been sold to him. Two billionaire collectors, Connie Cantor and

Martin Better, want to buy Lulu but Simon foolishly sells the painting to a fickle Hollywood celebrity who promptly flips it to Pierre LaReine, Simon's nemesis and owner of New York's most influential gallery.

Lulu may not get the painting but she does wind up catching the art bug and Mia—who has made fast friends with her over Chinese takeout and backgammon—watches awestruck as the self-pronounced Wall Street bean-counter metamorphoses into a free-spirited bohemian and a soon-to-be-emerging artist in her own right. Under Dane's loving tutelage, the transformed Lulu might well have instilled jealousy in Mia. But she has her own romantic entanglement—with handsome art advisor Zach Roberts—to keep her occupied and soon enough Mia discovers that her true creative calling doesn't involve oils or canvas. The tale she relates is a lively and charming study of human foibles, the creative impulse, and a hilarious and eye-opening look at the contemporary art world.

## A Conversation with Danielle Ganek

**Q** In the novel, Simon says that “art is the new cocaine,” and Mia is sent to “give Martin Better some sex” when he is interested in purchasing Lulu. Are these actual art world colloquialisms? How accurate are they?

**A** Isn't cocaine used as a metaphor often enough to be a cliché? Simon, not the most original thinker on the planet, is quoting someone when he says “art is the new cocaine.” And that person was re-wording Marcel Duchamp who famously called art a habit-forming drug. So, colloquialisms? No. Although I suppose the language of addiction and lust feels colloquial when applied to collecting. These two quotes are specific to Simon. Especially his comment about sex. That's very Simon. I've never heard a dealer talk like that (although that doesn't mean they wouldn't in the privacy of the back room!)

**Q** How much of Mia is based on you? Did you aspire to paint before you discovered writing?

**A** I think there's a universality to Mia's creative aspirations that makes her not just like me but like a lot of artistically inclined people. There's that awful frustration of one's skills not matching one's ambitions that we've all felt. I was always afflicted with this intense desire to write, rather than paint or

photograph (although I have done both, badly.) At times, it has felt like that, an affliction. There's a place in the book where Mia expresses her fascination with people with regular money-making jobs and who aren't tortured by their creative ambition. That's me. And the part where she says guacamole is practically her religion. Me too.

**Q** You're an avid art collector yourself, yet some of the funniest send-ups in the novel are of collectors. Is the world of art collecting as competitive and absurd as you depict?

**A** Yes and no. The fun of writing fiction is making the stuff up. But I think there are a lot of competitive and absurd—and competitively absurd—people in all realms of life. And it is human nature to want what you can't have. When a competitive and absurd art collector wants a piece and is told it's not available, that person may behave in a competitive, and yes, absurd, way. That's what makes art auctions so fascinating to watch.

**Q** How do you feel about figurative painting? Do you have any in your collection?

**A** I'm an easy audience. I suppose this is another way I'm like Mia; I'm a big fan. And I like all different kinds of art. I'm just utterly in awe of artistic talent, and the talent to create a really strong portrait of a living person and have that person come to life on a canvas is one that I think is particularly unique.

**Q** Who are some of your favorite artists and is the painting Lulu inspired by the work of someone specific?

**A** I love Richard Prince, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Mike Kelley, Cindy Sherman, John Currin, Lucien Freud...photographers, Diane Arbus and Robert Frank. But when it came to the Lulu painting I tried to conjure an image that would somehow represent the essence of the power and intensity we feel when observing any great piece but didn't feel like any actual known work. I didn't want it to be too specific, like this is Lucian Freud meets John Currin or something like that--I really wanted it to exist only in my mind and then on the page.

**Q** Have you been to the Venice Biennale and Art Basel? If so, how accurate are your depictions of them in the book?

**A** I've been to both the Venice Biennale and Art Basel a few times. (Like Mia, I love the sausage you get at the Basel convention center and the white asparagus that is in season at time of the fair!) I suppose my depictions are fairly accurate although I'm not the kind of fiction writer who walks around taking journalistic notes and then transcribing them. I'm sure there are people out there who will feel compelled to let me know what I got wrong, that the entrance to the Basel Art Fair doesn't face a gallery booth wall as described or something like that. I didn't say much of Venice because when Mia goes there she is so fixated on meeting up with Zach she isn't her normal observant self.

