John Singer Sargent in Historical Fiction

Mary F. Burns

Survey of Fiction That Features Sargent as a Character

John Singer Sargent appears as a fictional character in relatively few but widely varied works of fiction: Children's and Young Adult books, short stories, literary fiction, mystery stories, a play and even a ballet. We'll take each category in turn.

Children's and Young Adult Books

One of the more interesting YA stories to feature Sargent as a character was Douglas Rees's ***The Janus Gate***[1] (2006), a weirdly scary, paranormal tale of Gothic-style haunting involving the daughters of Edward Darley Boit. Sargent, while painting his famous portrait of the Boit girls, is drawn into the secret psychological world of the four neglected children of a neurotic mother, with dire consequences and intense challenges to the painter's courage and sense of honor. His painting technique and style are delineated in some detail, and Sargent is portrayed as a polite, sensitive, astute observer. The story is told in his first-person point of view. The opening paragraph, addressed to the reader, gives a good sense of how the reader is to experience him:

> I have always been a man of first impressions. They strike me like bursts of light and overwhelm me, reducing me to silence, or to stuttering, telegraphic speech. I wave my hands and try to say something such as, "This painting of Millet's is far too realistic for my taste. See how he has tried to get the absolute reality of every inch of the surface of these rocks, every leaf of these trees. Of course that can't be done. Paint is paint and reality is reality."
>
> But what comes out is "Millet—all those rocks and trees. Silly old thing," while my hands go like signal flags on a naval ship in the middle of a battle."
>
> My first impressions have this trait: They keep happening. No matter how long I know someone it seems I am capable of being surprised, astonished by them again and again; and each of these moments has the quality of absolute newness and truth. (p.1)

Sargent is depicted as open to wonder and surprise, not as sophisticated or scientific, and therefore, someone who will plausibly respond to the girls' fantastical and ominous overtures without the usual adult's dismissive attitude. His relative inability to

express himself—a trait mentioned in nearly every fictional account of him—also lends a less-than-grownup air to the painter.

In ***Charlotte in London***[2] (2008), by Joan MacPhail Knight, Sargent appears only briefly, complaining he doesn't want to paint portraits anymore, and is spoken of by fellow artists as having a special genius for watercolors. The story covers the summer of 1895, which Sargent spend at Broadway with the Millets, Edmund Gosse, and Henry James among others. It is narrated by a fictional American girl whose parents are friends of the Millets, and features some very interesting photographs and excerpts from diaries and letters of the Broadway group of friends.

Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose[3] (2007) by Hugh Brewster, chronicles the story of the famous painting over a period of two years from 1885 to 1886, told in first-person POV by young Kate Millet. Kate tells how she misses out on being the child model for the painting—even wearing a blonde wig over her dark hair—when the more naturally and angelically blonde Barnard daughters, Polly and Dolly, come to visit and are chosen instead of her, without any apology from the artist. The laborious efforts of the whole group at Broadway to set up and take down the "scene" of the painting, every day for weeks but only for a duration of some twenty minutes or so—while the light was perfect—are well presented and amusing. The book is illustrated with photographs of the people and place, and many delightful, informal sketches and cartoons drawn by Sargent of his friends and their festivities.

The children's books give a relatively superficial view of the style and character of the painter and his subjects, while the YA-directed *Janus Gate* delves creepily into the transcendent state an artist often inhabits during the act of creation.

Mysteries

There has been a veritable explosion in the use of historical personages as "the amateur sleuth" in fiction in recent years, many of whom model the Sherlock & Watson school of detective duos—Oscar Wilde, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, Henry David Thoreau, Mary Shelley, Ada Lovelace and even Michelangelo, to name just a few. So perhaps it's not such a stretch to imagine Sargent in the role of clever detective? I am writing a mystery series featuring John Singer Sargent and Violet Paget, his life-long friend, and I have found two other current mysteries plus an unpublished student short story.

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What Alice Knew: A Most Curious Tale of Henry James and Jack the Ripper[4] by Paula Marantz Cohen is the fictional account of the James siblings joining forces in 1888 London to help solve the ghastly Ripper murders. Other celebrities abound, including Oscar Wilde, Robert Browning, Mark Twain, George duMaurier and of course, Singer Sargent. William James has been asked by Scotland Yard to consult with them in the position of a Victorian-era profiler, using the new science of psychology to try to understand what kind of person would commit such heinous crimes. Henry and Alice James, and then Sargent and other friends, are enlisted in the hunt. Sargent and his sister Emily, are in and out of the story.
They frequently visit Alice, who, as the perpetual invalid, often received visitors while lying in bed, waiting—as she would say, cheerfully—to die. The first such visit in the novel describes John and his family:

