



The Tattoo Artist

Jill Ciment

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In 1970, Sara Ehrenreich boards a small plane and returns to New York City with much fanfare; she will be featured in *Life* magazine. She has not left Ta'un'uu—the South Seas island upon which she and her husband, Philip, were marooned during a storm—in more than thirty years. Sara doesn't know that man has landed on the moon. She has never seen a ballpoint pen. Her body is covered, head to toe, in tattoos.

Flashback: it's 1918 and Sara, a shop girl and aspiring artist, meets Philip, a wealthy member of the avant-garde elite. The two fall in love, marry, and collaborate to make art, surrounded by socialites and revolutionaries—until the Depression cripples not just Sara and Philip, but most of their patrons. When Philip is offered a job gathering masks from the South Seas, they jump at a chance to escape America's sorrows, traveling to Ta'un'uu for what they think will be a week's stay.

The rest is history—a history Sara records on her skin through the traditional tattoos that become her masterpiece and provide an accounting of her days. Narrated in vivid and starkly moving prose, *The Tattoo Artist* reminds us of the unforeseeable forces that shape each human life.

The Tattoo Artist Details

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From Reader Review *The Tattoo Artist* for online ebook

Jessica says

Dude, if I were some big-shot Hollywood-type chick, my people's ass would be on the phone this instant with Jill Ciment's people's ass securing the movie rights to this book. *The Tattoo Artist* would make such an awesome film! It's so intensely visual in this way that would be great to see shot with a huge budget and put on a big screen. Awesome face tattoos! Period settings! Jungle and beaches! Sex! Violence! Extreme weather! Arty stuff! And because it was short and did have very tight structure and good pacing, adaptation to screenplay would likely be cake.

The Tattoo Artist is one of those too rare high concepts that's followed through responsibly and executed with confidence. The premise is a sort of post-colonial Robinson Crusoe story, in which a Lower East Side Jewish garment-worker-cum-bohemian-artist is stranded on a tattooed tribe's Pacific island for thirty years, going native, only maybe not quite. It reminded me of Pippi in the South Seas in the best way; that was always my favorite of the Pippi books, because even though I knew as a kid that the other ones were funnier and more quintessentially Pippi-ish, I was just crazy for the descriptions of that island and the islanders (though when I became an older girl, the latter made me cringe). I really appreciate literature for grownups that isn't scared to be as imaginative as the best kids' books are. *The Tattoo Artist* has the originality and fearlessness of a children's book, but it's about grownup stuff.

I know you're not allowed to hold something like this against a book, but one thing I kept thinking while reading this is that it's too bad it wasn't written at least ten or fifteen years earlier. Tattooing has lost its tabooed shock status in our culture, and while the concept still worked, I couldn't help feeling that the fundamentally shocking image of an American woman with an entirely tattooed face and body has been diluted somewhat by the ubiquity of the things. Obviously I could still appreciate what this would mean to the characters when the book took place, but my own reaction to the idea didn't feel as extreme as I wanted it to, if that makes any sense.

The reason why this finally was a three-starrer instead of a four is due to my personal preference for the overly-long, sprawling novel, and the fact that when I finished this, I wished it had been one. This is the opposite of the backhanded compliment, a such-good-food-such-small-portions kind of complaint. The worlds described -- early twentieth-century Manhattan and the island -- and the ideas in the novel were so good that I wished there had been more time spent on them. The main character Sara is a working-class child of immigrants, and her partner Philip is a wealthy bohemian rabble-rouser whose lofty leftist ideals are called into question when the Depression decimates his fortune. Sara's politics are presented within the context of her time, and when she returns to New York at the end, there's some quick commentary on them. But I wanted more on the contrast between the economic systems and values of America and the island, and what it all meant in the world of the book.

I also wanted more of Sara and what was going on with her -- I could always guess why she made the decisions she did, so I could see why the author didn't feel the need to beat me over the head with too much explanation, but personally I would've liked more of that anyway. Like early on when Sara first says she's in no rush to leave the island, I could fill in the blanks on why, but it did feel a little rushed. Not rushed in the sense that I felt lost at sea, but more just that it seemed like an opportunity for more cool interesting stuff to get into, that wasn't fully exploited. This was obviously a conscious decision made by the author, and I hope some of you read this because I want to hear what you think. I feel like sometimes I have the opposite complaint -- that just bringing something up is enough, and that as a reader I can do the work myself -- but

here I wanted more than I got. Like, when Sara's looking through old Life magazines and catching up on all she's missed since the thirties, and she's seeing the pictures of concentration camps for the first time. Now, I never thought I'd say this, since I've got this whole contrary rant about the Holocaust in fiction, but like, that's a pretty intense thing for a Jew who's been out of touch with western civilization to find out about later, and I wanted more here than just that thought, even though in theory I'd guess I'd prefer just the allusion.

The book did hold up on its own as a complete work, and probably many other readers would be satisfied to ponder on their own -- as I did -- questions about politics, art, and culture that the story raised. I was a little frustrated though, because I wanted them explored further, and I wanted a clearer idea of what the book's position was regarding these matters. Sara's on the island for thirty years, but the time felt too short. I would've been happier to stay stranded with her for much longer, which when I think about it, was maybe the point.

