

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Jude Berman, author of the new novel, *The Vow*, a fictionalized version of the life of 18th century painter, Angelica Kauffman. So first, can you give us an introduction to her life story?

JB: She was born in a very, little obscure place in Switzerland, in the mountains there in a town with a family, with a father who was an artist and they had no money. Hers is a definite rags to riches story. And she came out of nowhere and out of nothing. But her father recognized really early on when she was 10 or under that she had talent and enough talent that he really picked up on it because you wouldn't normally train a little girl in those days to become an artist. So he was stepping outside the bounds right there by helping her and pushing her along. And the more she did, the more he saw that she was an actual prodigy. And so he pulled her forth and as they would travel on the continent a lot of the time in Italy and they stop in major cities and he would find opportunities for her to learn her skills and find opportunities for her to paint such as painting portraits of the nobility and so on. And so she became a little sensation. It was a small world compared to today and people found out about her. I guess you could say her first big break was a patron who invited her to go to England. And then going to London opened all these doors beyond even what had happened as a younger woman. She was only 23 at that point when she met this patron. And then in London she became a major figure in the art world but in society as well. Painting the queen and painting, you name it, she knew them or she painted them or both. That time period of her life in London is probably the best known and that's sort of the peak of her success was in London. And then she went and returned to Italy for the last part of her life. And my book actually follows in three sections. The first is in Italy and then in London and then back in Italy, in Rome. Well Venice at the beginning and Rome at the end. So that's the main trajectory of her life.

AT: And one of the things that you do focus on is her relationship with her father because in addition to teaching her he was also essentially her business manager. And I have to say I did get a bit of stage parent vibes. (laughter) A little bit. He's not like *Dance Moms*.

JB: Everything that she did was something that she really wasn't supposedly allowed to do in that culture. And so in order to do that, she had to have people who were supporting her to do the extraordinary. And so her father is definitely the first of those. The patron, who is a woman actually, who brought her to London is another. And there are a series of those people in the book who helped her by believing in her really and giving her opportunities because it isn't as if it would have been easy for her to do that without them. And so I think the fact that her father was the first and the fact that he was her father, in my view gave them a closeness of parent-daughter relationship that stood out to me. I mean that's also my interpretation. We don't have actual facts on this and I've come across some other interpretations of him and their relationship. But you have to get under the skin, I feel, in writing about somebody who you can't actually meet and there are no videos and audio tapes of these people. And the fun of writing about them is you have to get really as deeply into their skin as you can and think, well what would they be doing in this moment? Or how do they feel about this person? And so with her father there's points in the book where they kind of come up against each other because she does have a bit of a point of rebellion. I don't want to spoil the story but there's points where she does some things and it's like, "well I've never lied to him before." But the circumstances are causing her to do that. And just other ways that it's not just a simple relationship either.

AT: It is really interesting because she was quite independent for a woman of that time and arguably even today. But you still have these scenes where for example she's gone to meet with her patron and she comes back and the two men, so she's living with her father and then another artist is living with them and she comes back and it just clearly hasn't even occurred to either of these men to clean their dirty dishes. So she comes in from meeting with this really important patron and immediately she's having to clean up after the men.

JB: Yeah and I found as I was writing, this is the challenge of historical fiction because you can't be anachronistic. If you are, it'll stand out. And I did do it occasionally and then "oh no, that's anachronistic" and maybe somebody's going to read in there and find some places that I have failed and it's still hidden in there. But it's a constant battle to do that. And so trying to stick to the truth of what it was really like to be a woman in that time and have her be independent and at the same time the extent to which she would have followed the norms of her time. It's a bit of a struggle as a writer to do that because I found that my tendency was to want to make her more independent than she probably could have been just even in simple little ways. I found though that, maybe this is giving away writer secrets, but I found that I could kind of do anything if I stayed in her mind and I think even in a scene, I haven't read that one a little bit, but if I'm recalling correctly where she's with the dishes, she mentally, subtly alludes to the fact that she's having to do this by habit because it's written in first person. And so you have the ability as the author to really see through her eyes and through her mind and so it's easy to say, not that she used it in these words, but "here I have to be cleaning up after them."

