Arts and Leisure: Reading opens doors for writers who are going somewhere

by Arthur Salm

Writers read.

The ability to write - to write, that is, not just to write - is achieved in large part through osmosis: By reading, you come to intuit why one string of words rings with clarity while another, every bit as grammatical, goes thunk on the page, or rather, clang in the ear.

SUSAN VREELAND - Susan Vreeland's latest novel is 'Luncheon of the Boating Party.' CNS Photo by Nelvin C. Cepeda.

But for some writers, reading must be directed. And it leads them into the most wondrous places.

Susan Vreeland's "Luncheon of the Boating Party" is the latest in her series of best-selling historical novels (the first was "Girl in Hyacinth Blue") that not only turn on the world of art, but have the very ethos of art infused within them. And she doesn't achieve that heartfelt effect merely by looking at paintings. She reads. And reads.

"I have two ideas for my next novel," she said. "I don't know what I'll end up doing."

What she's doing in preparation is reading: Nicholas Delbanco's "Running in Place: Scenes From the South of France," for example.

"I'm also looking for a good history of Provence," Vreeland said. "The idea is to trace a piece of property through time, as waves of history pass over it."

Through - what else? - reading, she learned of a safe house in Marseille, France, that was established in World War II for painters, intellectuals and scientists, Jews and non-Jews alike. Marc Chagall and Hannah Arendt, for instance, passed through.

Vreeland plans to read Rosemary Sullivan's "Villa Air-Bel" and "A Quiet American: The Secret War of Varian Fry," by Andy Marino, nonfiction accounts of Fry, "the American Schindler," and his safe house.

"I'm also reading a hefty summary of Chagall and his life," Vreeland said, "though I'll be reading others as well. I'm just casting around for a story at this point."

She tries but invariably fails to separate her pleasure reading from her research.

"Most of the nonfiction [I read] is either preparation or seeing whether an idea works," she said, "but it's still pleasure ... For 'Luncheon of the Boating Party' I also read Zola and de Maupassant, so I read fiction for research, too. De Maupassant," she said, "was a frequent guest at the hotel where 'Boating Party' took place."

Maybe that was the English teacher coming out. Vreeland taught for 30 years in San Diego, where, she said, she'd give dramatic readings of "Beowulf" and "Hamlet" and the Wife of Bath's Prologue from "Canterbury Tales" to engage her students. Vreeland herself is engaged - and intense and literally wide-eyed - when discussing her reading. Like when she talks about a three-volume set of Van Gogh's letters, for which a special place has been reserved in her living room.

"I read for a while, then draw back from them," she said. "What he says about each work, his conceiving and creating, makes me love him all the more. How brave he was to continue in spite of disregard and his physical condition!"

Exclamation point mine. And I'll stand by it.

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