> Indeed, John Sargent, a towering figure who stooped slightly when he walked, as though not wanting to assert his height too aggressively, had a quality of such gentle goodwill about him that even those of his peers who, for reasons of jealousy or aesthetic prejudice, were scornful of his work, found themselves disarmed when they met him. The Jameses spoke of these friends as one would of family members who had been raised in a different part of the world and spoke a different language. The Sargents were not cerebral people and would as soon listen to music or, in John's case, paint or play the piano, as talk. Not that he was simple—he spoke half a dozen languages without an accent and knew his way around every city in Europe. But his very cosmopolitanism made him a kind of innocent. Alice's father had traveled far and wide in search of the proper place to educate his children, finally settling in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as the best he could do, but Sargent's parents had merely traveled, with no destination in mind, and had never settled anywhere. John Sargent had thus been spared the pressure of expectation that the Jameses had suffered. He had started drawing when he was a boy and simply kept on doing it. (p. 82)

There are mildly acerbic exchanges at dinner parties with Samuel Clemens, whom Henry James both rationally and irrationally despises, as well as with Oscar Wilde and his coterie of strange men and boys. At one point during a dinner, Henry must turn to Sargent for an explanation of a question he has been asked, *sotto voce*:

> Henry was seated across from a group of young men of very slight appearance. "Are you partial to the Uranian school?" one asked him softly.
> "Uranian?" asked Henry, confused. Sargent whispered that the Uranians worshipped boys, and Henry shook his head vigorously and turned away. (p.162)

An amusing brief scene with the celebrated actress Ellen Terry, posing as Lady Macbeth—and whose intimate, gossipy knowledge of the London underworld is key to helping pursue the mystery—reveals again the artist at work:

> Sargent retrieved a large gold crown from one of the trunks, which she took and placed on her head.
>
> "No," said Sargent, "hold it above your head. We want the sense of *desiring* to be crowned, not being so."
>
> "Excellent," said Terry, holding the crown up. "But it's tiring to hold this way."
>
> "For art, my dear," said Sargent, and Terry ceased complaining. (p.225)

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The Spoils of Avalon[5] by Mary F. Burns features Sargent as the more genial, easy-going Watson-like amateur sleuth, with feisty, brittle Violet Paget (aka Vernon Lee) as the intrepid Sherlock. With detailed biographical timelines available for both these historical persons—their travels, their friends, their correspondence as well as their art created and books or essays

published—it becomes an engaging challenge of research and application of imagination for a writer to invent "mysteries" for the duo to solve in their own time, related to either a particular portrait (or sitter) or the subject of a book or a place they visited at the same time. The preface to the first book in the series, written by Violet Paget in 1926, musing on the past after the death of her childhood friend, sets the stage:

> Sherlock Holmes isn't the only one who solves mysteries, you know. In our youth, I and my friend Scamps—more formally known as John Singer Sargent—engaged in a fair amount of sleuthing ourselves. A decent respect for the secret foibles and follies of the often well-known subjects of our detective work, however, has kept me from publishing any of these tales of deduction. But the principals are all dead now, including alas! my dear Scamps, buried just last year in Brookwood. So perhaps the time has come to let the larger world know there is more than one brilliant mind able to delve into the mysteries of the human heart, and bring order back from chaos and distress.
>
> Modesty restrains me from naming the one who wields the Sherlockian mind, but let me just say, Scamps made an excellent Watson. Nonetheless, as a detecting duo, we were extremely well-suited—he was observant with an artist's eye for detail as well as the nuances of mood and tone, whereas I noticed things out of restless curiosity and, I must say, a suspicious nature attuned to find fault. Between us, very little occurred without our noting and remembering it.
>
> I shall start with our first case, which I have titled The Spoils of Avalon. Oh, and my reference above to *follies and foibles?* I meant to say—murder. (p.i)

I envision taking both John and Violet through four or five decades of their lives, skipping a year or so for every book, thus showing their personal and professional successes and failures through the years, their famous and infamous friends and acquaintances, their oddities and quirks, and how they changed and grew as artist or writer, and human beings.

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A Weekend at Blenheim[6] by J. A. Morrissey is rather like a British version of *The Great Gatsby,* (although the author is American), and the back cover endorsement by Dominick Dunne says it superbly:

> "I think it's safe to say that the present occupants of Blenheim Palace will blush with embarrassment or redden with rage when they read J. P. Morrissey's devastating portrayal of their ancestor, the ninth Duke of Marlborough, in his new novel…. It is a fascinating nightmare of ducal superiority, snobbery, and stupidity, as financed by his Vanderbilt heiress duchess and as witnessed by a poor American houseguest."