AT: Another recurring theme that I noticed was there's a lot of other characters who think they know what she should be doing with her career and I don't know how much of that is, she's young, she's a woman, I'm assuming those are the two primary factors. But you've got, obviously her father is guiding her career, but you've also got this male artist who's living with them, you've got her patron is like, "oh you have to come to England." But also she was a very skilled singer and so you've got another character who's like, "oh you have to come with me and be an opera singer." And reputedly, and you have this in the book, she chose art over opera because a priest basically told her that opera is full of sketchy people and it'll ruin your reputation and lead you down a path of sin. That's not exactly what he said, but... (laughter)

JB: Yeah, we could spend hours going through the book and going sentence by sentence, "did you make this up?" No, I did not. This is actually a fact. This one, no, this one I had to think up, but a lot of these things are actually things that we know about her, or at least to the best of our knowledge. I mean, the example of the choice between music and art and that fellow in that story, those are real and those are documented and at least she has at least one really well-known painting and I think possibly more, only one image is coming to mind, but I think there might be more where she shows herself as struggling between art and music, like the goddesses of each are on either side and she's sort of, "which one do I go with here?" So I think some of those choices are just natural, not gender related, but natural for her to have negotiated, like "do I do this? Do I do that? Do I listen to this person or that person?"

I think perhaps the biggest choice point there where there were pressures was this whole thing about history painting. It's a more complex form of painting at that time where the simpler paintings are portraits or still lifes or realistic scenes where you're copying from what you're seeing externally. And history paintings are these stories usually based on mythology or other kinds of invented themes and much more complex paintings. And so that was not considered acceptable for a woman to do for a variety of reasons. And she, I believe just out of her own volition, felt that that was something that she wanted to do. And so people were pushing back against her on that, but I don't know that anybody was actually telling her, "oh, you should go and do this," at least initially, until she made her own determination. And there's a lot of that in the book where she's getting pushback on doing that.

AT: That's what I found so interesting about it is that you have all of these different people telling her "you should do this, you should do that with your career." And because it's in first person, you can see how she is rejecting or accepting this advice based on her own opinion. So that difference between these external pressures, but she is the one ultimately making the decisions. And she even says something about how, "my father advises me, but..."

JB: Yeah, "he lets me have the final say on it," which I think is probably true to how their relationship was. And

there are, by the way, letters and actual copies, edited copies, because she didn't write in English. So I had some license there. But from that, you see how she's relating to someone based on how she's talking to them and considering them and considering their feelings and considering their opinions and whatnot.

AT: And we've talked about how her father trained her when she was young and everything. But I also want to give a shout out to her mother because she spoke several languages and she learned German, Italian, French, and English from her mother, which when you consider that she's directly working with a lot of patrons from different backgrounds, and particularly once she moved to England to advance her career, I have to assume that those linguistic talents were actually hugely helpful for her as well.

JB: Yes, although I'm not sure that that's unusual. I mean, my parents actually are European, and my parents knew that many languages. And I didn't end up learning them all myself, but I grew up in a family where you could rattle off all the languages you knew. The circle of artists and literary folks were doing a lot of movement between the countries, even though they couldn't hop on the jet plane to go from here to there, they did. They went back and forth between the continent. And later in the book, the whole last third is with Goethe and they do what's called the Grand Tour and they all go back and forth, the Germans and the Italians. The destination is Italy, but they're spending a lot of time going back and forth. I think the English tend to claim her, really, because of that time, even though she wasn't there most of her life either.

AT: Yeah, she does seem to have moved around quite a bit.

JB: Yeah, and I think that started with the whole thing of itinerant artists, and that's what her family would, they came out of Switzerland, but they were on the move. And that was the only way that they could make money was going from here to there. Paint a church ceiling here and then go on and try to get, and then later she was getting much bigger commissions. She was more settled, but the rags to riches - the rags part, you don't have a home as much as you're moving around and kind of going from place to place. And then when you get very wealthy, you're traveling for another, in another way. But it's interesting, there was a lot of travel, which I didn't make up, that's in her life and in her circles of people.

AT: And so the title of the book, as mentioned, is *The Vow*. So what is the vow that you're referring to?

JB: There's actually more than one vow - three vows that I had in mind as I was writing. And the first one is the most obvious one, which we've already sort of talked about, which not as a vow, but in terms of her goals and her ambition. She vowed to become, well, first of all, to become an artist, specifically to become a history painter. And as a big vow, because as I said, this is something that was not considered open territory for her. So that's the first level, is on that level of career and what she's vowing to do.

