

BOOK CLUB KIT

Make your next book club event legendary.

When hosting a book club meeting about a daring art heist, a cat-and-mouse waiting game, and a small-town girl's mesmerizing transformation, equip yourself with an exclusive Q&A with the author, discussion questions, recipes, soundtrack, and advice from an antiques expert.

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www.rebeccascherm.com

PRAISE

"Scherm's debut has a plot that twists and turns, but it is the enigma of who Grace really is that will keep readers hooked until the very end. A bleak tone, deeply flawed protagonist, and dysfunctional relationships will draw well-deserved comparisons to Gillian Flynn." —**LIBRARY JOURNAL**

"From the first page, you know Rebecca Scherm is the real thing. *Unbecoming* is an assured exploration of the intricate, intense, risky processes that go into creating identity—and into dismantling it." —**TANA FRENCH**

"Rebecca Scherm's extraordinarily confident voice and style, this novel's depth of detail—great characters and a terrifically engaging plot—are a sheer delight to read. There is something very fresh and captivating about this book and best of all I had no idea what was going to happen from one page to the next." —**KATE ATKINSON**

"*Unbecoming* is the story of a heist, and especially what happens afterwards. No one thinks beyond the maps and the timetables and the moment of sale, its narrator tells us, but Rebecca Scherm has done just that, showing us the tense, suspenseful aftermath of an unraveled plan. *Unbecoming* is a novel of voice, invention, and momentum, as tautly plotted as any Hitchcock movie and focused on the central question any lover and any jewel thief must eventually ask: How do you tell what's fake from what's real?"

—**KAREN JOY FOWLER**

"'Self-assured' doesn't begin to describe the skill with which Rebecca Scherm develops her central character—Grace—and the tangled web she weaves, which is her life itself. It's a completely compelling read from start to finish, beautifully researched and brilliantly constructed. I loved it."

—**ELIZABETH GEORGE**

"Some characters who go bad find that it's against their nature, and some who go bad discover that dishonesty is the central truth about themselves. Rebecca Scherm's wonderful novel *Unbecoming* has a mesmerizing narrator, Grace, who discovers that her gift (and it is a real gift) is for deceit. A thriller, a psychological study, and a love story, this novel is an unusually intelligent and suspenseful book. The dark arts have rarely been so brightly lit."

—**CHARLES BAXTER**

"Artfully constructed and beautifully nuanced, *Unbecoming* is an elegant, page-turning mystery of theft, betrayal, and young love, which brilliantly reveals that the very worst lies are the ones we tell ourselves."

—**KIMBERLY MCCREIGHT**



A CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA SCHERM

Q. There's a lot of fascinating information in this book about the art and antique worlds. What kind of research did you do to make this setting feel so genuine?

A. When I used to visit my grandparents in the summer, my grandmother and I spent a lot of long, hot Florida afternoons watching *Antiques Roadshow*. I loved the small suspense of it: the tension between the objects, both the obviously beautiful and the homely, and their owners, and then the big reveal of “market value.” When I was a bit older, in New York, I was making my own art (unlike Riley, I was all ideas, lousy execution) and rebelling against the ideas about history and craftsmanship that I’d learned growing up, when my family never missed an opportunity to tour a historic home. But soon enough, I became more interested in ideas about art—“worth,” intention, influence, ownership, taste—than I was in making art myself.

I did all kinds of nutty research for this book. On one memorably embarrassing occasion, I went to a gem dealer in the Diamond District, trying to learn and sound knowledgeable at the same time. I bought a seven-dollar ametrine to thank him for his trouble, and then I had to pay the last two dollars in change. Not my smoothest game.

Every object in this book is something real that I found for sale somewhere. Some of them I visited in person, and they surprised me: the first time I saw James Mont pieces in real life, at Todd Merrill’s store in New York, the metallic finishes seemed cool, even icy to me, where I’d always imagined them to glow with a kind of heat. Always, I sought out objects that had some kind of contradiction, like the hideous pink diamond watch or the lumpy pottery. And I found that when Grace wasn’t moved by the object, she had no trouble stealing it.