Sargent was indeed at Blenheim in 1905, when he painted their magnificent family portrait. Sargent is depicted as sophisticated, reserved, modest and polite in company, which in this novel consists of the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough, Winston Churchill, and a scattering of acid-tongued guests, male and female. One of the women, Miss Deacon, whom we discover later is the Duke's mistress, has this to say about Sargent to the American visitor and his scandalized English wife:

> [Miss Deacon] sighed. "Do you think what everyone says about Mr. Sargent could be true? I, for one, do not believe it for a minute."
>
> "What do they say about him, Miss Deacon?" I asked.
>
> She looked startled by the question, as if this were common knowledge. "Why, that he's a sodomite." She lowered her voice and looked behind her. "They say he hires young men, art students, to pose for him. It's wicked—completely false, of course, but there are stories…."
>
> Margaret closed her eyes tight and shivered, as if to squeeze the image of Mr. Sargent from her. (pp.73-74)

In private, Sargent is seen through a window, by the American narrator, comfortably standing naked while drawing erotic sketches of an equally naked Duchess (oh, wait, she's wearing a necklace), and then falling lustily into bed with her. The MacGuffin of the story is that his sketchbook of the nude drawings goes missing in the house, and several mishaps, midnight wanderings, and tragedies occur before the end. In sum, Sargent's appearance in this novel, while key, is superficially as well as artificially presented. He is well-mannered, conversationally able if not witty, and on one occasion, needs to be physically restrained by Winston Churchill when the Duke says something particularly nasty about the Duchess—a lover wishing to defend his lady. All very well in its way, but nothing in depth.

"From the Diary of William James" [7] is Eve Cran's short story, set in 1883, and it takes its inspiration from the portrait of *Madame X*. William James has a few free hours during a stop-over visit to Paris, and is invited by his brother's new friend John Singer Sargent to attend a fête—*Une Balle de Bénéficier du Sacré-Cœur*. Sargent figures less prominently in the story than does James, but is mentioned in the diary by William as "sober and amiable, correct in his manners and attentive to my poor proficiency in French. With tact, he kindly translated between me and those we met." Williams' description of Madame Gautreau, who is also attending the event and is seated next to Sargent, beautifully describes the portrait that Sargent painted of her, in a clever reconstruction by the author:

> But when viewed altogether, [her] imperfect features faded into an unusual composition of feminine allure, enhanced by a manner of provocative insouciance. It seems apropos to write she had a *je ne sais quoi*, fueled by contradictions worthy of The Scottish Play. Lovely yet imperfect. Familiar and foreign. American, but French. And unlike all of the other women, she chose to wear black. The gown was simple but jealous, allowing neither air nor light to distance it from her. For its fit, one might have thought the same sculptor who fashioned the rest of her marble-like form had chiseled it too. It obeyed her every move, with the exception of a rebellious right strap that often succumbed to the greater power of gravity. (p.6)

Sargent is a bit player in the narrative after this point, which involves William James wandering around the newly-built crypt of Sacré-Coeur, looking for Mme. Gautreau, getting lost, and encountering supernatural beings. James at first thinks Sargent is attempting to

seduce Mme. Gautreau, but soon realizes that Sargent is seriously dedicated to his art. The "seduction" is only for the purpose of obtaining her consent to paint her portrait and thus render both of them celebrated, famous, and the talk of the town. We know how that turned out.

Literary / Historical Fiction

The list of historical fiction featuring artists as main characters grows by leaps and bounds every day: from Van Gogh to Frank Lloyd Wright to William Blake, Jan Van Eyck, Matisse, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Monet, Manet, Botticelli, Frieda Kahlo and William Morris, naming just a few.

Perhaps the two most well-known novels about Sargent are ***Strapless***[8] by Deborah Davis—a fictionalized non-fiction, recently made into a perhaps less-than-successful ballet performed in London in February 2016—and ***I Am Madame X***[9] by Gioia Diliberto, both published in 2003. Recounting the complex social situations before, during and after the exhibition of the infamous painting, both books tend to present Sargent as young, ambitious and a bit naïve (for Paris) but also brilliant, stolid and professional. The primary focus of both books is Mme. Virginie Amélie Gautreau, her background, family, marriage, disposition and place in Paris society, and how her social ambitions and Sargent's dreams of fame and prosperity combined to create an amazing portrait that nonetheless could not withstand the contempt and disdain of the aristocratic class (and within that, mostly women) for Amélie's *arriviste* status and her husband's trade-tainted wealth. Both books are assiduously researched and contain a good deal of interesting information about Sargent's life, friends, style and studio décor.

Longer works of fiction with Sargent as a more major character allow for the depiction of greater depth of being and even the interior life of the portraitist. Jean Zimmerman's 2012 novel ***Love, Fiercely – A Gilded Age Romance***,[10] takes as its basis the wonderful portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes, and tells the scrupulously factual—but sometimes fictionalized—story of these two American aristocrats. When they meet Sargent, it is 1897, at his studio in London, because Edith Minturn Stokes *must* have her portrait painted to celebrate her wedding.

