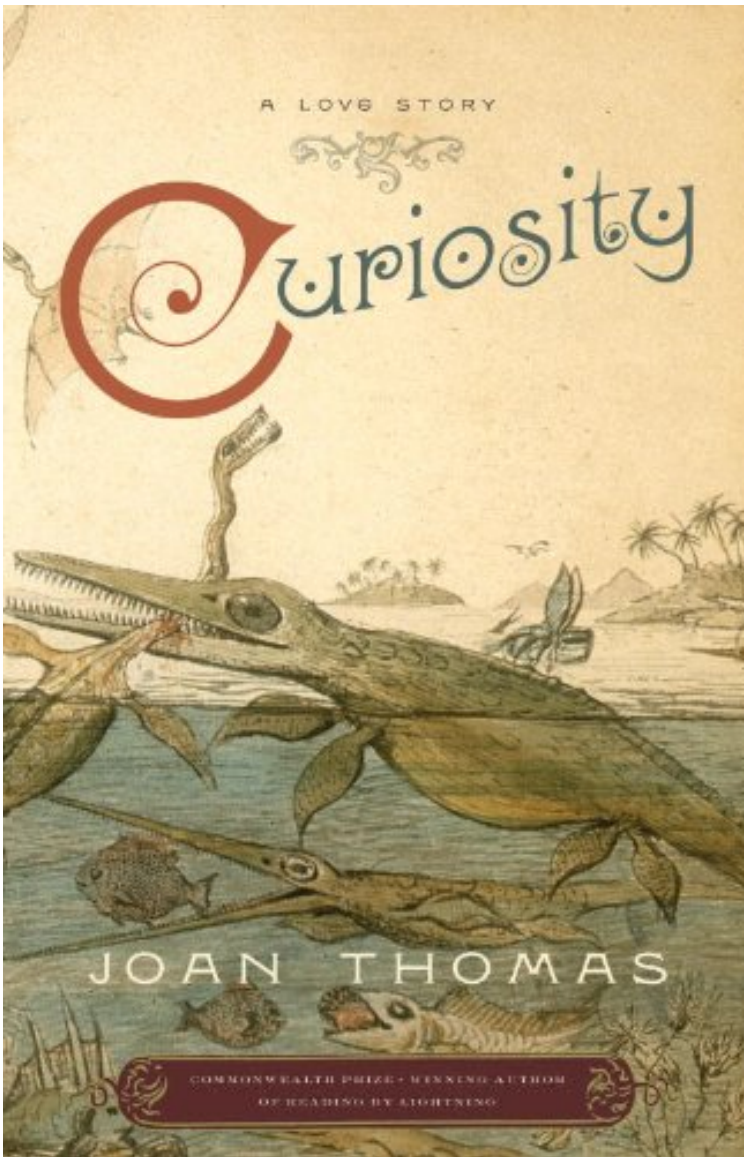


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Curiosity



Par Joan Thomas
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAward-winning novelist Joan Thomas blends fact and fiction, passion and science in this stunning novel set in 19th-century Lyme Regis, England the seaside town that is the setting of both The French Lieutenant's Woman and Jane Austen's Persuasion.More than 40 years before the publication of The Origin of Species, 12-year-old Mary Anning, a cabinet-maker's daughter, found the first intact skeleton of a prehistoric dolphin-like creature, and spent a year chipping it from the soft cliffs near Lyme Regis. This was only the first of many important discoveries made by this incredible woman, perhaps the most important paleontologist of her day.Henry de la Beche was the son of a gentry family, owners of a slave-worked estate in Jamaica where he spent his childhood. As an adolescent back in England, he ran away from military

college, and soon found himself living with his elegant, cynical mother in Lyme Regis, where he pursued his passion for drawing and painting the landscapes and fossils of the area. One morning on an expedition to see an extraordinary discovery a giant fossil he meets a young woman unlike anyone he has ever met. From the Hardcover edition.