**Q** Who are some of your favorite writers and does this book have any direct literary

**influences?**

**A** As with art, I'm a big fan. I'm an easy audience and I read constantly. I read all kinds of things. I'm obsessed with F. Scott Fitzgerald. I love Lorrie Moore, Ann Patchett, Tom Wolfe and Jane Austen and Edith Wharton. My first favorite book was called *I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith. The charismatic narrator captured me at a really young age when I first aspired to write. It's still one of my favorite books and I think I will always retain that initial desire to create a really likeable narrator with a great sense of humor. I love reading—and writing—first person narrators. I don't enjoy writing in the third person nearly as much.

**Q** **You've already received some rave reviews from the art world including Richard Prince and Larry Gagosian. Were you nervous about how people in that milieu would receive the novel?**

**A** Frankly, I was nervous about how people in any milieu would receive the novel! But yes, I was nervous about friends in the art world; I hoped they would understand my sense of humor. So far, no one in the art world who has read a galley has found fault with anything, they all claim to have loved it. (Although, really, what are they going to say to my face?) And no dealers have complained that Simon or the "small, uncircumsized" Pierre was based on them.

**Q** **What are you working on now?**

**A** A novel in which the narrator is a thirty-seven year old New York City decorator who has carried

a torch for her first boyfriend for twenty years. She re-meets him when they're both hired (he's an architect) to work on redesigning an awful McMansion and although she's renounced the need for love, she believes it's destiny. Until she discovers she hates him. I think she's an older, funnier version of Mia with a unique perspective on the conspicuously consumptive world in which her creative aspirations have landed her.

**Q** **Now that you're a published novelist, how would you compare the world of art to the world of book publishing?**

**A** Well, unlike people buying art, people who buy books to read don't have to compete with one another to get what they want, unless it's within the rarefied world of book-collecting and first editions. You don't see anyone racing through Barnes and Noble when the doors open to make sure they get their fix! So there's not that competition. (Although it's fun to imagine that behind the doors at the publishing houses there are the same competitive and absurd behaviors to observe of acquiring editors as there are in the art world!) The team of women—and, in my case, they are all women and I adore them—who have been involved in my book are all very nice and extremely civilized. I can't see any of them screaming into a phone, and you do see that in the art world, people getting very worked up! In the art world everyone is competing for very little good product: dealers compete for artists and artists' works (an artist

could be represented by 3 different dealers in 3 different cities and only produce ten works a year) and clients; collectors compete with each other for works; museums have to compete with everyone and have smaller budgets. So there's more intensity, I guess. Definitely more screaming into phones.

# Lulu Meets God and Doubts Him

## Questions for Discussion



- 1** What do you think about Jeffrey Finelli's promise to Lulu that she could have the painting? Do you think he meant for her to own the actual painting? To whom do you think the painting rightfully belongs and why?
- 2** Discuss the topic of Simon's panel talk, "the role of the muse in contemporary art," in relationship to Lulu. What is her role as Finelli's muse?
- 3** Why do you think Lulu slept with Pierre LaReine? Was she using him as much as he seemed to be using her? Who do you think had the advantage and why?
- 4** Consider Zach's assertion that "collectors only borrow works of art. They can never really own them" (p. 193). Do you feel that a work of art is above personal ownership? Why or why not?
- 5** Discuss Connie Cantor and Martin Better's respective passions for art collecting. Is one more valid than the other? What is the role of the art collector in today's world. What do you think would happen to "art" if there were no market for it?
- 6** Mia stumbles across her passion for writing almost by chance. Do you think she ever would have discovered her true creative medium if it hadn't been for Lulu?
- 7** Simon sold Lulu to the unnamed Hollywood celebrity for \$275,000. Four months later, Martin Better purchases the painting for \$675,000. Five months after that, it sells at auction for \$4.3 million. Is this exponential increase in value legitimate? Why or why not?
- 8** La Reine is one of the world's preeminent gallery owners yet he mistakes Lulu's unfinished self-portrait for an early Jeffrey Finelli. Do you believe that artistic talent and sensibilities can be inherited?
- 9** Simon is an enigma to Mia—from his nationality to his sexuality to his spirituality. He is often quite bossy and brusque to her yet she stays with him for more than five years. What role does he play in Mia's life?
- 10** After Lulu quits her Wall Street job, she tells Mia "I was miscast in my old life... It didn't fit me, the job, the apartment, the fear. Not to get too evangelical about it, but everyone should know what this feels like, to live the life you really want to be living. To be the person you believe yourself to be" (p. 191). It's a sentiment that just about everyone can relate to at some point or another. Discuss an instance in your own life when you felt this way.