> For wealthy Americans, Sargent represented the perfect package. He had it all: the exquisite taste and ferocious talent expected of a French artist, a Boston Brahmin's gentility—his father's family hailed from Puritan Massachusetts—and the flawless social skills that made him welcome in any highbrow drawing room. To be "done" by the master had become an indelible marker of one's social standing. By the mid-1890s, the American public had been stricken by what fellow painter Walter Sickert called "Sargentolatry." (pp. 123-24)

Sargent's presence in the book is strong, but only comprises eleven pages of the nearly three hundred total. His Tite Street studio is described in detail, as are the various quirks and mannerisms of the "darkly handsome, charismatic painter" as he works: dashing off to play on a Bechstein piano, sometimes singing with the sitter; muttering and grimacing at

the canvas; trolling through cabinets and trunks filled with costumes and props to find just the right effect for a portrait.

> Laboring for hours at a stretch in front of the easel, Sargent teetered like a Barnum bear on the balls of his feet, holding his brush poised like a dart in perfect silence, then jabbing at the canvas, never failing to exclaim a self-deprecating "pish-tosh, pish-tosh" at the completion of a stroke. (p. 127)

But it is the effect of his portraits on the world—the wealthy world—that is celebrated most. Referring to the ravishing portrait of Lady Agnew of Lochnaw (1892), the author writes:

> The painting launched her. She arrestingly displayed the "nervous energy" so emblematic of his female subjects, with the lovely wasting quality prized in elite Victorian ladies…. No other portraitist could deliver…the delicate flesh tones glimpsed through the sheer fabric of milady's sleeves, the smoky intelligent eyes, the exquisitely skittish fingers. When a woman sat to Sargent, she knew that from the cast of her expression to the texture of her apparel she would be delivered up to the world in a specific, delicious way, joining the parade of the world's most celebrated women. (p. 125)

We get more of the painter and his work in this book, but it's still on the surface.

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Similarly, in Allan Gurganus' novella **"The Expense of Spirit"**[11]**,** we see Sargent in relation to an American woman who comes to him, having overcome great obstacles with dogged persistence, to have her portrait painted—the dream of her lifetime. The "Maestro" as he is called, is described by the protagonist:

> In strode a man who seemed the hired and presentable fellow who would, in turn, introduce some eccentric disheveled artist. Muriel felt relieved to recognize, via a self-portrait reproduced two inches square, Mr. Sargent himself. Austere, tall, and impeccable as some bank trust officer in a three-piece black suit, he wore the simplest of watch chains. And yet he seemed to have pop-eyes and a beard that claimed too much of his neck…. Singer Sargent spoke in a ripened Anglicized American accent. His manners were exemplary, if a bit glassy and automatic. (p. 4)

The story is fraught with humble suspense. Muriel has scrimped and saved every last penny of her earnings as a piano teacher in 1880's Chicago in order to sail to London and have her portrait painted by Sargent. She and her sister arrive at Tite Street in 1888 with letters of introduction—and find themselves just two of the some two thousand visitors a year who come to the studio. She finds she cannot dare to make her request for a portrait

to the busy artist, who genially allows her and her sister to sit and keep him company for a few days. Then, in a wonderfully intimate and insightful description, Muriel gets her wish:

> Feeling light-headed (she really should've eaten, she really should've been born a genius, rich, or beautiful, or all three), she had leaned upon the trunk, to prevent a crude stagger forward or perhaps even a fall (the disgrace of that, here!). And the slight pressure of her pianist's hand caused the petals of the lowest peony to drop, with half a humid sigh, around her tensed white forefinger and thumb on which all weight now pivoted. The chin was lifted, accidentally displaying the long pale neck that her crippled mother had mercilessly and often described as, "along with Muriel's hands, her one distinguished feature." The painter saw the face set atop a neck tilting back for breath till it accidentally craned toward seeming almost swanlike, and something, something in the woman's fortitude at trying to hide her vast disappointment, to hide her vast distinction (which was of the self-same Chartres size), something in the fading light, maybe even something obdurate and half attractive in the bone structure of her sinewy ridged side-face, something there revealed a respect for art so surrendered, so complete, it could not be ordered on demand. And one felt in the artist's straightening spine, in a bracing almost alarmed, that something had annealed him. It made his habit of social lightness go briefly grave as, reconsidering, he paused, then barked four syllables of Italian at his manservant….And the lifted dampened brush returned to motion! (pp. 29-30)

This is a beautifully rendered account of artistic inspiration, and gives us a better look into the inner promptings of what causes an artist to paint, or a writer to write. Without any notion of historical accuracy, we see the painter Sargent responding to such promptings in a completely satisfying and credible way. As far as my research has gone, I can find no actual portrait by Sargent that resembles this description, and therefore assume that Gurganus created it from the rich air of his imagination.