The second vow is sort of secondary to that because it's part of how she vowed to do it, which is vowing not to marry. So she actually, spoiler alert, she did marry and she not only married, she married twice, but they're not normal, conventional, traditional marriages for that time. And we don't know that she ever said, "I vow not to marry." So that's a bit of my inference from how she went about her relationships and how she resisted marriage. And the fact that the marriages that she did have were very unconventional. So that second vow of not marrying, whereas the first one was about career and ambitions, this was really about her vow with her heart and her relationships, to keep her heart and her relationships separate, put her career above those. So that she knew that if she were to marry, that would really impede her ability to become a painter and artist. The example that always gets me is that if she, as an artist and a woman is married, then any painting she paints does not belong to her. It legally and physically and whatnot belongs to the husband. And this is obviously something she would not have wanted, did not want. And I don't want to get into too much spoiler detail, but the times that she was married, that was sort of dealt with, we'll say. It wasn't like, "oh, okay, now the husband's

going to own my paintings.” So yeah, so that's the second vow, which has to do with the heart and keeping that separate from and putting it secondary to really being able to be an artist. And as she says at one point, “married to my paintbrush” or something.

And the third one I would single out because it was really important to me, even though I think it might be less important to some readers or might be more subtle and some readers might not really pay that much attention to it. But for me, I see myself as writing metaphysical fiction as much as, say, historical fiction. And so there is a metaphysical side to the story. And that, you could say, is the vow of her soul. She starts at the beginning of the book with this phrase that kind of comes to her about “paint with your soul.” And that is a thread that goes actually throughout the book and looking into it deeper and deeper levels, what does it actually mean to paint with the soul? And so, as I said, that's the metaphysical part and more light gets shed on it throughout the book. The source of creativity for an artist is beyond gender. It's not as if there's a male hand or a female hand that is painting. What's painting is an essence of the person or an essence of an energy that comes through a person that is non-binary. So the pictures that she paints may be plenty binary in their subject matter, but the artist that does it is non-binary in that sense. And so, I had to be careful with that because that's a concept that wasn't really... I mean, it was very easy to be anachronistic about that, I think, at that time, but I tried to deal with it at the level of the vow of her soul, which is exploring this territory that's beyond just the physical world and the gender definitions and whatnot and roles and all that of her time, or our time for that matter. And so that gets played out more in the latter part of the book, but it's there from the beginning.

AT: And so one of the interesting recurring themes that you have as well is how Angelica violated or was said to violate the gender norms of her day, specifically in her work and in her education as a painter.

JB: Right. So we could follow that actually in parallel with the three vows that we talked about just now, which is that the gender norms around her career and her success and her painting, they're extreme. She could literally not be an artist as a woman during that time without every hour, 24/7, breaking a gender norm because they are so strict. And I've mentioned a couple of them. One, the thing of just not being a history painter. You say, “okay, well, why is history painting off limits to women? And what's there about mythology that's in a men's territory or something?” But what it comes down to is what she was allowed to study. So even if she was studying on her own, there were no ways that a woman could study anatomy or do life drawing because there's a nude. And so she could paint a nude, but she couldn't paint a nude live. So that meant that she couldn't learn to do it. And there's this great story that her father got her in to study in a gallery by dressing her as a boy so that she could go in there in disguise and nobody would kick her out because they wouldn't know it was Angelica. And supposedly, that's actually not true. It was just something that was leveled at her. I like to play around with that though, thinking that she kind of wanted to do that because she obviously wanted to learn that. So she was forced to learn on her own, find her own ways to observe. If you can't see a human body in the flesh to study the anatomy, you could look at a statue. But in reality, looking at a statue does not teach you as much as looking at a human body because it's not moving. You can't see how the muscles work and all that sort of stuff. So she violated those norms at the same time as that she couldn't completely make her way through it because there's some ways that she just wasn't able to get beyond that. So that's the gender norms in terms of her career is that, this is what women are allowed to do and whatnot. And as also I mentioned the thing about not being able to own her own paintings. So she did own her own paintings. So she was violating the norm in that way. There were also rules about sitting for portraits, whether it was considered unacceptable for a woman to sit for a portrait. It seems crazy to us now. And she did sit for portraits, but it wasn't just without any restrictions. I think nowadays the things that we take for granted that she couldn't take for granted. And so she had to chart her own course and violate things along the way in order to chart her own course.

