

WINNER OF THE DOBBIE LITERARY AWARD FOR WOMEN WRITERS

# FUGITIVE BLUE



# CLAIRE THOMAS

LONGLISTED FOR THE MILES FRANKLIN LITERARY AWARD

## PRAISE FOR *Fugitive Blue*

‘Claire Thomas’s *Fugitive Blue* is a fine first novel about the search by a young art conservator to find the origins of a fifteenth-century panel painting. In narratives about different historical periods, from Renaissance Venice through to post-war Australia, Thomas suggests parallel stories about love and loss, female creativity and unrealised desire. Polished and poignant, expressed with incisiveness and resonance, *Fugitive Blue* doesn’t miss a beat.’ *Westerly*

‘Intricately structured, written with originality and poise... *Fugitive Blue* is a novel about art, the fragility of love and transformation. The fresh and vivid images evoked resonate with the reader long after the novel is finished.’ Judges for the Dobbie Literary Award

‘Written with élan and delightful ease... Thomas captures atmosphere with artful economy and sketches characters and emotions with masterly precision. A novel to be reckoned with.’ Murray Waldren

‘... beautifully done with great imagination.’ *Sydney Morning Herald*

‘... beautifully written, elegant and very enjoyable...’ *Launceston Examiner*

‘Reminiscent of Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, this novel is an elegantly written work that interweaves the past and the present...’ *Sun-Herald*

‘... a strong sense of historical time and place presented through the beautifully descriptive passages... well-written with excellent characters... Its interesting subject matter has been intelligently interwoven within a multi-layered story of love lost, past and present and the endurance of art. It will appeal to an unlimited range of readers...’ *Bookseller & Publisher*

‘... immediately enticing...’ *Canberra Times*

‘A captivating novel about the fragility and essence of love. Indeed it is a work of art.’ *Gold Coast Bulletin*

‘... beguiling debut novel...’ *Sunday Tasmanian*

**FUGITIVE  
BLUE**

**CLAIRE  
THOMAS**

**Also by Claire Thomas**

*The Performance*

Quoted material: p. v: Dawson W. Carr and Mark Leonard (eds), *Looking at Paintings—A Guide to Technical Terms*, published by J Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, a division of British Museum Publications Ltd, London, 1992, p. 33; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, translated by Charles Lock Eastlake, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 311; A.S. Byatt, *Possession*, Random House (Vintage), London, 1991, p. 169; p. 63: Guy Chapman (ed.), *The Travel-Diaries of William Beckford of Fonthill*, Constable/Houghton Mifflin, London, 1928, p. 78; p. 110: Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, Penguin, London, 1959, p. 162; p. 113: Emile Zola, *The Masterpiece*, translated by Thomas Watson and Roger Pearson, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 41; pp. 158–9: Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Faber & Faber, London, 1965, p. 33; p. 163: George Seferis, 'Five Poems by Mr S. Thalassinos', in Keeley, Edmund, Sherrard, Philip; *George Seferis: Collected Poems*, Princeton University Press, 1967, 1995 revised edition, p. 59; p. 206: Stella Bowen, *Drawn from Life*, London: Virago, 1984, p. 168.



First published by Allen & Unwin in 2008

Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2021  
by Hachette Australia  
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)  
Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000  
[www.hachette.com.au](http://www.hachette.com.au)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 4534 1 (paperback)

Cover design by Alissa Dinallo

Cover photograph courtesy of Shutterstock

Text design by Bookhouse

Typeset by Bookhouse

Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

*Dedicated with love to  
Cheryl Thomas*

‘Fugitive pigment: a pigment that is particularly susceptible to changing over time.’

DAWSON W. CARR AND MARK LEONARD, EDs,  
*Looking at Paintings—A Guide to Technical Terms*

‘But as we readily follow an agreeable object that flies from us, so we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it.’

GOETHE, *Theory of Colours*

‘It may be that your diligent—reconstitution—like the restoration of old Frescoes with new colours—is our way to the Truth—a discreet patching.’

A.S. BYATT, *Possession*

# I



I am not writing this to be sentimental. I am just trying to find the answer to a story.

I did not imagine myself here. I certainly did not imagine myself here alone. So, for you and for myself, I want to explain how it happened. How this bit of it happened, anyway. Because there are other threads, of course, that I cannot find, that twist and pull at me now and will probably continue to do so forever.

But with you, there is no forever. Of course. I am away from home so it is more difficult to comprehend that, harder than it would be if I were in Melbourne where we lived. Or in Asia, where you are now. But I'm here, instead, in this old wet European city, and so I must repeat some words over and over to myself to comprehend. No forever. Slowly, I am beginning to register it.

This is the part I'm telling you.



There was nothing unusual about the arrival of Ana Poulos. She walked into the Centre like the other clients, then waited in the foyer for a few minutes, sitting neatly on a charcoal upholstered bench. The senior conservators were at a conference that morning, so I had been asked to greet her. I squeaked down the dark rubber floor of the passage towards the client, roughly wiping my hands on my black apron before pushing through the heavy transparent door of the foyer.

She stood up, held out her hand and I welcomed her.

‘Let’s go into the meeting room,’ I said.