Anyway, whatever, blah blah blah blah. The book was good and I'd definitely read more by this author.

Susan says

Excellent. I loved this. The story of an artist and her husband who, after gaining some success with her art, is stranded on an island in the south Pacific for 30 years. There the natives' tradition of tattooing becomes her only source of artistic expression. Very much to think about, and will make for a good discussion in our art group.

Birgit says

Brilliantly told. The premise - the avant-garde descending on the "savages" for no other reason than their misguided, self-enamored quest for true ethnic art, only to be up for a momentous wake-up call - may seem a tad self-evident and tired, but what Jill Cement accomplishes here is beautiful. For me, who's never cared much for tattoos, it was a fabulous journey into the world of (self)expression, physical beauty, and skin-deep judgement. I look at heavily tattooed bodies somewhat differently now (maybe I've always looked at them).. isn't that what you're supposed to do?

Kasa Cotugno says

This is only the second book of Jill Cement's I've read. Whereas on the surface it shares little with *Heroic Measures*, there are undercurrents that give a picture of an author with a specific point of view regarding displacement. *Tattoo Artist* is more of a self examination Sara and Philip, members of avant guard artist groups following WWI, struggle through the Depression, and find themselves stranded on an island paradise in 1938 in an attempt to collect the unique death masks carved by Ta'au'aans, the "Michelangelos of South Seas tattooing." Sara is telling her story from the vantage of 1970, after thirty years spent with "her" tribe, finding a city in which television, walks on the moon, skyscrapers and all the "advancements" of the intervening 30 years has transformed the world as she knew it. She observes like Rip Van Winkle, questioning her place in either of the two worlds she's known. On the basis of these two books, I look forward to reading just about anything that Ms. Cement writes.

Janet Elsbach says

Lovely and intense and imaginative and rich.

Sandra Evans says

Sara's story has left me wanting to run away to New York, get a new tattoo and then travel to the South Seas. The imagery of this book was so beautiful, Ciment really transported me to another world and I was heartbroken to leave it when I finished the book. I really hope this is made into a movie soon!

Diana says

My fingers are a bit sensitive today hitting keys trying to find the right words for this unique story. I will be cautious, about my love for this book, I will recommend it, but I don't want to go over the top confessing my thoughts, I don't want it to be a let down for anyone else by "talking it up".

With that said, I would like to get my own copy of this book, so it can be buried with me. I want to lie under a beautiful tree on a beach or a mountain top and read it in the afterlife. Oh, I have to chuckle, but that sums it up . . . I think that will be a new shelf of mine on goodreads, books I want to be buried with, burned with, pushed overboard with, what have you.

Some readers will not like it, it begins with the not to be understood, arrogant, passionate, world of two avante-garde artistic personalities, Phillip and Sara. Clumsily they climb over one another, trampling their love for one another with the search for exploration, creation and self expression. Which is why, their experiences on the island of Ta'un'uu, are so transformative. They travel to the island to find unique tribal masks for a collector. Once they set foot on the sandy beach, everything they know, feel, love is tested. They were scheduled to stay a week, but it will be over 30 years before Sara will return to NYC and a life that no longer exists.

After only a couple of days, their lack of knowledge about the island culture and an unfortunate event finds them drugged and forcibly marked with facial tattoos. Their identity and knowledge of the world is irrevocably changed. The journey of their life and love has a new definition, yet, slowly, sara picks up the bone needles and ink, putting tattoos on Phillip. Her art reaches a new level and her place in the island community changes. Eventually her own body becomes her surface for expression, and the brands she creates outline her life.

I wonder if we ALL walked the earth with our triumphs, tragedies, our love and our shame worn like an armor on the skin; if it would change our behavior. Would we be kinder, quieter, less restless, more thoughtful, more attentive to the every moment of living? There would be nothing to hide in the story of a life written on the flesh, an outward resume of meaning. In every detail there would be pain, touched with another human hand and given elegance with shape, color and exquisite skill.

I would have liked a little more from the author, and then I think, what more needed to be said? I was

intrigued by the first pages, and hooked, shortly after until the last. Perhaps I will find that again in another book by Jill Ciment.

Susan Emmet says

This novella really reined me in. Taut, tight, intriguing, provocative.

Made me think a lot about colonial white guys stealing "primitive" art for their salons. And desperate people seeking refuge or meaning or connection to something larger than they are. And making your body a canvas for your life without being able to see much of what you've wrought until you find a mirror. Or learning to listen to the "Other" without judgment, with silence, with care.

Sara and Philip's tempestuous journey through their life together is arresting. Depression-era New York, political and artistic movements, competition between partners, desperately seeking patrons - this portion of the narrative is strong.

But I was most taken by Sara's "rescue" by Life magazine in 1970 or so, after 30 years of life on the tiny island of Ta'un'uu. The notion of rescue is most interesting. From where and what? To where and what? At what price? For what reason?

And in our time of so much radical experimentation in art (maybe most on the Deep Web?), does the tale of a woman who truly becomes her art exist in so-called "civilized" society? Or will her tattoos be relegated to only her personal story of life?