Q. Forgery vs. authenticity is questioned in this novel, both in terms of artifacts and personalities. Why explore this dichotomy?

A. Several years ago, I read a biography of the art forger Elmyr de Hory, who argued that if his Picassos were as good as Picasso’s, what was the difference? That biography was written by Clifford Irving, who was himself a fraud. But the funny thing is that de Hory’s notoriety has given his forgeries value in their own right.

What interests me is the foggy sea between true and false. We're confronted all the time with half-truths, with moments of doubt where we make an unconscious choice to see or not see the truth, with performances that have subsumed the actor. If you've ever talked yourself into or out of something too effectively, you've performed your way to a new truth. Grace's life is made of these performances, and her work restoring decorative arts seems to her like a real penance, even if it seems to others—Hanna, for example—like a kind of approved fakery, a tacit agreement to pretend that mistakes can be truly erased, buffed out and shined over.

As I wrote, these roads—truths and lies, originals and frauds and restorations, inner and outer selves—kept intersecting unexpectedly. I'd be writing about James Mont and find myself writing about Grace's Id, or Grace would fantasize about art theft while refusing to confront her jealousy of Riley's position in his family. The Heather Tallchief story is a perfect example, because the way Grace aligns herself with the story is not how the reader aligns her. So it seems less a dichotomy to me than, say, a Möbius strip.

Q. Grace seems to get a high from forgery and theft. Have you had any experience similar to this?

A. I'd only ever stolen a single cookie from a grocery store, but as I tried to get into Grace's mind, it became clear that I was locked out of her daredevil psychology. Once she was stealing and forging jewelry—methodical, premeditated theft—I tried to find a way to get that feeling myself, without actually stealing anything.

Then my pet rabbit chewed up the spine of a library book. The fine to replace it was the cost of the book plus \$50, and I was close to broke. So I decided that I would forge a library book. Just like Grace, I would make something equal to the stolen original using parts of the original. I found a used copy of the book, same edition, for six dollars. I cut out the original's endpapers, which had the library's stamps, with a tiny knife and glued them into the replacement book. I carefully removed the ancient sticker from the spine and glued that to the new one. And then I had to find the metal strip lodged in the spine—the security strip that beeps when you walk through the gates. I tweezed it out and slipped it in the new book. I spent hours on the project and renewed the book until it was perfect. I returned it at the end of a day, when there was a big pile of returns to process, and pedaled away madly. I kept expecting to get a call, but I didn't—though now I probably will.

Q. We find ourselves rooting for Grace, despite her many misdeeds. Why do you think that is?

A. When we watch heist movies, it's so easy to root for the criminals. I think looking at them on screen makes it easier—we can root for them, even identify with them, without ever forgetting that we, the audience, are not guilty. But *Unbecoming* looks through Grace's eyes, and so we can't help but align ourselves with her, even when we feel unsettled by what we're rooting for. That's the question that compels me as a reader and as a writer: the desire to understand minds that are very different from my own, to untangle a psychological knot.

Q. *Unbecoming* takes readers across the globe from small town Tennessee to New York City to Prague and Paris. Can you discuss why you chose these particular settings? Did you have to travel for your research?

A. Grace grew up in a tiny pond where the few people with influence have all the influence, there's very little diversity of any kind, and girls are taught to be lovable above all other qualities. From there, I wanted to send her somewhere where that cultivated lovability wouldn't get her very far. And I knew Paris was the right choice as soon as I thought of it. Because it's thought of as this great romantic city, it can feel especially lonely if you're on your own. I went for several days to do research, to map out her life and soak in that loneliness, and it was easy to imagine Grace in her first days there, stretching out her school French, trying to look as if she belonged.

