

HOLD STILL SYNOPSIS

Jo Hiffernan, a handsome Irishwoman, attracted to foreign men and fabulous paintings, became the signature muse and lover of James Whistler in 1860s' London and posed for one of the most scandalous paintings of all time: *L'Origine du Monde* by Gustave Courbet - a strikingly frank painting of a woman's vulva.

Loosely based on historical figures, the novel charts Jo's transformation from a naive seventeen year old from Clerkenwell to a sophisticated cosmopolitan as she falls in love, struggles to become a painter, accompanies Whistler to Paris and eventually meets Courbet. In Paris, she poses for Whistler's controversial 'White Girl' portrait which shocked critics and spectators alike and finds herself in the midst of several turbulent and thrilling art movements. After her mother's death, Jo returns to London, where Whistler and his coterie school her in the fierce commitment necessary to becoming a great artist. When Whistler's ailing mother comes to live with him and Jo moves out, he betrays her with a chambermaid, putting Jo's position as his muse and her livelihood under threat. Jo retaliates with a brief liaison with Fanny Cornforth, Rossetti's mistress. After a huge quarrel, Whistler begs for forgiveness when he realises he can't paint without her, but the damage is done and Jo tires of sitting for him. When Whistler takes Jo to France, they meet the powerful and handsome Gustave Courbet, Whistler's rival. The two men compete for Jo who begins to realise her own ambitions to become an artist by moving alone to Paris, where she risks a more independent way to be a mistress, muse and lover.

Divided into six sections named after portraits of Jo, the novel offers a vivid and sensual insight into the woman who inspired these extraordinary paintings and how she overcomes the sexual mores of the time to launch her own painting career.