She was carrying a leather handbag that pulled at the red sleeve covering her forearm and a brown paper bag, the type you get from clothing stores, with crisp side folds and twisted cord handles. Her bags bounced together as we moved towards the consultation table that dominated the meeting room in the Centre. As I followed Ana Poulos, I tried to see what was inside the paper bag—to make out a shape or a sense of weight—but the only visible detail was a small corner of white tissue poking out at the top.

‘You can put it up here,’ I suggested.

With that, she placed her things on the table and pushed the handbag to one side. Then she pulled a work of art from the brown paper bag, releasing a few unexpected flakes of paint like shaken-off snow. I followed a piece of it as it floated into a dimple of rubber between our two pairs of

feet. Ana's black court shoes, my grey Campers and a dot of blue between them. I had to stop myself from rushing through to the lab and grabbing a container to collect the delicate debris.

Mrs Poulos folded back the tissue paper and there it was. A simple composition. Two fat angels flying through blue, white wings waving and little legs kicking out behind.

'Wow.'

'It belonged to my mother,' Ana explained. 'She recently passed away.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. And then I felt my face heating up. Five minutes into the consultation and I'd already hit a moment in which my awkward words got stuck.

'That's okay,' she smiled. 'She was over ninety.'

I tried to be professional. 'This looks like it could date from the early Renaissance, perhaps the mid-fifteenth century. It could be a practice piece by a workshop apprentice. Does that fit with what you know?'

'I don't know much at all about its history, really.'

'See that knot in the wood there,' I continued, waving my smudge-covered fingers over the painting. 'That would have been enough for it to be rejected by a professional. And the subject's unusual.'

'The angels?'

'Yes. Angels are everywhere now but in this period they were usually placed on the edge of the picture. Like fruit or leaves. As an embellishment.'

Mrs Poulos nodded. 'I've often thought of it as a draft for something larger. Like a study in a sketchbook?'

'Maybe,' I said. 'But it is properly finished. And all that blue. It looks like ultramarine. Ultramarine wouldn't have been used in a study.'

'The pigment?'

'Yes. It was very expensive, literally worth more than its weight in gold at certain times. It comes from lapis lazuli, the gemstone.'

'Oh yes,' she said. 'I've got a lapis pendant.' And then she reached inside her red shirt and pulled out a smooth sphere of blue, held to a long chain by thin tentacles of gold. 'I've had this since the seventies.'

'It's lovely,' I said. And I thought of my own lapis jewellery: beads of flecked stone I'd bought from Ishka as a teenager. I'd forgotten what I'd done with those bracelets. Probably just shoved them inside some box with countless other discarded decorations. Friendship bands plaited from embroidery thread, brightly coloured badges for radio station promos, a few sparkling pink hairclips.

'Isn't it interesting how the value of things can change so much?' Mrs Poulos said. 'What's considered precious at various times through history.'

I nodded my agreement, remembering a limestone Romanesque Madonna who was a chameleon over epochs. Initially painted black, the thirteenth century had seen her coated blue in recognition of the newfound significance of

that hue. Later, she was given a Baroque revamp—gilded in gaudy gold—before being consumed, two centuries later, by lashings of white in a chilly response to a new doctrinal notion of purity. And I thought of the apothecaries I'd learnt about in art history with their hidden stash of ultramarine treasure and then the woven shop basket I'd fumbled through as a thirteen-year-old, tugging my chosen blue bracelets from a tangled mass of beaded colour.

'Well, do you think you'll be able to restore this?' Mrs Poulos asked, getting to the point of it all.

'We can definitely try,' I replied. 'I might not do the work personally, but the Centre would be happy to take it on. There's no doubt about that.'

My instructions that morning had been simple. Accept anything that looks like it could benefit from conservation treatment, explain the general procedural and fee options, and reassure the client that all due care would be taken with her possession.

As soon as Mrs Poulos left the Centre, I dashed into the lab, grabbed a small glass beaker and a pair of tweezers, returned to the meeting room and rescued five flakes of blue paint: the fragment from the floor and the others from across the table. Then I sat down and stared at the patch of colour that had just landed on an expanse of beige laminate. I was excited by my proximity to what was possibly one of the oldest artworks to have arrived at the Centre. I secured my

hair back into a ponytail and leant forward on the table, my elbows resting on its surface as I scrutinised the painting.

It was more of a plank than a standard joined panel—just a single piece of wood, coarsely sawn with the cuts still splintered. It had been previously restored, probably during the nineteenth century: a cradle support was attached to its back in an attempt to prevent the timber from curling and twisting as a reminder that it had once belonged to the trunk of a tree. The painting covered the surface with only a thin border of exposed wood left bare around the edges. There was significant degradation in the paint layers with visible cracking and flaking. It was unvarnished. The blue was still vibrant, although typically faded. The angels were united, complementary, but also unusually idiosyncratic: one was confidently cheeky with an almost coquettish tilt to its fleshy neck, the other a classic, wide-eyed innocent with a ruddier complexion and grasping, extended arms. Thick golden curls adorned their heads. Their plump legs were discreetly positioned to obscure any genitalia, while their faces had a pretty gender ambivalence. Their wings. Their wings were full of air, exultant. The brushwork was inconsistent—

Suddenly there was a thud at the doorway as my boss powered in to inspect what had been received in her absence. Gillian walked towards me, rolling up her long knitted sleeves. She leant over my shoulder towards the object on the table.

‘Wow,’ she said. ‘What the *hell* is this?’  
That was the beginning.