Q. Do you have a favorite real-life heist story?

A. Several of my favorite real heists made it into the book: I can't imagine planning a heist without reading up on the successes and failures of those who'd gone before, and so Grace and Riley had to do that research, too, which gave the crime they were planning the shimmering veil of "story," until they actually did it. My favorite of those thieves is Blane Nordahl. When he was caught again last year, the *New York Times* reporter on the story sounded awfully admiring, and I can't help but feel the same way.

One of the inspirations for Grace isn't in the novel, because Grace wouldn't be willing to see the similarities. Her name was Sofia Blyumshtein, and they called her Sonya the Golden Hand. She grew her fingernails very long and tucked stolen jewels under them, or she had her pet spider monkey swallow them while she distracted the jeweler.

My favorite heist that had no place in *Unbecoming* was the theft of a hundred thousand dollars' worth of frozen bull semen, stolen from an artificial insemination business. Just one tank, only the fanciest. I prefer discriminating thieves.

Q. What made you decide to have Grace tell her story?

A. I grew up steeped in Hitchcock films, where we often look through the hero's eyes at the blond woman who needs to be saved, and who will then, in turn, save him. And as I got a little older, I began to recognize other reductive types, especially the "femme fatale," in movies and in the old noir fiction I loved, and I wanted to find out who this woman might really be, how she became. The femme fatale, the gangster moll, the damsel: what if she were one very real, very complicated person?

I had other pressing concerns—among them, the idea that the quality young girls should work hardest to cultivate is lovability. No one says it outright, but I see that message coded everywhere. Well, how far will this girl go to be loved? What happens when the love she thought she had earned is threatened? For someone who grew up without enough love, how much will ever be enough? The love Grace craves is primal, irreplaceable, and it often motivates her in ways that she doesn't want to understand. But I wanted to push her to realization. I wanted her to "get caught," but by herself.

SERVE

THE FRENCH BLONDE

Ingredients

½ oz. elderflower liqueur, like St. Germain
1 oz. dry gin
2 oz. Lillet Blanc
2 oz. fresh grapefruit juice
A few dashes lemon bitters

Instructions

Vigorously shake together all ingredients in an ice-filled cocktail shaker for at least 30 seconds. Strain into a martini glass.

HOT TENNESSEE TODDY

Ingredients

1 part whiskey
Spoonful of honey
Cinnamon stick
Squeeze of fresh lemon juice
Boiling water

Instructions

Pour whiskey into a heavy mug. Add a spoonful of honey, cinnamon stick and lemon juice. Top with boiling water and stir.

Please Drink Responsibly.

LISTEN

[Click here for Spotify playlist](#)

You Know I'm No Good

AMY WINEHOUSE

Wildest Moments

JESSIE WARE

I Spy You

TAPE FIVE

Bang Bang My Baby Shot Me Down

NANCY SINATRA

Charade

BOBBI DARIN

The Lady Is a Tramp

TONY BENNETT & LADY GAGA

L'envol

CARAVAN PALACE

Tiger Rag

DJANGO REINHARDT

The Certain Female

CHARLIE FEATHERS

Feeling Good

NINA SIMONE

TIPS FROM AN EXPERT

Clinton Howell and Emily Collins from **Clinton Howell Antiques** offer advice on antiques and their favorite art world discoveries and scandals.



(Clinton Howell)

How can you spot a forgery?

Consider the materials. When it comes to paintings or furniture, the material needs to match the time period in which the object was made—although that can be faked as well. Experience is the best way to be able to spot a fake. Unfortunately, there's no shortcut there!

How do you take care of your antiques? What should you not do when it comes to DIY maintenance?

