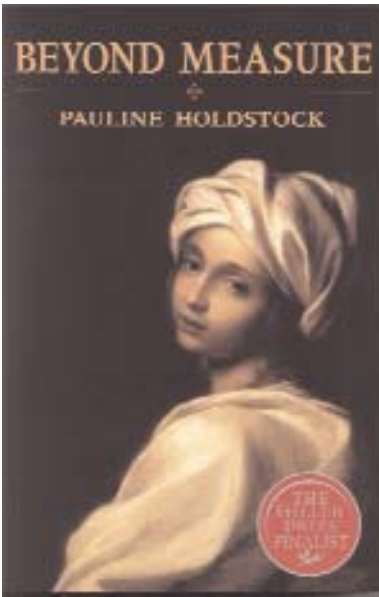


Beyond Measure by Pauline Holdstock

Readers' Guide



ABOUT THE BOOK

It is mid-sixteenth century when *Beyond Measure* opens and Chiara, a young slave girl, has been stolen from her homeland and transported to Italy. She suffers from a skin pigmentation disorder, similar to vitiligo. Viewed by some as being marked with misfortune and cursed, Chiara is passed to Paolo Pallavicino, an artist and man of science who conducts anatomical dissections of animals and human corpses, exhumed under the cover of darkness. Chiara is subsequently passed from one artist to another, and finally presented as a gift to a female painter, Sofonisba Fabroni. Fabroni is involved with an artist's colony, all collaborators in the construction of the ornate displays for the feast of San Giovanni. But they are also rivals competing with each other for commissions by patrons. In their midst, Chiara witnesses the mind games, superstitions, and jealousies that lead ultimately to rape and a trial.

WHAT THE MEDIA SAID ABOUT *BEYOND MEASURE*

"In *Beyond Measure*, Holdstock proves herself a master of pacing: Her lively, macabre plot trips lightly along in spite of its dark elements. Holdstock's evocation of the Italian landscape and her handling of the exquisite detail of artists' realm keep the reader snug in a layered, hideous and lushly beautiful mid-16th-century world."

– *The Globe and Mail*

"A master of pace, she pulls the skin of this novel as tight as a drum so that you can feel chaos in the offing but don't know what it is until it's on top of you . . . This well-executed novel can sit comfortably on any bookshelf alongside works by writers like A.S. Byatt and Jane Urquhart." – *The Vancouver Sun*

"In *Beyond Measure*, Holdstock has created a fascinating portrayal of a society obsessed with surfaces, which sees the creation of beauty as ample justification for torture, mutilation, and murder." – *Books in Canada*



BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PAULINE HOLDSTOCK

Holdstock says, "I write to find out what I can know," and the wide-ranging contexts of her novels - from the Italian Renaissance, to the Chinese Boxer Rebellion (*The Blackbird's Song*), to the smallpox that ravaged the Indians of the West Coast (*The Burial Ground*), to a decaying London in the near future (*The House*), to the Franco-Prussian war (*The Turning*) - provide ample illustration of her quest for knowledge and the range of her writing. Holdstock's rich use of metaphor lends an evocative beauty to her prose, often in sharp contrast to her occasionally grim subjects. She has been nominated for or won numerous prizes for her work, including the CBC Literary Award and the Prairie Fire Personal Journalism Prize.

Born in Gravesend, England, Holdstock now lives in Sidney, B.C. A mother of four, she researches much of her material in local libraries, although she did spend some time in Italy to research *Beyond Measure*.

PAULINE HOLDSTOCK IN DISCUSSION WITH HELEN COLTRINARI

HC 16th century Italy seen through the eyes of a slave girl and a variety of artisans might not be considered fodder for a good book. As it turns out, your book is a page-turner. Where did you get the inspiration for such a story?

PH I wanted to write about a disfigured girl. The book was originally set in nineteenth-century British Columbia but the colours didn't work for me - either visually, or psychically. I wanted rich hues and light. Italy drew me. Once there, I knew I wanted the blues and golds of the Renaissance and in the research I found my book. I learned that slaves had been common in Italy. So there I had it: a disfigured slave among a group of artists engaged in the search for beauty, perfection.

HC The details of the artistic works create vivid and lasting mental images. Are you an artist yourself? Have you taken courses in painting and sculpting? Where does all this detail come from?

PH There is a wealth of material readily available. Artists like Leonardo, Cellini and others have written in detail about process. We have texts that go back to the middle ages giving instruction to artists learning their craft. The 'How to' is not a modern invention. Cennini wrote a handbook for artists. The medieval monk Theophilus wrote a treatise on illumination and working with gold leaf.