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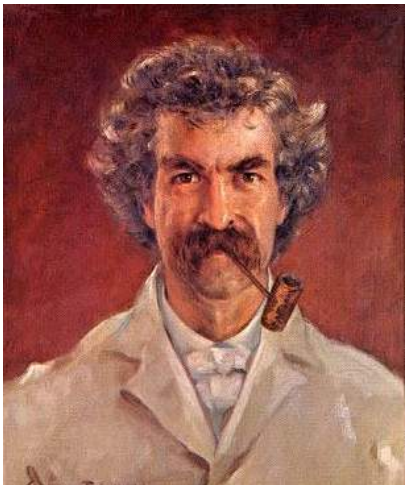
Before moving on to other literary works about Sargent, there is one more book that begs our attention: an alternative history novel, ***The Venice of the West***,[12] starring Mark Twain and Sargent. The author's description of the novel follows:



Mark Twain by James Carroll Beckwith.

In this fictional, alternative history of California, Mark Twain and John Singer Sargent explore Alta California and Rossland. The (Mexican) Republic of Alta California prevails from south of the Russian River in Sonoma County and a (Russian) Rossland stretches from Alaska to Fort Ross (the Tsar's summer palace on the coast) and east to Sakrametska (Sacramento). Fanning's narrative [a writer and artist who is the story's narrator] switches between dispatches from journalist/novelist Mark Twain and his traveling companion, American impressionist painter, John Singer Sargent, who has come to California to launch a career as a portrait artist and possibly explore his own

> unspoken sexual preferences. The [book] includes sketches and watercolors by Fanning, who like his protagonists, is both novelist and artist. It includes a timeline of alternate history versus actual history. (Preface)

In a letter from Sargent to Henry James (he addresses him as "Dear Hank"!), the artist comes across as particularly "American" but also as a thoughtful friend and reader. After complimenting James on his technique in the story *Daisy Miller* ("the way you allow your reader to eavesdrop on Daisy's thoughts, as if one were inside her head"), Sargent goes on to say:

> I strive to accomplish the same trick in portraiture, presenting my subject in a pose and setting and light so characteristic that he recognizes, approves of, and delights in the likeness. At the same time, the perceptive viewer can see beyond the surface, to the vanity, insecurity, and social pretensions that prompted the sitter to commission his portrait; or to the nobility and dignity of a genuinely great man; or to the affection or lack thereof that I myself feel for the subject. Heady stuff to be contained in a thin layer of pigment on canvas.... (p. 25)

It's a jolly read, a rollicking adventure, and a portrait of Sargent that is quite different and imaginative, while holding on to the essence of the man and artist as the last several decades of research and writing have come to reveal him.

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The Seduction of Genius

In this play by Paula Marantz Cohen[13], Singer Sargent is a primary character, along with Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Ena Wertheimer, the eldest daughter of Asher Wertheimer, a London art dealer of whose large family Sargent painted eleven portraits. Sargent's long-time Italian servant, Niccola, and a housemaid named Mary round out the cast. It begins in 1905 in London, and ends shortly after the death of Sargent in 1925.

Edith Wharton

James, Wharton and Sargent are all clearly "geniuses" in their own spheres, and we find that Ena Wertheimer, too, has a clarity and wit and purpose to her life that would allow her to be included in their circle—except for the fact that she is Jewish. The difference this makes—or doesn't make—to the other characters is a key construct of the play—the outsider, the gypsy, the artist, the solitary writer is set against the social insider, the class structure, the conventional, society itself.

The impetus for the gathering of these luminaries is Edith Wharton's desire to honor James with a portrait by Sargent; the artist's fee has been collected from James's many friends and admirers in honor of his seventieth birthday. Ena just happens to be at the studio at the time, sitting for her own portrait. When we first meet Sargent, in

Act I:ii, he is politely fending off Ena's not-so-covert overtures—she is clearly in love—but when he learns Wharton and James are waiting for him, the conversation takes another turn:

ENA

I wouldn't embarrass you by joining you for tea. I know your friends scorn me.

SARGENT

(still distracted)

I wouldn't say that.

ENA

No doubt they malign you for your friendship with us.

SARGENT

They are old-fashioned.

ENA

Then they do malign you?

SARGENT

They don't speak of it.

ENA

Worse! They speak of it behind your back. Mrs. Wharton certainly does. She gossips about it with that little Bernie Berenson whom she leads around like a dog on a leash. He is insufferable. He hates us more than she does. Jews turned Christian are always the worst that way. They say he collects medieval crucifixes.

Betty and Ena Wertheimer

(Sargent laughs.)

They scorn us for our money, but scramble to make their own. She writes her potboilers, and he sells pictures to stupid Americans. Father says his attributions are questionable. There was a very nasty mess with a Tintoretto. At least he said it was a Tintoretto.

SARGENT

Your father makes a nice profit on the pictures he sells.