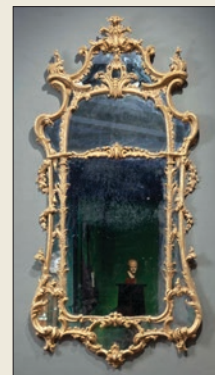
Try to make sure things are not stored in a very dry environment. Humidifiers or even just containers of water can help. Much like doctors, the best antiques dealers vow to do no harm. In other words, no restoration is often better than misguided or inexperienced restoration. Generally, people should polish their own wood furniture using wax, maybe every six months. Dining tables can be washed with soap and water, since food can leave grease behind, but never leave water on them—you need to dry them with a towel. You can follow this with wax. Pledge should be avoided because of the long-lasting chemicals that are hard to remove if the table's finish needs repair. Butcher's wax is the best. A half teaspoon will wax a finished dining table.

Where and how should you buy antiques?

Buying from a dealer has many benefits, especially if you are making a significant investment. Dealers can offer valuable guidance, conduct business on your behalf (privately), and investigate and research pieces for you.

There are the traditional major auction houses such as Christie's, Sotheby's, and Bonhams. Other New York City houses where good buys can be found are Doyle's and Roland. There are good deals available at Christie's Interiors sales and Doyle @ Home.

You don't need to be in New York or London to attend an auction. There are many auction houses all over the country. Here are a few: Rago (NJ), Stair (Hudson, NY), Milea Brothers (NJ), Freeman's (Philadelphia, PA), Skinner (Boston) (Skinner has online only sales where bargains can be found), and Pook & Pook (PA). A great auction house in the midwest is Leslie Hindman. Brimfield Market (MA) holds a huge sale a couple of times a year. There are also great treasures to be found at antique malls—don't be scared to ask for a "best price"!



(Tall, Lily of the Valley, Chippendale)

Some may believe art world scandals and discoveries are saved for Hollywood make-believe. Have there been any exciting recent stories to shake the art world?

Not all falsifiers are created equal. In 2013 Springfield Museums in Massachusetts exhibited an imitation Vermeer “The Head of Christ” by the most notorious forger of all: Han van Meegeren, the World War II-era painter whose counterfeits were so convincing that, after the war, he had to create one for witnesses to avoid harsh punishment for selling a national treasure to the Nazi leader Hermann Göring. The painting, along with two other van Meergerens, was a part of the museum’s exhibit “Intent to Deceive: Fakes and Forgeries in the Art World.”

A Leonardo da Vinci painting, “Salvator Mundi,” was discovered only a few years ago by fellow Art and Antique Dealer’s League of America Board member Robert Simon. What makes this so impressive is that there are only around fifteen surviving Leonardo paintings in the world. The last one to be discovered was the “Benois Madonna” over one hundred years ago.

May 2014 marked the first confirmed sightings of the missing artwork from the 1990 theft at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. The masterpieces, including works by Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Manet, were taken by two men disguised as city police officers and are estimated to be worth a total of \$500 million.

CLINTON HOWELL ANTIQUES

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the meaning of the novel's title. Who is unbecoming, how, why, in what ways?
2. Compare Grace's relationship with Riley to that with Alls. Does she behave differently with them? What are the power dynamics?
3. Grace is a challenging narrator—unreliable and at times unlikeable. How did this affect the way you read the book?
4. Were you surprised by the book's ending? What were your feelings about the way it ended?
5. Mystery and charisma are a crucial a part of Grace's personality. Have you ever met someone like Grace?
6. What is the effect of the story being told from Grace's point of view? How is that significant?
7. What did you take away from theme of the exploring authenticity vs. forgery?

AUTHOR TOUR

January 27	Ann Arbor, MI	Literati Bookstore, 7pm
January 28	St. Paul, MN	Common Good Books, 7pm
January 29	Scottsdale, AZ	Poisoned Pen, 7pm
January 30	Albuquerque, NM	Bookworks, 7pm
February 1	Pasadena, CA	Vroman's Bookstore, 4pm
February 2	Houston, TX	Murder by the Book, 6:30pm
February 3	Brooklyn, NY	powerHouse Arena, 7pm
April 17	Dallas, TX	Dallas Museum of Art, 7pm