



The Center of the World

Thomas Van Essen

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Alternating between nineteenth-century England and present-day New York, this is the story of renowned British painter J. M. W. Turner and his circle of patrons and lovers. It is also the story of Henry Leiden, a middle-aged family man with a troubled marriage and a dead-end job, who finds his life transformed by his discovery of Turner's *The Center of the World*, a mesmerizing and unsettling painting of Helen of Troy that was thought to have been lost forever.

This painting has such devastating erotic power that it was kept hidden for almost two centuries, and was even said to have been destroyed...until Henry stumbles upon it in a secret compartment at his summer home in the Adirondacks. Though he knows it is an object of immense value, the thought of parting with it is unbearable: Henry is transfixed by its revelation of a whole other world, one of transcendent light, joy, and possibility.

Back in the nineteenth century, Turner struggles to create *The Center of the World*, his greatest painting, but a painting unlike anything he (or anyone else) has ever attempted. We meet his patron, Lord Egremont, an aristocrat in whose palatial home Turner talks freely about his art and his beliefs. We also meet Elizabeth Spencer, Egremont's mistress and Turner's muse, the model for his Helen. Meanwhile, in the present, Henry is relentlessly trailed by an unscrupulous art dealer determined to get his hands on the painting at any cost. Filled with sex, beauty, and love (of all kinds), this richly textured novel explores the intersection between art and eroticism.



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