ENA

Of course he does. But he is always honest. He sets the price high. But, then, so do you.

SARGENT

Granted, I do.

ENA

Mr. James seems a nice man. He was polite when I met him at your last Academy showing.

SARGENT

He is a gentleman.

ENA

(her tone changing to one of anger)

He made fun of father in his last novel—or at least it seemed to be father: a Jewish art dealer with ten children. Not a flattering portrait. Betty and mother were angry.

SARGENT

You shouldn't take it seriously. Henry writes without knowing where his material comes from. He hardly means it to connect directly to life. He used me once, you know—at least in my infantile incarnation: a poor American boy with grasping mother lives hand-to-mouth all over Europe, suffers pathetic adventures and shows spirit in the face of adversity. It seemed quite transparent. But when I confronted him with it, he said he didn't for the life of him see the resemblance. I don't think he did. He plucks so absent-mindedly from what comes to hand that he has no sense that he might be representing something that exists outside his own head. He is really very kind. I owe him a great deal.

ENA

You can afford to be generous. The doors open to you. They still close in our faces. And even when they open, they laugh at us behind our backs.

SARGENT

You have to see the thing from their point of view. They are afraid of you.

ENA

We threaten them with our money?

SARGENT

You threaten them with your wit, your energy, your passion for life. *And* your money. You are the future—a future in which they have no place.

As the play continues, Wharton and James argue and bicker like an old married couple, and interesting conversations occur between Ena and Niccola. When Sargent is off-stage, the others talk about him—they are trying to figure him out, to guess what he will do next, why he is the way he is, what he will ultimately make of himself. Here are Wharton and James in one such discussion, after Sargent has agreed to paint his old friend's portrait, and then leaves the room:

WHARTON

I told you he would do it.

JAMES

Yes—but how will he do it? He has been known to be cruel. You remember what they used to say: "To have John Sargent paint your portrait is to take your face in your hands."

WHARTON

That was ages ago, before he learned his lesson with that little French tart, Madame Gautreau.

JAMES

She was actually American, you know. Louisiana. The great Bayou.

WHARTON

(exasperated)

What does it matter what she was! The point is that John's attitude is entirely different now—too much so, if you ask me. He makes them all look like they've been in the Social Register for generations, even if they just finished weighing a pound of sugar or measuring out a yard of muslin. And do you think that old pawnbroker Wertheimer is so enamored of him?

JAMES

Ah, my dear, as usual you look only at the surface. In John's case, there are layers. He mocks even as he flatters—and flatters even as he mocks. It is a deep business for a flat medium, and his genius is that he gets away with it. Take his portrait of Lord Ribblesdale.

WHARTON

A superb work. The essence of aristocratic lineage on display.

JAMES

There you are! You missed the half of it. An elegant anachronism. He pulled the man out like taffy, put him in a ridiculous riding habit and top hat, and rendered him, in one handsome stroke, utterly obsolete.

WHARTON

You will turn anything into an insult. It is your gift. But be assured—John will render you as the great man you are.

JAMES

And how, pray tell, do you know that?

WHARTON

(with decision)

Because he will have me to reckon with if he doesn't.

(Lights out.)

Dramatic and dynamic in ways that novels cannot be, a play about John Singer Sargent, and his famous friends, is a further leap of the imagination from the page to the stage. How did he walk and move? What were the expressions that crossed his face during conversations? What the inflections in his speech, his accent, his "Americanisms" and the influence of decades of hearing and speaking French, Italian, German, English? It is one thing to hear the other characters speak of Sargent as *charming* or *unreadable*, and quite another to watch him cross the room, stop short, begin painting, or look with longing at another human creature who might somehow ease his lonely pain and gypsy sense of belonging nowhere on the earth.

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Portraits of an Artist

As a literary novel primarily focused on John Singer Sargent, ***Portraits of an Artist***[14] takes a Rashomon-like perspective of the painter—several sitters for their portraits reveal, as if interviewed, what their experiences with Sargent have made them think and feel about him. I chose this multiple first-person point of view after reading numberless times that Sargent was reticent, unknowable, private and unrevealing of his own feelings and opinions. The reader may decide that one or more of the sitters are classic "unreliable narrators"—or not. For me, his paintings—and especially his portraits—were the key to understanding the man. As Oscar Wilde knowingly remarked, "Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter."

Studying closely each portrait I intended to "bring to life" in the novel, I discovered nuances of light, color and expression that revealed human truths when combined with information gleaned from biographies or the sitter's correspondence. For example, Charlotte Louise Burckhardt, the subject of "Lady with a White Rose"—I found a single phrase about her written in the biography of her husband, Roger Ackerley, whom she married in 1889, a wealthy London fruit merchant known as the "Banana King." The biography was written by the man's son by his second wife (alas, Louise died young, in 1892) and referred to his father's first wife as "an actress." This one comment opened up a wealth of imaginative possibilities which, coupled with that dissatisfied little smirk on her face and the way she poses with that rose as if it might contaminate her if she held it closer, gave me the key to her story in my novel, and her relationship to Sargent. There were rumors they were to be married (even Henry James commented on it in a letter) but it all came to nothing. I had to ask, why? And what was the effect on her? On Sargent?