I'd love to be a visual artist and might have been one with positive encouragement. My art teachers were highly critical beings (possibly from another planet). I did take up drawing again when I began the book and drew all the way through it. I even worked with colour!

HC Can you describe for us the process of writing this book? We know it took 6 years to write.... How much research did you have to do about the period, the artisans, the artistic creations? We'd love to know what is left on the cutting floor!

PH It was easy research to do. There is so much that has come down to us and is now reproduced in art books, in histories and so on. Many journals and letters have survived the ages and have been published, especially in the last century. And then, of course, in Canada we have the fabulous inter-library loan service. Through that, it's possible to have access to virtually any book or academic paper you might come across, however obscure.

What's left on the cutting room floor? Not much! Every time I came I came across something that really set fire to my imagination I just had to find a place for it. It was a very cavalier attitude and involved a great deal of faith. The hard part came at the end when it all had to be assembled.

HC The characters simply jump off the pages. Let's start with the women. Both Chiara and Sofonisba are strong, smart women and very believable. Did you base Sofonisba on the painter Sofonisba Anguissola (1532-1625)? She would have been 20 years old at the time of the setting for the novel.

PH No. I stole only her name. The salient facts of her story come from the life of the painter, Artemisia Gentileschi. But I had no intention of trying to represent the historical Artemisia. That's a presumption I could never make. I'd be terrified of misrepresenting a real person, doing some kind of injustice to their life.

HC And "chiara" can mean dappled sunlight ...is that why you chose that name for the piebald slave? A coincidence? Even her first assigned name, Caterina, which means pure was a good choice. Did you intend to stir up strong feminist feelings through the women?

PH Absolutely. And more than that. Chiara comes from 'chiaroscuro' -- light/dark -- the technical term used in painting and invented just slightly later than the book. Chiara is a deeply symbolic character. She relates directly to

the central theme of beauty and terror, the core of our human existence.

HC The men are something else. From despicable Alessandro through to the finicky Paolo, the men stir up very different emotions in the reader. But Matteo Tassi sears the mind – he is both loveable and despicable...maybe like all men? Why did you choose such a character for this possible match for Sofonisba?

PH Sofonisba's a pretty strong woman. Only a man like Tassi who lives his life without fears, without compromise would be a match for her. He's my favourite character despite his calamitous lapse. Even his violence is honest. And he's utterly devoid of that most despicable of human traits - cruelty. In fact he's also the kindest character.

HC No one who reads the book will forget the fire in the cathedral...followed by the cruelty to the mare. Where did you get the inspiration for this description?

PH Castiglione describes an extravagant theatrical performance complete with decorations and blazing torches. Any writer would shout 'Fire!' on reading it. As for the horse, it's based on an incident in the diary of a Florentine apothecary who lived a little earlier, Luca Landucci. But I'm afraid the ultimate cruelty inflicted on the horse (which I could scarcely bring myself to write and which only the careful reader will understand) was taken from a rash of incidents that occurred in the 1990's close to my mother's home in the UK. Similarly, the most cruel act in the book is taken from our own times, from that truly medieval war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

HC While reading the book, I kept seeing the movie, so deeply visual are the descriptions. Beyond the fire, the sculpting of the foetus, the painting of the wings, I loved the breakfast on p. 137. For me it was truly evocative of mornings in Italy! What "scenes" would you choose to highlight for a movie version of the book?

PH The grisly ones, of course -- the hanging, the disinterment. But Chiara's scenes are the ones that would engage an audience emotionally, her first night with Tassi, her presentation to Sofonisba at the banquet, Chiara in the menagerie...

HC And lastly, what is next? What are you working on now? I can hardly wait!

PC Something extremely cold (literally), stark and riven with a single-minded passion. Meanwhile, I have a collection of short fiction I should like to see published.

