

STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

Carol Orange discusses her novel take on the Gardner heist in 'A Discerning Eye'

By [Kate Tuttle](#) Globe Correspondent,
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DAVID WILSON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Although she had been in Boston for many years Carol Orange was living in Paris when she heard about the 1990 art heist at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. “I was so shocked and depressed by this event because the Gardner was always my favorite place to go in Boston,” she said. “It’s such a special institution.”

An art dealer, Orange already knew the paintings that had been taken, but she decided to study them further, searching for clues about the

mastermind behind the theft. “I looked at the art because that’s my training,” she said. “And I recognized this underlying chiaroscuro theme, the tension between shadow and light.”

The interplay of shadow and light became a narrative through-line in “[A Discerning Eye](#),” the novel she would write about the Gardner heist. For the main character, Orange created Portia Malatesta, a Boston-based art dealer very much like Orange herself. But there the comparisons end. “She’s much braver than I am,” Orange said, adding that in the novel, Portia is willing to risk her life, tangling with dangerous criminals to get the stolen paintings back.

The book has another strong female character: Isabella Stewart Gardner herself, who appears to Portia in daydreams as a muse and guide. “I’ve always been so impressed by her,” Orange said. After reading all the available Gardner biographies, she said, “I feel like I know her intimately.”

Of course, the author hopes readers will enjoy the book’s twists and turns as Portia tries to uncover the secrets behind the crime, but Orange also wants something else: “I hope what they’ll take from it is a love of art, an appreciation of art. Great art should be available for the public to enjoy.”

Carol Orange will read from “A Discerning Eye” at 7 p.m. Tuesday at a [virtual event](#) hosted by Simmons University.

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