AT: She has a conversation with another woman artist in the book about how it's inappropriate for women to paint portraits because you're making eye contact. And she says, “well, then it should be inappropriate for

women to sit for a portrait because you're making the same eye contact" and just pointing out sort of how ridiculous these gender norms are.

JB: Right. And there's a famous quote by Samuel Johnson about that. And it seems ludicrous to us now because it's very hard to imagine. And I think part of the interesting thing about writing about this time or her in particular is just trying to imagine if somebody said that to you now, "you can't sit for a portrait" or you can't do these things. These things do exist in our world, I would say, backing up, in different ways. And so I think that's part of the relevance of this is that there are, without pointing to examples, but there are times and places and whatnot, cultures in this world right now that are not that different from this. Thinking about gender norms, violating gender norms in terms of relationships, the norm was to marry. And in fact, the conversation that you referred to there with Mary Moser, and it's an irony because Mary Moser wanted to marry and was very traditional. The irony is that Mary Moser never married in actuality, even though she was the more traditional of the two and painted only still lifes, portraits, didn't do history painting, didn't violate those norms.

AT: Well, the assumption that she's going to marry and have children, like there's even a point where her patron who, as you mentioned, is a woman, she's like the wife of the English ambassador, and that's how they meet. But she even says, "Oh, you'll feel differently when you're a mother." So again, it's that just sort of default assumption of, this is what is going to happen with your life because you're a woman.

JB: There is this very strong expectation that she would marry. But Angelica really stuck to that, even though she didn't. Each step of the way, she did not follow the norms in relationships with men. And what I found was that that gave her a certain freedom because she wasn't automatically on a track with this man, for example, Nathaniel Dance, another famous artist of the time, was clearly pursuing her and she didn't want to fall into that standard norm of flirt and then the next step is you get married and then you go down that line. And we do have a lot of evidence, actually, of the ways in which she departed from the gender norms, in that there were these cartoons, they were called cartoons, basically like drawings, that were published in the papers of the time by some of these artists that ridicule her. There's more than one instance, there's two or three different instances where she's ridiculed in the press and with these cartoons for her relationships with men. And you have to know that if she was following the standard protocol, that would not be happening. And when we look at them, some of them, they're ugly portrayals of her as a woman who isn't conforming and she had to live that down in a very public way. And I think she was probably able to do that partly because she was also getting a lot of positive reinforcement and praise from the public for who she was. But at the same time, it's the modern paparazzi phenomenon where she was a prime object of that. And so ways in which she departed from what was expected was very public. And I mean, one example where she was in the theater and she was with these two men, one of them, Nathaniel, who I just mentioned, and another who's also in the book, and she's spotted in this compromising position between the two of them. Well, if you think about it, if she were very conventional, she wouldn't have been in that position. And so she's going about her life as I saw it, negotiating her way on her own terms in a way that she's in relationships and friendships with these male artists, because all of them actually, really other than Mary, who are artists who are well known, were male. And she's right in the middle of their world. So she's negotiating her way on her own terms. And that comes into play in some ways, in a bigger way in her relationship with later in her life with Goethe, who had his own relationships with all sorts of women and who at the same time in his book calls her out as the most exceptional. And I think part of that, her being exceptional, is that she doesn't just fall into this or that role.

AT: Now, a lot of the women that we talk about on the podcast have been lost to history for different reasons. And that is particularly true, I feel, of women artists.

JB: She achieved the highest peaks of notoriety during her life, the biggest statue in the room sort of thing. She

just had that profile in the public at that time. And then that continued after she, her funeral was a massive affair. And it's not in the book, obviously, but it just showed that level of her legacy was to that great expansive extent. That lasted past her lifetime. In about 70 years after her death, there was a bestseller written in England called *Miss Angel*. And I would say that was less, she's an artist. It's about her. But I'd say it wasn't really about her art so much as it was much more about her personality and her role. It was really a romance sort of book. And it didn't cover her whole life. It only covered the first marriage situation with this con artist, which I haven't talked about. But, it was very dramatic and made the subject of that book and kept her in the limelight for probably basically the most of the rest of the 19th century. But then you take 100 years and she's completely erased for 100 years, you could say. Her artwork still existed in the places that they were. Not in major museums, but in places where they're existing, in England primarily. She was erased. 100 years is a long time. And so I went to college and I was an art student and I started studying art history when I was in grade school, actually. And I never heard of her. Not once. I feel like I knew all the artists and I never heard of her until 1990. It's like a legacy that was there and then disappeared and came back. The only reason it came back is that scholars, and women in particular, started after my time in college to say, "OK, where were the women? We know they were there. Let's go find out about them. Let's revive their legacy."