Extrait ONE They were powerful charms, curiosities. The people who came to Lyme Regis to take the waters would pay sixpence for the meanest little snakestone, and carry it for luck. Mary's mother had worked the curiosity table until lately, and if a customer had trouble parting with his coin, she would fix a soft look on him and offer a charm against wizenning. She was not bold in her manner and the gentleman would startle and wonder at her meaning. But usually he bought, after that. Now that her mother had the baby to look after, the curiosity table was Mary's job. Mary had come out early to get set up for the coach from Bath. Her wares were all organized on the table, and the square was still empty. There was just the brown hen tethered beside her, and the pauper Dick Mutch lying in stocks a few feet away in front of Cockmoile Prison. Mary sat deep in thought, her eyes on the moon, a useless, daylight moon, floating in a blue sky. Wizenning it was a complaint particular to men. She needed a more general charm. Blindness, she finally decided. She tried it out in a low voice: They be a powerful charm against blindness. She watched the moon impale itself on the steeple of the shambles, and then she bent back over her wares: Devils toenails, sea lilies, thunderbolts, brittle stars, vertebrae, snakestones. Mary had lined them up in rows by kind. The loveliest were the snakestones, coiled serpents in gold and bronze missing their heads, though, in their natural form. Mary's brother Joseph had come home on his dinner break expressly to rectify this. He used a tiny stone chisel to make a pointed smile on the outer coil of each snakestone, unconsciously holding his mouth in the shape he was aiming for. Then he took up a drill to make the eyes. Six snakes had been so improved before he had to pelt back up Church Street to work. On second thought, Mary slid these six out, and made a separate row for them at the front of the table. Just as the moon freed itself from the steeple, a silver bugle sounded from the top of the hill. This was the signal for every peddler in town to pour into the square. Then there was the coach itself, plunging down Broad Street in heavy pursuit of its wild-eyed horses, and in a flash it sat, a black and gilt cage, gleaming in front of the prison. The footman had a stool at the ready and the door burst open. First out were two small dogs, touching smartly down on the footstool, and then a collection of gentlefolk, dazed by their harrowing descent and by the brouhaha of the men in the prison, who stuck their arms through the beggars grate and set up howling at the sight of strangers. Last off were the poor, struggling down a ladder from their perch on the roof. In a trice, the visitors were set upon. Mary got to her feet but she did not call out. It was not in her nature to hawk, and in any case, buyers always came to the table on their own. The curiosities drew them. Mary had often experienced this power when she collected on the shore. And indeed, two ladies strolling over to look at Annie Bennetts lavender had spied the curiosity table over Annie's shoulder. And then Annie lost them, they were making their way eagerly towards Mary. What curious stones! said the larger of the two, picking up one of the snakestones with her gloved fingers. What on earth are they? They were living serpents one day, but Saint Hilda turned them to stone. She were clearing the earth of serpents for the protection of innocents. As she spoke, Mary deftly turned her boot to hide the clot of mud on the hem of her skirt. The lady wore a red and blue braided jacket, all in vogue with the high-born since the war began. As though these ladies fancied they might be called upon to fight Bony! She held the snakestone up to the light, admiring the way the snake rested its chin on the round coils of itself with a smile. King George himself would be proud to wear such a beauty on a sash on his belly, Mary offered. If he had the wits to know it. If he had the wits, cried the large lady to the other, as though a dog had made a jest, and Dick Mutch in the prison stocks (as mad as the poor king himself) set to cackling, so that Mary must smile and say, Pay the poor lummick no mind. The lady set the snakestone back on the table and made to open the reticule on her arm, but her companion leaned in and said something Mary could not hear, and without another word or even a glance at Mary, the two of them went off across the square with their dogs running behind them. It was foolish to mind the discourtesies of the high-born, but Mary did mind. I should have spoke of blindness, she thought. The square cleared, and it seemed she would have no luck at all that day, but then a man with a dirty blue bag tied to his saddle rode up on a horse. After he had gone, Mary was burning to go down to the cabinetry shop and tell her father what had transpired, but first she must pack up their wares. Sliding the curiosities onto the tray, she named them all to herself, using the queer words the stranger had used for them: the ordinary snakestones he had called ammonites, and the beautiful snakestones worked in gold and bronze, pyrite ammonites. But then, before she could go downstairs, Mrs. Stock from Sherborne Lane came bustling up to the house, and Mary must stay in the kitchen with her mother. Mrs. Stock came inquiring after Percival, who lay like a wax doll in his cot by the