Anna says

It's kind of odd that I, a tattoo disliker from way back, would chose a book titled "The Tattoo Artist" from the library. I've always been a bit curious about why people chose to change the appearance of their their skin permanently. As a former ER nurse, the presence of multiple tattoos on a person's body wasn't always the best indicator of compliant behavior. I thought it would be interesting to read about the role of tattoos in a different culture, and I was right, it WAS interesting. The whole book was very readable, and although I didn't always like the drift of the narrative, I found I had to keep reading. It was superb storytelling, and even a believable tale. I just didn't "get it" I guess. What the author was trying to say, is still beyond me. I still don't understand the relevance of self inflicting all that artwork on one's skin. Her homecoming was interesting as well, and well written, but, did she go back? Or stay in the comforts of the modern world? I felt like I was left dangling a bit at the end, and again, failed to understand the relevance of that final tattoo. All in all, kind of a weird book, but likely not one I'll forget.

Laila says

I have never read anything like this, the story was wholly unique. It had a sort of haunting, macabre feel to it.

Kerfe says

The story is simple: rich young idealistic Jewish Marxist artists lose money in Great Depression; try to regain

status by cashing in on "primitives"; become stranded in the wilderness; lose hope, comfort, life; find something that has no name. Try to go back. Can't.

In only 200 pages, Ciment manages to reveal a world and mind as vast as human nature. Art. Culture. Masks. Adornment. Civilization. Home. Creation and destruction. Leaving and returning. Vanity and assimilation. And of course the big ones: life and death. Belonging, meaning, becoming. It's all here.

Like the ever-changing tattoos that vibrate and continuously transform when the eyes try to focus and pin them down, these words will resonate in their own new context each time they are read.

Bonnie Brody says

The Tattoo Artist is as unique a book as I've ever read. It is brilliant in its conception and completion. I loved both the story and the metaphors. It is a book that will have you in its grip for a long time.

Sara and Philip Ehrenreich meet in New York in the early 20th century. Both are Jewish activists. However, Sara comes from poverty and Philip from money. They are both avant-garde in their beliefs and love the world of art, culture, and revolution. Philip wishes more than anything that he could create art but he lacks that real gift. Sara, however, has it, and she becomes a celebrity in her own right. They end up partnering but their relationship is very open and experimental from the beginning. All is well until the depression hits and Philip loses everything. They are backed by a wealthy patron who has been impressed by Philip's mask collection and they head to the South Seas to collect masks from the Ta'unuans.

Once they reach their destination, unbeknownst to them, they will remain on this island for thirty years. Their first impression of the island and its inhabitants is mind-blowing. All the islanders are tattooed and their first view of them is like watching a moving tapestry. At first, Sara assumes that the beauty of the island is the inspiration for all their tattoos. Gradually she realizes how wrong she is. Their tattoos, which cover their whole bodies, including their tongues and the soles of their feet, tell stories, narratives of lives lived and lives lost. Through a series of unexpected events, Sara finds herself tattooed all over as well.

The prologue to the book introduces us to Sara and her tattoos. She is responsible for all of their design except for the tattoos on her face. "My tattoos, like all the tattoos of my island, are a pictorial narrative, an illustrated personal history, though not necessarily a chronological one." Every inch of her body is covered with her story, illustrated by the tattoos she carries with her always.

This is a book to savor, to question, to appreciate in all its beauty. It is one of a kind and Ms. Ciment has created a masterpiece.

Jenni says

The only reason I rated this four stars instead of five is that I wished there were more of it.

Meet Sara, a Lower East Side shopgirl who falls in love with a wealthy, bohemian artist. The book

chronicles their journey of being stranded on a remote South Pacific Island during the Great Depression and, after 30 years, being rescued. In Ta'un'uu, where they are stranded, the villagers use their entire bodies as canvases, with tattoos as their medium for telling life stories and expressing spirituality. It's a fascinating look at what inspires people to mark their bodies, as well as an exposé of the preconceived notions modern day society has about things like face tattoos.

The first third of the book is all about Sara and Philip's courtship and passion for art. It's very detailed and really gives you a sense of who they are and where they came from. But compared to this, their time on the island and return home seem short-changed. I would've loved to know more about those three "lost" decades. During that time, monumental events like the Holocaust and the first man on the moon happened; it would've been really interesting to learn more about the contrast of life before and after the island.

Overall, a fabulous book that I couldn't put down. Would also make a great movie. Pretty please cast Jennifer Lawrence as Sara. The end.

Chris says

Walking through the library recently, I saw this book, totally judged it by it's cover and checked it out. I couldn't stop reading it until it was done, yet it didn't leave me emotionally attached to it either. I loved the story, it was unique and beautiful, and I swear there were times I could feel the pain of the tattoo needles. There were times I wanted to choke Phillip and moments I wanted to cry for Sara. It weaves beautiful artistic images in your mind as you read, and the only way I can describe this is... you don't just read this book, you experience it.

Lauren Tamraz says

Excellent story about a shipwrecked artist who falls in with indigenous tattoo-ing tribe in the South Pacific during the 1930's (?) Seriously good read.