Another example is the monstrously magnificent

portrait of "Dr. Pozzi at Home." It was well known, even at the time, that he and Amélie Gautreau were lovers, and the good doctor (known as "Doctor Love" to his women patients) was famous for wearing all white clothing during surgery, to show that one could operate without spilling a drop of blood. He was clearly a handsome, confident, worldly man, and Sargent painted him with that same confidence. Here is a brief excerpt from Pozzi's chapter in my novel; Sargent has come to Pozzi's home, a very young artist, barely out from under the tutelage of Carolus Duran at this point. Pozzi is the speaker:

My informality began to put him at ease, and he gained a little confidence as he contemplated the possibilities for this portrait. He looked around the room, hesitating.

"May I see your wardrobe?" he asked.

How amusing! I led him through the ornate arched doorway into my dressing room; beyond this, I saw his eyes widen as he caught a glimpse of the bedroom—a high, four-poster bed with red and gold hangings, deep carpets and a gilded mirror on either side of the bed.

I flung open the doors of an immense oak wardrobe, and he stepped forward, eagerly feeling the soft velvets, the stiff brocades and smooth gabardines of the jackets and coats hanging there. After a few moments, he stepped back, shaking his head.

"Not the professional man," he said, mostly to himself, but I caught at it.

"Doctor Pozzi at home, then, eh?" I said. I took off the black velvet jacket I was wearing, and undid the tie at my neck, allowing the frilled collar of my shirt to fall away from my neck, and the front of my shirt to drift open slightly.

I saw the color rise to his cheeks again—and glanced in the mirror to see myself as he was seeing me: black hair formed a soft widow's peak above my forehead, hazel eyes fairly glittering with a lively sensuality, alert and smoldering at the same time. Was the painter imagining what it would be like to be touched by these long, delicate fingers, how thrilled my women patients must be to submit to my care?

Sargent put up his hand to hold me where I stood, and looked again around the dressing room. Something caught his eye, lying half hidden among silk pillows across a *chaise-longue*—my crimson dressing gown, my *robe d'intérieur*—such as one might wear for a late afternoon's assignation with a lover, perhaps. He released it from the tangle of pillows, and held it up to me.

Really, so very entertaining. I put on the robe, and tied it loosely about my waist with a thin red cord. Sargent stepped closer to me.

"If I may—" he said, seeming to find it hard to breathe easily. He tugged lightly at the white frilled collar of my shirt until it stood out around my neck, then did the same with the cuffs, allowing them to spill out from the scarlet sleeves. The folds of the gown fell gracefully nearly to the floor. He stepped back to see the effect.

"Yes," he breathed. "Yes, that will do quite nicely."

> I turned to look at myself again in the mirror, smiling at what I saw. I turned back to him.
>
> "And how shall I stand?" I said. I put my hands in the pockets, comfortably at ease.
>
> "No, no!" he cried, startling both of us. "Your hands, your hands must be seen, indeed they must!" I removed my hands from the pockets, and lightly fingering the cord on my waist with my left hand, I raised my right hand to my chin.
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> "Almost," he said, and looked intently at me. "Lower your right hand, as if you were gathering your gown together, like so," and he stepped forward to position my hand where the lapels of the gown began to fold. He was so close I could feel his warm breath on my cheek; we were about the same height. His hand trembled slightly as he touched me, then he stepped back again.
>
> I saw it in his face—it was perfect. *I* was perfect.
>
> This was going to be a magnificent portrait.

Under close scrutiny, the portraits themselves suggest how things may have happened, why they may have happened, how the painting came to be as it is. This in turn suggests ideas about the sitter and the artist—a writer is compelled to ask, calling up all her experience, wisdom, imagination and daring: what were they thinking, feeling, seeing, wondering, dreaming, desiring?

In Sargent's case, for me, the portraits hold the answers.

Conclusion

The majority of the books I surveyed for this paper portray Sargent with the stock clichés drawn from early biographies: his difficulty speaking at times, his reserve, his impeccable manners and conservative clothing, his dynamic, active motions while painting, and the subtle (or not) hints at homosexuality. Several books have him saying his most famous line: "No more mugs!" But all this is window-dressing, almost caricature; it's using Sargent as a prop in a larger story that reveals other people, motives and secrets—but not him or his secrets.