cold hearth, hardly bigger than the day he was born. She was a widow with an ardent, reproachful manner that implied she would one day be more than she was, and should be heeded. She sat on the rush chair in the kitchen and darted her hungry eyes around the bare cottage as though their misfortune was secretly to her taste. Percival began to make his mewling cry. Molly picked him up and sat down in the chimney corner, opening her blouse and inching her shift down on the side away from Mrs. Stock. She spread her fingers so a leathery nipple popped out in the crotch between them, and stuffed it between Percival's lips. He gave a tiny cry of helplessness and Molly tipped her head, resting it against his. Mary sat on the bench and willed Mrs. Stock not to see her mother's breast, which had been full to bursting when Percival was born and hung slack now like an empty bladder. This was down to Percival, who, for all he was an infant, had a part to play in maintaining his own keep and did not seem inclined to play it. At the end, the second Henry had been ill and thin like Percival was now, although Mary remembered him as having a queer smell to him that Percival did not have, a smell of chaff or uncured hay. The doctor came and gave him a medic, and just before he died, he coughed up two worms, both of them dead. It was the medic that killed them all three, Mary's father said. Mrs. Stock sat talking, talking, puffed up like a rooster with news. She had learned of a lad who had the power to heal, by virtue of being a seventh son. The seventh son of a seventh son has the power to raise from the dead, she explained, with the air of a teacher instructing the dim-witted. But this boy is purely a seventh son. The lad was only twelve, not much older than Mary, and already he'd healed boils, dropsy, a child with a withered foot, and a woman vomiting black bile. He lived in Exeter, not so very far away. Mary's mother hated Mrs. Stock (she had privately said so more than once), but she couldn't help but listen she was a slave to the hope Mrs. Stock carried into the kitchen. They had no coals, so she sent Mary next door to the Bennetts to boil the kettle for tea. Mary measured out just two dippers of water so the kettle would boil quickly. When she came back, her mother was still nursing Percival and Mrs. Stock was working her way through a list of questions. She inquired as to the exact date Mary had turned eleven, as though she was hatching a plan for her. Then she turned to Lizzie, who was playing with oyster shells on the floor. And you're three now, my pretty one? Lizzie kept her head down and did not reply. Four, Mother said. And your big lad? Fourteen, I reckon? And he's well? You had good success with the onion? This last in a clever voice. So then Mary saw why Mrs. Stock had come, and marvelled that she had waited this long to ask. A few weeks before, word of the pox had spread up the Dorsetshire coast, and Mrs. Stock had advised peeling an onion and hanging it from a string in the doorway to draw the pestilence to it. Mary's mother had followed the advice, and she told Mrs. Stock so now. She had peeled the onion and hung it in the middle of the lintel. It was Richard who made her take it down he had no use for jommetry. He's a history and a mystery, my Richard, Molly said, laughing in a shamefaced way. He will always strike his own path. So I've heard said, said Mrs. Stock grimly. Well, give us a look, then. Molly told Mary to roll up her sleeve and show Mrs. Stock the three little circles at the top of her arm. They were healed now, as dry as fairy rings in grass. God forgive and protect us all, Mrs. Stock cried, closing her eyes and crossing herself. There were many who told me, but I swore it could not be true. It had been early morning when they first learned about the pox Mary's father was going out to the latrine on the bridge when a man came up from the Cobb and told him. Six dead in Bridport, he said. At first, there was excitement in the town, people standing in the square going over who had told them, and what exactly was said. But at noon Mrs. Bennett came running up Marine Parade and announced in a shrill voice that the isolation hut on the Cobb was being turned into a pesthouse, where you could pay to have a bit of pox put into your arm and lie between life and death while the contagion was sweated out of you. Mary saw her mother's face and then she grasped the terror the pox brought with it, although it seemed her mother dreaded the cure more than the disease. It's one thing to wait till the pox comes to you, Molly said. She was standing in the workshop in the cellar of their house with Percival slung over her shoulder. It's another thing altogether to go to the pox, and die in a hut with strangers for your trouble. In the light from the high window, her own pox-marks showed on her white cheeks like discs drilled lightly into chalk. The beast in the field waits, said Mary's father. It was an empty argument, thought Mary, sitting on the workshop steps. Where would the Annings find the coin to take themselves off to the pesthouse? That night, Richard went out to the Three Cups. He was redcheeked and singing when he came home, lit up by cider and by his bright new idea. He had taken a pint with Farmer Ware and they'd fallen to talking about the pox visited on cows at Ware Manor Farm. He was at the bottom of his third pint, he said, when the idea came to him: he would try his own version of the pesthouse cure, a barnyard version inspired by the fresh cheeks of milkmaids everywhere. Molly kept them awake with her crying, but the next day he took them anyway, just Mary and Joseph, took them out to Ware Manor Farm with its mossy yard the colour