AT: It is another recurring theme that we see in women's history that when women's stories are told, a lot of times they're told in a certain way that perhaps undermines their achievements. And so it's interesting when you talk about this sort of sensational bestseller that didn't necessarily speak to her truth, shall we say.

JB: Right. And in fact, that was a motivation. When I was reading that at the time, the first time I read that, it was like the equivalent of yelling at your TV screen, like, "no, no, no. She didn't do that." And in that book, they have her, she is conned by this one man. Now, that is an unavoidable fact. We know that to be true. But in the book, after she's conned by him, her savior is another artist, named Antonio Zucchi. These are all real people with real names. And in that book, as a novel, he is her savior. And it's like, oh, he's been waiting all this time. And he swoops her up. And, it's a Victorian novel, where he then marries her and they go off into the sunset, so to speak. That's the way the Victorian novel ends. And as I said, every bone in my body or whatever was screaming, "that's not how it worked." I just know at the level of my bones that Antonio was not that type of just loving savior. He, in fact, was a very traditional man who she was having to stand up against. And it was because there would be legal or other very practical means that she needed to do this. She had been supporting, actually, her father, which was interesting. We were talking about her father earlier. She went to the point of actually financially supporting her father for most of the rest of her life after she became well-known. But there would be reasons other than the norm of, "I'm setting off into the sunset marrying him," that would cause her to go and marry him. Similarly, there's a lot of talk in the literature, wherever you want to look, about her relationship with Goethe and how and why, what was going on there. And all of the relationships, with Sir Joshua Reynolds there's speculation about what did she do and how did she, it's all from the point of view of what would have been expected of her. So yeah, one of my goals was to tell her story in a way that felt more true to somebody who wasn't just falling for this or that dictate from one or another male figure in her life.

AT: Now this is a very different subject matter than your other book, *The Die*, which also came out this year and is more in the futuristic sci-fi genre. So what was it about Angelica's story that captured your attention that you have two such dissimilar books coming out in the same year?

JB: Right, and what you just said is true. They're totally dissimilar in that *The Die* is about the future and this is about the past. But there's one way in which they're similar, which is I see them both as metaphysical fiction. *The Die* actually, in my mind, is primarily visionary or metaphysical fiction, as much or more than it is speculative fiction. And as I've already talked about here, I see the aspect of *The Vow*, the metaphysical aspect of that as well. So there is that connector between the two, although your average reader probably isn't

going to hit on that as the obvious connection. They're probably more likely to see the difference. I'm not somebody who is as much interested in history for the sake of history. I'm more interested in history for the sake of what we can learn from it. *The Die* is actually using ancient wisdom from the *Mahabharata*. So in there, I've actually got history coming into the future as well.

But for *The Vow*, it's the usefulness of the history of her story now in that when I was growing up, and I think it's maybe less so now, but it's still definitely true, which is the lack of role models. And it's very difficult to do something and set out to succeed and actually succeed if you don't have role models. The old glass ceiling, right? And Angelica is that role model in a way because she is that woman who did that even against all odds. And so I feel like that was motivating me to say, how do we pull forth these role models, because without role models, it's so easy to just, even if you don't believe it, to feel emotionally that this is inaccessible or what's wrong with women that they couldn't do this and I'm a woman and I can't do it. We don't think those things, but they're in some level of the psyche to get that message. And so having her as a role model was important to me. It's interesting because role models aren't perfect, right? So there's things about her that, her artwork isn't necessarily the greatest artwork that ever occurred. She was really limited by the fact that she couldn't study anatomy. And so her figures have this, I think that's partly why she may have fallen off from, other than the gender reasons, that she fell off in the art world for those hundred years. She didn't have, for example, the bone structure, whatever you want to call it in the anatomy. And so her figures look a little floaty at times, you could say. You don't have to have been the perfect artist or the greatest artist. You just have to be a role model. You just have to have walked that path and show that how you did that. There is some sort of magical quality about her personality that I think that captivated people at the time that I felt like I was trying to tap into. And so it's not just, well, she's this mechanical being who did these things. No, she's a very full and human person with flaws and all who negotiated all these situations. I wish I had known her story when I was many years younger, starting on the path as an artist.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.