Just a note on historical fiction. It isn't, strange to say, written (at least, not by me) to open a window on a former world but to shed light on this one. We all -- across time -- live in the same world, are driven by the same passions. I'd like readers to see the parallels.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HELEN COLTRINARI

Helen Coltrinari has been a teacher in both immersion and core French programs in Canada and in Europe. In her diverse career, she has been a secondary school Department Head, an Executive Producer with TVOntario, an on-air host of several television series, a writer of teacher guides and classroom ready resources and a workshop presenter and a writer for a Canadian publishing house. In addition, she has designed and developed television utilization workshops, short courses in multimedia, and curricula for distance learning programs. Ms. Coltrinari holds an M.A. (French) from the University of Toronto and an M.Ed. from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). As well as teaching courses for Brock University's M.Ed program, she is a published author, a keynote speaker, a facilitator, and a member of an international team working with teachers in Brazil. She is a past president of the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) and sits on a variety of regional and local Boards of Directors.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The book opens with several detailed descriptions: a public hanging, a slave girl's arrival in Genoa, a moment in the artist Paolo's workshop and a moment between a father and daughter. How do these descriptions set the stage for the story (stories) that follows?
2. The first public words Orazio utters about his daughter, Sofonisba, (p. 20) indicate both his admiration for her and his belief in her talents. Is the gauntlet that Orazio throws down to the other artists in his circle an indication that he is an early feminist?
3. How is love, in its many forms, depicted in this novel?
4. How does Sofonisba pursue her ambition? What are the obstacles, if any? How does she celebrate her successes, if any?
5. The personalities of Sofonisba and Matteo seem on a collision course from the outset. How does the author avoid getting maudlin? How does the author deepen the relationship of the characters, yet further the plot?
6. At the end of chapter seven in Part II (p. 146) Chiara returns to sleep in the room of Sofonisba who is tossing and turning; Chiara immediately falls asleep. Does the adage "no rest for the wicked" apply here?
7. The description of Tassi sculpting the bronze foetus is very detailed. What is the significance of this sculpture? Is it a symbol for something deeper or darker? As a symbol, does it evolve through the rest of the book?
8. The fire in the cathedral is an amazing scene that stays in the reader's mind. Is it visually powerful because of the description of the fire? Is the conflagration where religion, art, and science meet?
9. How are Sofonisba, Matteo and Chiara "round" characters i.e., complex and many-sided?
10. The character, Chiara, is certainly surrounded by the superstitious beliefs of various people with whom she comes into contact. Her name in itself is evocative of both art and nature. How does the author keep her central to the action of the novel?
11. Though there are many grizzly scenes, there are also scenes tinged with humour? Choose one of each and explain why the scene touches the affective mind.
12. If the central themes of the book are beauty and terror, how does each of the main characters contribute to deepen the themes? In addition we experience the themes of art, science and religion. How are these themes intensified and woven together throughout the novel?
13. Is there a parallel between Paolo, and other artists in the novel, and modern bioengineers?
14. A literary critic from *Maclean's Magazine* has described the author as having "an evident anger" towards the treatment of Chiara. Do you agree or disagree that Pauline Holdstock writes with anger?
15. It is said that all artists suffer from egotistical pursuits? Where has the author introduced the maniacal and yet kept us turning the pages?
16. What does the title "*Beyond Measure*" evoke? Are we measuring truth? Beauty? Nature? What is it that is beyond our measure?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What was the most memorable “mental picture” for you?
2. Who was the most memorable character? Why?
3. What was the most grotesque event in the book for you?
4. In its review of another of Ms. Holdstock’s books, *The Times* literary supplement states “the evocation of pace and time have[ing] an almost cinematic immediacy.” Does this description apply to *Beyond Measure* as well?
5. Imagine that you were making the book into a movie. Who is your director? Who plays the roles of Orazio, Alessandro, Tassi, Sofonisba, Chiara etc. What part of Italy would you choose to shoot your film (Corsica, Sicily maybe)? Would you choose another country/area? (Holland, France) What scenes would you make central to the movie?
6. Are there modern day versions of the main characters? Who are they?
7. What is the book really about?
8. Was the author trying to give us any feminist notions in the book?
9. Why do you think the character of Chiara was piebald? Might the author have chosen another deformity to get the same results?
10. The book is filled with detailed information about artists’ work. What does this tell us about a. the author? b. the characters? c. the period? How does all of this detail advance the story?
11. If you could give a colour to this book, what would it be?
12. Describe both physically and emotionally the following characters: Orazio, Sofonisba, Chiara, Orazio, Paolo Pallavicino, Matteo Tassi, Ceccio,
13. In 5 years, what will you remember of this book?

ALSO BY PAULINE HOLDSTOCK

Mortal Distractions. 2004. Thistle-down Press. ISBN 1-894345-66-5.

The Turning. 1996. New Star Books. ISBN 0-921586-53-1

The Burial Ground. 1991. New Star Books. ISBN 0-921586-25-6

Swimming from the Flames. Turnstone Press. ISBN 0-88801-182-2