of the limes you saw loaded into ships in nets. The farmer led them into the cowshed, where a boy mucking out the stalls was made to put his fork down and pull up his smock. Red sores bloomed across his belly. They used the point of a clasp knife to scrape the boys cowpox into Marys and Josephs arms, three cuts each for good measure. In payment, Richard Anning gave Farmer Ware a thunderstone for the dairy, to keep the milk from souring. We be all one in nature, Molly said vaguely. Mary rolled her sleeve back down. She kept her dark eyes fixed on Mrs. Stock. Mary was a healthy, God-fearing girl with a drop of animal humours in her, and if asked, she would assure Mrs. Stock that she felt better for it, although in truth she would have favoured a livelier animal than a cow a fox with its dashing ways, or maybe a magpie. Mrs. Stock finally fastened her crimson shawl with a clasp pin and took her leave, and Mary, almost choking by then with impatience, tried to slip down to the workshop. But her mother called her back. She had put Percival on his side in the cradle and she was at the chimney corner, prying the loose brick out to get at her leather pouch. She spilled the coins on the table it was all half-groats and farthings. Count it, Mary, she said. Mary slid the coins into rows by kind. The shillings the strange man had given her were pressed into her waistcoat pocket.

One shilling thruppence, she said, keeping her voice flat. What is the fare to Exeter? It was sixpence to Axminster and Exeter was ten times as far. Five shillings, if you ride outside, Mary said. Molly picked up the baby again and cupped his little head, straightening his cap. Then she carried him down into the workshop and Mary followed. Marys father was standing at the workbench fitting a dovetail join in a drawer. Molly went over all boris-noris and said, Pray let me see the cash box. Marys father laid the two parts of the join side by side on the workbench with a thunk. He reached the cash box from the cupboard shelf and handed it to her. He would suffer her to count the money, but that did not mean he would suffer her to spend it. With her free hand, Marys mother slid the top off the cash box and moved her fingers over the coins inside, not really counting. There be more than enough, she said. Richard did not say what she wanted him to say, he did not ask, For what? That were the Widow Stock upstairs, she said in a heated-up voice. There be talk of a healer in Exeter. A seventh son. Richard turned back to his drawer and pressed his lips as he wedged the join together. He reached for his felted hammer and tapped at the join, and its two sides squeaked into the perfect

little dovetail cells they made for each other. Her mother waited in silence another minute and then she turned and climbed back up to the kitchen. Mary sat down on the workshop steps, her excitement about the gentleman on the horse suddenly falling away. She took off her bonnet and set it on the step. By what arithmetic did you compute which child was a seventh son? she wondered. They were four just then Joseph, Mary, Lizzie, and Percival. Mary herself was either the first daughter or the third, depending whether you counted the dead in with the living. Or possibly she was the fourth: between her and the second Henry, there had been a babe that opened its eyes once on the world and shut them again, too early to say whether it was a boy or a girl. The parts were not made yet, Marys mother said (although, Mary noted, it had eyelids to close). Mary could hear the cradle rocking on the floor above, and her mothers tread. Molly would be making a soft mush to try to get into Percival. Two shillings sixpence weighed still in Marys pocket. She had not offered the money from the curiosity table and her father had not offered the money from the cash box.