Alan Gurganus' short story comes close, as I mentioned above, to showing the inspiration that strikes an artist who is truly alive in his art. Paula Cohen's play, however, seems to me to provide a stunning, deep and delicate portrait of Sargent at the height of his career, in the context of friends who knew him well but who still failed to understand the man; his interaction with and relationship to both Ena Wertheimer and his manservant Niccola are intensely revealing and poignant. Both the artist and his art are well-served in this play, and we come away awed by the indefinable power of the writer's imagination which has revealed these depths that no mere facts can tell us.

In a similar way, my own novel uses the insights and opinions of Sargent's friends—whose portraits he painted—to help understand a man whose private life was significantly hidden from the public view, especially after the debacle of *Madame X*. The glory and glamour and stark, human intensity depicted in his portraits demand irresistibly that we

who appreciate his art make a conscious attempt to know *who it was* who created it, and *why*—not just when and how.

That said, I was immensely impressed and delighted to be witness to the many excellent presentations and papers at the Sargentology Conference in York in April, 2016. For example, exquisite details about the colors of paint that Sargent and his contemporaries used, and their "meanings" in light of cultural contexts and artistic fashion, provided me with an even broader sense of how to explain and write about the artist and his paintings. Another presentation addressed the music that was performed in Sargent's era, and composers or pieces he was known to love and even play himself on the piano—this gave extra depth to his paintings, particularly in the connection between musical style and Sargent's painting style.

Unlike the biographer or the researcher, however, who deal in facts and occasionally informed speculation as to the whys and wherefores of the life of a notable person, the writer of historical fiction has greater imaginative license to explore the human scene, to draw out the defining motivations and fill in the unrecorded times with plausible truth. My colleagues in this field, and especially the members of the Historical Novel Society, are adamant and often perfectionist about getting the details right for the era and time they write about—the food, clothing, music, transportation, currency, streets, animals—and particularly language and references to current events. We try to meticulously place our famous characters in the towns and cities and countries they actually lived in or visited at specific times. We search volumes of information—and only a mere fraction of what we learn actually is mentioned in any book. I could tell you details about the history of cigarettes and fountain pens…! And because we authors must understand the reality, we are eternally grateful to the academic and also amateur scholars and researchers who pursue the truth of the facts, which become the springboard for our imagination.

All of this serves to help make our characters comfortable in their own surroundings—and then we can create what we truly love—what any historical fiction writer is born to do. From our deepest imaginations, we listen to and write down those never-recorded conversations and inner thoughts that we then intuitively know that our character said or thought—because his or her life or art or accomplishments couldn't have appeared without those thoughts, words and inner lights.

And so it is with John Singer Sargent—an enigmatic, cool, reserved and occasionally awkward man whose brilliant, incisive, psychologically-intense and revealing art begs the questions: Who was he? What did he want? Why do we love him so?

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[1] Douglas Rees, *The Janus Gate*. New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2006. Subsequent quotations will be indicated in the text by page number.
[2] Joan MacPhail Knight, *Charlotte in London*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008.
[3] Hugh Brewster, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose: The Story of a Painting*. Toronto, ON: Kids Can Press, 2007.
[4] Paula Marantz Cohen, *What Alice Knew: A Most Curious Tale of Henry James and Jack the Ripper*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks Landmark, 2010.
[5] Mary F. Burns, The *Spoils of Avalon: A Sargent/Paget Mystery.* San Mateo, CA: The Sand Hill Review Press, 2014. Subsequent quotations will be indicated in the text by page number.
[6] J. P. Morrissey, *A Weekend at Blenheim.* New York: Thomas Dunne Books, a division of St. Martin's Minotaur, 2002. Subsequent quotations will be indicated in the text by page number.

[7] Eve Cran, "From the Diary of William James." Unpublished class assignment at University of California, Berkeley Extension, Fall 2015. From the author: "As an aside, the story is part of a collection I'm working on where I recreate famous works of art (e.g., *Madame X*) within the pages of a short story. I've finished one involving *Nighthawks*, and another using *Paris Street; Rainy Day*, as their bases." Subsequent quotations will be indicated in the text by page number.
[8] Deborah Davis, *Strapless: John Singer Sargent and The Fall of Madame X*. New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2003.
[9] Gioia Diliberto, *I Am Madame X*. New York: Lisa Drew Book/Scribner: 2003.
[10] Jean Zimmerman, *Love, Fiercely: A Gilded Age Romance.* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. Subsequent quotations will be indicated in the text by page number.
[11] Allan Gurganus, "The Expense of Spirit" in *The Practical Heart: Four Novellas*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. Subsequent quotations will be indicated in the text by page number.
[12] Patrick Fanning, *The Venice of the West*. Wordrunner eChapbooks: 2012.
[13] Paula Marantz Cohen, *The Seduction of Genius.* Unpublished play. © 2002, 2016.
[14] Mary F. Burns, *Portraits of an Artist*. San Mateo, California: Sand Hill Review Press, 2013.