
IMPRESSIONIST QUARTET:
*The Intimate Genius of Manet and
Morisot, Degas and Cassatt.*

By Jeffrey Meyers. Harcourt.
368 pp. \$26

These days we think of Impressionism as pretty, crowd-pleasing art, the stuff of blockbuster museum exhibits. But as Jeffrey Meyers reminds us in *Impressionist Quartet*, his tale of Impressionism as seen through four interconnected lives, audiences weren't always so receptive. At first, the brilliantly colored canvases and their subjects—from absinthe drinkers to washer women—seemed shocking.

The four painters chronicled here, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot, and Mary Cassatt, fought to break new ground in their personal lives as well. For example, Manet embarked on a secret affair with the piano teacher who lived with his bourgeois family, during which she gave birth to a child. The painter moved into an apartment with her and the baby boy, who was passed off as her brother. In all likelihood, the boy's father wasn't Manet, as was long assumed, but Manet's father.

Meyers provides wistful portraits of his two female painters, Morisot and Cassatt, who received from the two men a mix of artistic validation and personal frustration. The elegant and attractive Morisot was probably in love with Manet, but she married his brother and bore a child. Degas and Cassatt, who was born in Pennsylvania and moved to Paris at 29, both craved intimacy yet pushed others away, choosing to put their work first. The precise nature of

their relationship with each other—in some sense devoted but apparently never quite romantic—remains a mystery, as Meyers admits. And though Cassatt never married, mothers and children became the great subject of her work.

A prolific literary biographer, Meyers doesn't advance any sweeping argument rooted in art history, and his recitation of the facts sometimes takes on a dry, book-report quality. He does, however, describe his subjects' difficult personalities well, and he unearths the occasional arresting detail—such as the fact that Degas, who couldn't otherwise speak the language, found two English words fascinating and repeated them endlessly: “turkey buzzard.”

Both Manet and Degas courted controversy by depicting female nudes as dancers and prostitutes rather than as classical idols. One critic accused Manet of an “infatuation with the bizarre,” and a fellow artist said that Degas's nudes inspired “at once continence and horror.” In the end, though, the Impressionists achieved canonical acceptance, wielding enormous influence over the painters who followed them. One of Meyers's foursome eventually became reactionary: Taken to Gertrude Stein's Paris apartment to see her collection of modern art, Cassatt said, “I have never in my life seen so many dreadful paintings in one place; I have never seen so many dreadful people gathered together and I want to be taken home at once.” The woman who had worked so hard to gain the acceptance of the establishment thus dismissed the artists of the next generation who wanted the same thing.

—ALIX OHLIN

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

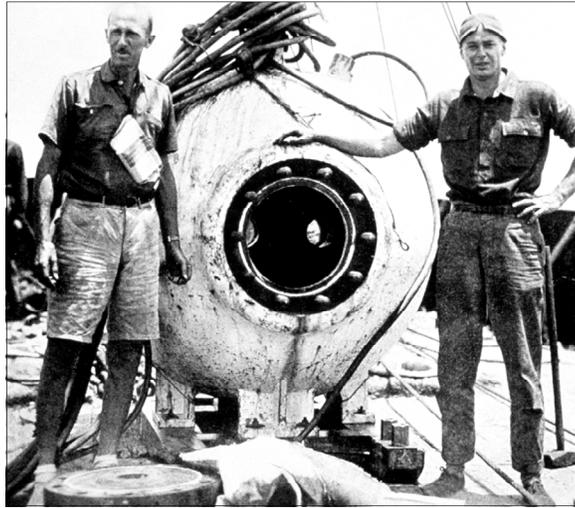
DESCENT:
The Heroic Discovery of the Abyss.

By Brad Matsen. Pantheon.
304 pp. \$25

Ernest Shackleton, Edmund Hillary—these were glorious explorers, men who performed unimaginable physical and mental feats to plant the flag for God and country. By contrast, there's something unsatisfying about the accomplishments of William Beebe and Otis Barton, who in 1934 conquered the ocean

depths by allowing themselves to be lowered a half-mile in a small steel ball. No less brave than Shackleton and Hillary, perhaps, but ingloriously helpless and totally at the mercy of their equipment.

Barton, a New York City trust-fund kid with a bad attitude toward the family plan (he dropped out of engineering school at Columbia University), saw deep-sea exploration as his route to fame and glory. Beebe, explorer, naturalist, and director of the Department of



William Beebe (left) and Otis Barton show off their bathysphere in Bermuda after their record dive in 1934.

Tropical Research at the New York Zoological Society, had collected and identified creatures of the jungle; now he wanted to do the same with those of the ocean. Beebe had the cred, but Barton—who, after getting no response to his letters to Beebe, insinuated himself into the zoologist's presence one late December day in 1928—had the blueprint.

Daydreaming through engineering classes, Barton had come up with a design for a steel sphere thick enough to resist water pressure at great depths. Of course, it would need windows of some kind, an oxygen system, telephone contact, a spotlight, and a cable and winch to lower and raise it. To sweat the details, Barton hired the eminent shipbuilding firm of Cox and Stevens, which, after much trial, error, and subcontracting, turned over a finished product. In 1930, Barton carried it by tugboat to Nonsuch Island, Bermuda, where the Zoological Society staffed a research station. There Beebe waited on the *Ready*, a tug refitted with two winches to handle the three-ton cable.

Beebe christened the four-and-a-half-foot globe the "Bathysphere," using the Greek prefix for *deep*, and without further ceremony the *Ready*, towed by a barge, headed for deep water. Beebe and Barton squeezed inside the sphere and waited for the hatch cover to be tightened. Hampered by the forced intimacy, they watched through a tiny porthole as the Bathysphere lurched downward and the multicolored world darkened to a purplish blue. At

800 feet, Beebe began seeing what he'd been hoping for: weird, fierce, luminescent sea creatures no one had seen before. But a small leak and other glitches dictated a speedy end to the Bathysphere's maiden voyage.

Barton and Beebe continued to dive together intermittently for the next four years, with Beebe cataloging marine life in the deep and Barton attempting to film it. Yet never did collaboration evoke so little gratitude on either side. Beebe came to view Barton as a whiny dilettante; Barton saw Beebe as a publicity-hogging egotist. Shortly after a historic half-mile dive in 1934, the two men parted company and never spoke again. Barton made a movie

from his amateur underwater footage, *Titans of the Deep*, which flopped. He roamed the globe for another 60 years, backed by his trusty trust fund. Beebe left the ocean, frustrated by accusations that he hadn't really discovered any new deep-sea creatures, and went back to his beloved jungle.

Brad Matsen, an expert on marine and environmental topics who produced the National Geographic ocean series *The Shape of Life*, writes engagingly about the technical and scientific contributions of Barton and Beebe, as well as their personalities—and egos. The courage of these two explorers revealed the ocean floor, yet the terror of descent taught a larger truth as well: No man can conquer the sea.

—A. J. LOFTIN

WHY WE LIE:

The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind.

By David Livingstone Smith.

St. Martin's Press. 238 pp. \$24.95

DECEPTION AT WORK:

Investigating and Countering Lies and Fraud Strategies.

By Michael J. Comer and

Timothy E. Stephens.

Gower Publishing. 459 pp. \$185

Whatever is alive is at peril. Whatever is alive must compete for food and a mate while protecting itself against predators.