There would be no help for Percival in Exeter; it would have to come from another quarter. Mary sat and watched her father as he took up the second drawer and began to fit it together. He was working from the light of the window, which showed the sky in three rows of its panes, and then the sea. In the soft sawdust on the floorboards, she could see his footprints like the tracks of animals on the shore. This was a collecting cupboard he was making, with shallow drawers for the curiosities. For the rich, who could afford to horde what the Annings must sell. It was a strange passion with the high-born, filling their drawing rooms with thunderbolts and snakestones, although they could buy all the china figurines they chose. Richard was lining up the dovetails, bracing the drawer on the workbench. He needed a helper. But hed apprenticed Joseph to Armstrong the upholsterer on Dorcas Lane. Ive enough aggravation in my day, he said when Molly argued about it. Armstrong can have the thin-faced nesseltripe and welcome to him. Mary stood up. Ill brace it, she said. No, he said. Ye ve not the meat on your bones to hold it steady. So then Marys anger swelled up and sealed her mouth shut, then she could not tell him. About the strangeness of the man, the way he d sorted the curiosities according to the names he gave them, shoving the carved snakestones to the side as worthless. The way he d tried to speak to her as though she were a child, and how shed shown him. Last time I was at Lyme, he said, I ran into an antique fellow wandering the shore with a staff in one hand. On the search for the creatures he d refused onto the ark. Mary had stood up to her full height and declined to smile. Noah, shed said. It was, lass, said the man, regarding her with surprise. Ive been burning to know if these cliffs were here before the Flood. But he wouldnt put his mind to the question. Shun the sea, he cried. He shook his staff

