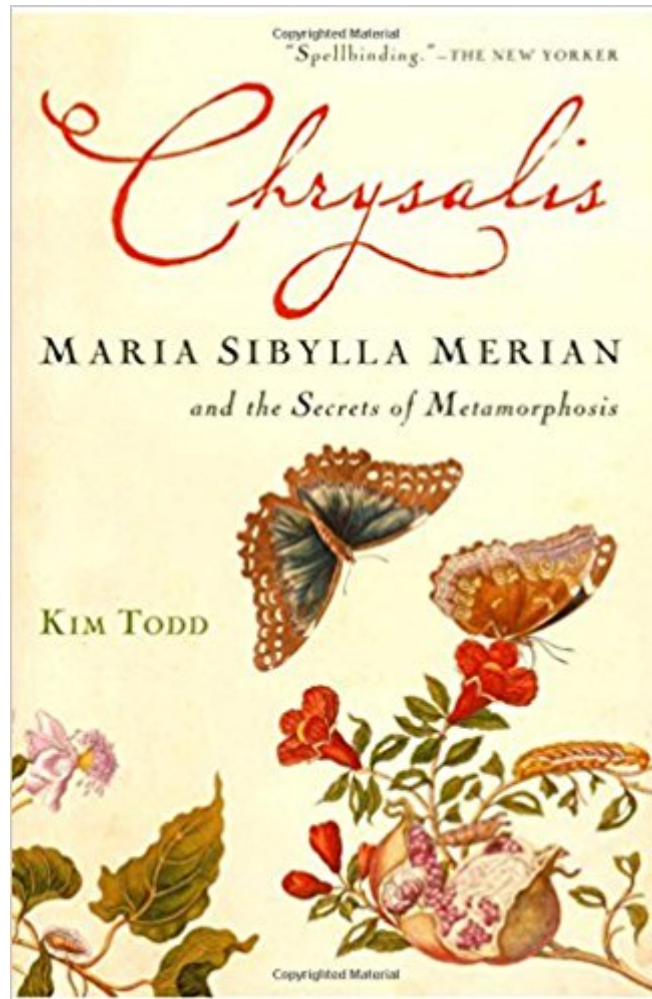


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Chrysalis: Maria Sibylla Merian And The Secrets Of Metamorphosis



Synopsis

Today, an entomologist in a laboratory can gaze at a butterfly pupa with a microscope so powerful that the swirling cells on the pupa's skin look like a galaxy. She can activate a single gene or knock it out. What she can't do is discover how the insect behaves in its natural habitat—which means she doesn't know what steps to take to preserve it from extinction, nor how any particular gene may interact with the environment. Four hundred years ago, a fifty-year-old Dutch woman set sail on a solo scientific expedition to study insect metamorphosis. She could not have imagined the routine magic that scientists perform today—but her absolute insistence on studying insects in their natural habitats was so far ahead of its time that it is only now coming back into favor. *Chrysalis* restores Maria Sibylla Merian to her rightful place in the history of science, taking us from golden-age Amsterdam to the Surinam tropics to modern laboratories where Merian's insights fuel new approaches to both ecology and genetics.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

You may have seen the artwork of Maria Sibylla Merian, as it is a staple for pretty but accurate pictures of butterflies, caterpillars, moths, and flowers, and can be found on china or stationery. She was more than a painter or engraver, though. Her life was unique. She had artistic talent, but she was also a keen scientific observer, who advanced the study of insects immeasurably. She was a teenaged bride who left her husband who divorced her, and she had to care for their two children. She was so enthralled with the study of moths and butterflies that at age 52 she traveled to a

mysterious and largely unknown land to see more of them, and to bring back pictures and scientific descriptions of their behavior. And she did this more than three centuries ago. *Chrysalis: Maria Sibylla Merian and the Secrets of Metamorphosis* (Harcourt) by Kim Todd is a thoughtful examination of what we can know about Merian's life from the few personal documents that remain about her, and a proper reevaluation of her place in the world's scientific effort. It also is a fine resource about the biological controversies that were brewing in the seventeenth century, controversies that had to be settled in order for a basic understanding of insect life to take hold. Merian was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1647. She could not have a formal apprenticeship like a male artist in training, and she could not even paint in oils, because the rules of the guild forbade women from doing so. She was, however, able to use watercolors and engraving with beauty and utility to bring her objects of study almost to life upon the page.

Maria Sibylla Merian was one of the first naturalists to approach collection and illustration from an ecological point of view--though that term wouldn't be used until 150 years after her death ("oecology" in Ernst Haeckel's *Generelle Morphology*; see the documentary DVD *Proteus* for more on Haeckel). She understood that a butterfly or caterpillar removed from nature and placed in a curiosity cabinet is merely one stage of a much more complicated life story. *Chrysalis* is thus well worth consideration, even if your interest in natural history is minimal. Kim Todd's biography is a good one, despite an unfortunate lack of source material documenting Merian's inner life. Todd is judicious with her speculations. Her conclusions about Merian's thoughts/feelings are reasonable, if occasionally florid. But considering the subject matter, a little floridity is hardly a flaw. As the subtitle "... and the Secrets of Metamorphosis" would suggest, the reader is also given a broader view of the milieu in which Merian was working and the contemporaneous theories about spontaneous generation and parasitic behavior in insects. The book also offers depictions of some of the unusual characters traveling in the scientific and religious circles of the time: * Frederik Ruysch, a surgeon and obstetrician who created moralistic montages of fetal skeletons holding objects such as a handkerchief made of lung or a violin bow made of artery, accompanied by captions like "Why should I long for the things of this world?" * James Petiver, an apothecary and fellow of the Royal Society, a buyer of damaged insects, and a man described by a student as "wretched both in looks and actions.

[...] *Chrysalis: Maria Sibylla Merian and the Secrets of Metamorphosis*, a nonfiction book by Missoula writer Kim Todd, sounds like a Victorian adventure novel: a fifty-two-year-old woman abandons her

husband and European continent to study the metamorphosis of caterpillars in Surinam. But this was before the Victorians. In 1699, more than a century before Darwin, sixty-five years after Galileo's prosecution, and a time when witch hunts were part of the recent past, Maria Sibylla Merian embarked on a journey of scientific discovery in the dangerous New World with only her daughter for company. While the male colonists grew sugar cane on their plantations, Merian's slaves and servants helped her locate insects, reptiles, and plants for her to study and depict in her captivating watercolors. She trusted the natives' knowledge to assist her research, something that would be used against her reputation in the decades after her death. By the time Merian stepped on that boat to Surinam, she was a mother of two, had published two books about the metamorphosis of caterpillars in her native Germany, and spent five years living with a Pietist religious sect in a castle in Amsterdam, where she argued successfully for a separation from her husband using the sect's beliefs. At the time, a woman's husband was her legal representative and the court ordered numerous women to return to their abusive husbands. But after Merian's successful separation, she lived in Amsterdam and financially supported herself and her youngest daughter. Watercolors were her tool because "guild rules banned women from painting with oils." To get on that boat and to fund her scientific and artistic expedition, Merian sold her paintings and any unnecessary belongings.

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