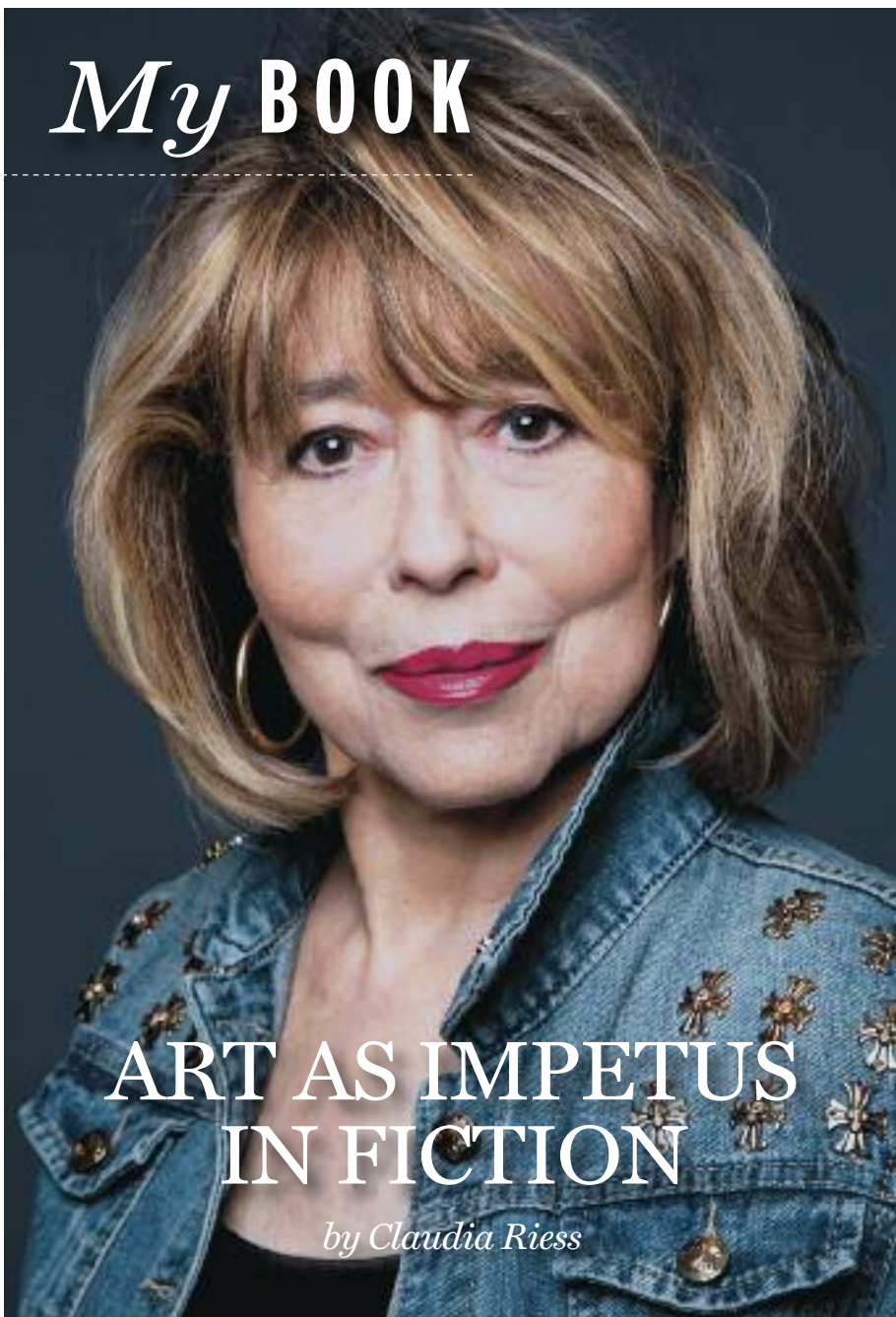


# My BOOK



## ART AS IMPETUS IN FICTION

by Claudia Riess

“my front porch.” Our differences were established. She went on to tell me that her father had owned a sugar plantation in Cuba that had been confiscated during the Cuban Revolution. Her story, so out of my league, remained etched in memory.

Decades later I was talking to my brother, an art history professor. I happened to mention that I was thinking about writing a suspense novel. Without missing a beat, he said, “How about Michelangelo’s *Battle of Cascina*? Maybe finding a lost study for it?” At that moment, my Vassar chat popped into mind, dovetailing my brother’s suggestion. I imagined a cache of art stolen from the sugar plantation by a group of revolutionary wannabes, with a tie-in to both Michelangelo and da Lucca, his fictional contemporary.

My protagonists emerged as Erika Shawn, a young art magazine editor, and Harrison



Wheatley, a more seasoned art history professor. Their efforts to track down the stolen art begin as an academic venture, but quickly change character when a murder occurs.

Like music, art is a universal language. But whereas a musical composition to truly exist must be executed—and interpreted—by individuals other than its creator, an art object is an entity unto itself. It may be bought and sold, its market value dependent on the aesthetic temperament of the times and the manipulations of influential collectors. There is no cap on its price, no governmental controls. The unmonitored world in which it exists is therefore susceptible to crimes of every stripe, from forgery to black-market trade.

The world of art knows no geographical boundaries and is where the most sublime of human instincts clash with the basest. For me it has become the perfect amalgam from which to draw inspiration for fiction! ✦

*Stolen Light*, Claudia Riess, *Level Best Books*, March 2019, \$16.95

**M**y eight-year-old granddaughter stared up at Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* and would not budge from the spot. “Five minutes more,” she said, when my daughter suggested we move on to the next gallery; after all, it was nearing closing time at the Museum of Modern Art.

What was it that held her gaze? The vision of the world transformed, or seen as it truly is? Did she glimpse the soul of the painter in that animated sky? Were creative ideas of her own inspired by his mesmerizing colors and swirling brushstrokes?

I marveled at and yet understood my granddaughter’s fixation. Ever since I can

remember I’ve been fascinated by the transformative power of art—the immediacy of it. I’ve no doubt that my interest in art is in part due to the fact that I associate it with childhood memories of strolling through museum galleries with my father, absorbing his wisdom and basking in his admiration of my spouted commentaries.

I did not consciously set out to include art as a subject in a mystery series that begins with *Stolen Light*. It happened serendipitously: During my first week at Vassar I had dinner with a dorm-mate. Later, we sat on the edge of my bed and chatted about our histories. She asked where I had “summered” and I said