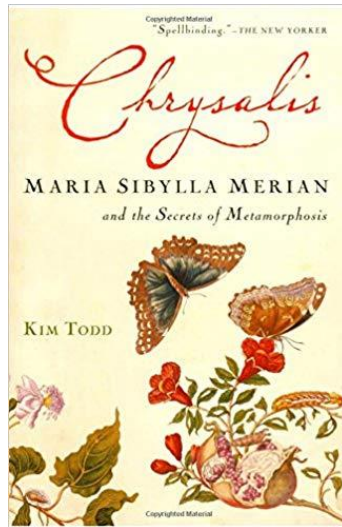


Book Discussion Guide

Diana Gallagher



Chrysalis: Maria Sibylla Merian and the Secrets of Metamorphosis by Kim Todd. This is a stand-alone book.

Kim Todd is a PEN/Jerard Fund Award and Sigurd F. Olson Nature Writing Award winning author with an MS in environmental studies as well as an MFA in creative writing. She lives in Montana and attended the University of Montana.

About the Book

This book opens in Surinam in the year 1700 as Maria Sibylla Merian works, despite the challenges posed by the heat and remote location, to research and draw insects and other creatures. The narrative quickly changes from novel-like to biography. Author Kim Todd looks closely at the life and work of Maria Merian and how her efforts to research and document metamorphosis contributed to science in general and entomology in particular. Maria Merian

lived an unusual life for a woman in the seventeenth-century and left us her books and paintings, long neglected, to show her results.

Despite marrying at 16 and giving birth to two daughters, Maria wrote books on caterpillars and painted the pictures that illustrated them. By 39, she had left her husband and, with her mother and daughters, joined the communal Labadist religious group in Holland. Her husband tried to convince her to return to him but she refused. During this time, the Labadists set up a colony in Surinam which would become important later in Maria's life. Once Maria's mother had died, she left the Labadists and took her daughters to Amsterdam.

Up until this point, she had continued her studies as much as possible but her duties to the religious community had made it difficult. Now, Maria Merian searched out insects and painted to earn money to live. She quickly found collectors, insect enthusiasts, and wealthy clients who had cabinets of curiosity and were looking for insects and paintings to add to them. New species of animals and insects were especially popular and many travelers brought them back to Amsterdam ports from all over the world. At the age of 52, Maria and her younger daughter left on a dangerous adventure to Surinam. She knew that many of the Labadists had died of disease and been killed in their settlement in Surinam but decided her work was worth the risk.

Maria Merian found huge numbers of insects in Surinam and most were species she had never seen before. She also recorded images of plants, reptiles, and spiders. Despite the richness of insect life, after two years Maria fell ill and decided to return to Europe. She produced her large and detailed book once back in Europe. There were many fascinating and important developments in natural science during these years and Maria Merian was as much a part of it as was possible for a woman. In 1715, Maria Merian had a stroke and by 1717, she was dead.

Kim Todd provides a comprehensive look at how Maria Merian's work was received after her death and over the next three centuries. She discusses how, over the years, translations, reprinting, and unauthorized changes created problems and lowered the quality and value of the books. Later scientists found what they thought were errors in her work and used them to discredit what she had done. Later in the nineteenth century, some of these observations were discovered by others working in Surinam to be correct but it wasn't until the 1970s and 80s when the original editions of her books were found again that her writings and paintings were given the respect they deserved.

Discussion Guide

1. How did Maria's upbringing contribute to her interest in butterflies and metamorphosis? What kind of advantages did she have, as the daughter of a man who owned a publishing house?
2. Kim Todd reminds the reader that Maria was at the limit of what was allowable for a woman who was married and was expected to have her husband's permission to pursue her work. She had two children in an age when women generally had many more. Would Maria have accomplished as much as she did if her marriage had not ultimately failed?
3. Did her time as a member of the Labadist religious group provide any benefits or only distractions from her work?
4. Do you feel that the book gives a good idea of the conditions faced by Europeans, particularly women, in areas such as Surinam? What do you imagine life would have been like for seventeenth-century Europeans in a tropical country?

5. Kim Todd goes into considerable detail about the developments in natural science and activities of scientists during the seventeenth century. How does Maria's work fit into the scientific researches of the period?
6. How do you feel about the criticisms of her work throughout the nineteenth century? Are some valid or was she targeted for being female? What information does the argument over the validity of her observation and drawing of a bird-eating spider in Surinam provide the reader about the way her work was viewed?
7. Todd provides a list of several things that Maria got wrong in her work and then provides a similar list for some famous male scientists: Audubon; Swammerdam; Leeuwenhoek. Do the lists of mistakes made by these men in their work change your view of her errors or not?