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**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

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## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

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**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