at me. Water, water, everywhere and not a drop to drink! He had only two teeth left in his head, the sorry old codger. But it were rain that made the Flood, Mary said. He could have drunk rainwater. The man had laughed, high colour rising in his cheeks. Sharp as a blade, he'd cried. Richard was fixing a handle to the second drawer of the collecting cupboard. He moved to the shelf for his screwdriver. His back was turned fully to the window and his face was erased by its glare. Something stirred in Mary at the sight of his bony form looming large and black against the glass. Then he stepped away from the light and she could see his face again (intent and inward, with no thought of her upon it at all). Any trade off the coach? he asked. Not off the coach. She paused, and then she finally said it. A man came on a horse and bought seven curios. She reached into her waistcoat pocket and took out the coins. Her father's black eyebrows lifted and she caught the gleam of his approval as she opened the lid of the box and dropped the coins in. Then he turned back to the cupboard. The Philpot dames have spoke for this cabinet, he said. Pick out a beauty snakestone. We'll put it in the top drawer to start them off. The Philpot dames! Miss Elizabeth Philpot always smiled kindly at Mary and was a healer in her own way, with a salve she offered anyone who came with a wound to her door. There were three sisters, but it was Miss Elizabeth Philpot who loved the curiosities, although she would not go down to the shore to collect. Mary ran upstairs to the tray she had left in the kitchen and picked out the best pyrite ammonite, one Joseph hadn't yet got his hands on, and slipped it into her pocket. As Mary carried the curiosity tray down to the workshop, Molly called and reminded her to go for water. Almost no one was out on the street it was the afternoon lull. Broad Street rose up between proud shops and houses, and Mary climbed quickly towards the spring, wondering where the man with the blue bag was lodging. If he was lodging in Lyme at all. She could not determine where this man fit. He wore a top hat like a gentleman, but also a robe like an apothecary. He spoke like a gentleman, but he carried a dirty cloth bag. The degrees of the poor Mary could tell at a glance, but she was not skilled in the degrees of the rich. The degrees of the poor were the artisan, the servant, the labourer, the working poor fallen on hard times, and the true pauper (who had never been anything but). So three full degrees lay between a cabinetmaker's daughter like Mary and the pitiful Dick Mutch lying in the stocks, although the high-born coming off the coach made no distinction between them at all. But Miss Philpot did, and it seemed this gentleman did as well. Mary thought of the familiar yet courteous way he'd spoken to her. As she climbed Broad Street swinging the bucket, she went over their entire exchange. Where did you find this gryphaea, lass? he'd asked, looking at her with pale, protruding eyes. The Devil's toenail, sir? Mary said. On the Devil's beach. It was Monmouth Beach she meant. The Devil's toenail? he said fiercely. The Devil's beach? Where did you get such notions? Our Lord made everything that is. How startled Mary had been at that startled to her core! As though the man had peered into her head and pounced on what he'd seen there, a question that troubled Mary constantly. Everything you saw was made by man or God or the Devil; even Lizzie would have been able to tell you that. As Mary walked, she noted the handiwork of man on either side: the shops and houses built of brick and thatch, the window in the millinery shop that reflected back her bonneted head, the ordure floating in the sluice lake along the border of the street. But here and there, the hand of God broke through in the green moss growing along the rim of the sluice lake, and the wisteria drooping purple on the kitchen walls at the backs of the houses. God also made the brambles that climbed up and choked the wisteria, and the stones that sprouted in the farmers' fields, and the weeds growing up around the stones, and the pox. It was here the question grew perplexing. Some of God's works were to serve man and some were to test him and punish him. So how could you be certain where the works of God ended and the works of the Devil began? Mary veered off Broad Street then, still carrying the bucket. She took a detour to the meadow on Pound Street and, stopping at the edge of it, looked down on the town. All the world she knew lay below her. More than her world to the east, you could see the Isle of Portland, so far away that Mary had no expectation of ever setting foot upon it in her life. To the west lay Monmouth Beach, exposed now by the outgoing tide. In counting up the handiworks of the Devil, Mary always named Monmouth Beach (over which a mist of wickedness hung even now, from the smugglers working that shore, and from her own sister Martha wailing in terror while the tide washed her around the point to her death). And of course the Devil made the dragons that lived at one time in the cliffs and gave their shape to the cliffs, the shape of their bodies curled up in a lair. So, if the Devil made the dragons, it seemed reasonable that he'd made the cliffs, and certainly Black Ven, glooming over the shore to the east between Lyme Regis and Charmouth. But with an air of authority as grand as a king's, this gentleman had given it all to God! Mary stood a minute longer, looking down at the calm sea. The lopsided moon was floating above it. That moon was wakening the tides would be slack next week. Then she turned back up towards the spring. She was glad she'd not told her father about the conversation with the

stranger. Hed have pinned a sneering name on the man. Her father took pride in scorning what others esteemed. A thought that had flickered in her mind when she saw Richard at the window came to her now: he had never had the pox, her father. But nor had he taken the cure at Ware Manor Farm. He is a history and a mystery, she said to herself. But so was she! She thought of the moment the man had trotted into the square. It was his horse shed noted first, a big-jointed mare of striking ugliness. The man was not looking in her direction at all he seemed intent on going down to the shore but Mary had called as loud as a costermonger, Curiosities! With no sign from its rider, the horse had stopped abruptly and dropped its head, moving loose lips over the cobbles in search of an errant stalk of hay, and the gentleman had had no choice but to swing off and come towards the table. Why had Mary (who never cried out) cried out so suddenly at the sight of him? But what especially chawed at her mind and would not let it go was this: that the man had looked at the curiosities without surprise. Not as curiosities, but as something known, calling each by name, wrapping each one carefully in a separate cloth from his blue bag. All with a bustling and a business-like air, as though he had come into town expecting and prepared to meet Mary Anning. From the Hardcover edition. *Revue de presse* "Meticulous and deeply affecting. The traps of poverty and class, calcified notions of womens place in science and society, fall away to reveal the hidden life below: the human mind and heart excavated with delicate and devastating skill." Marina Endicott, author of *Good to a Fault* "Curiosity is a delight. Set with marvels and rueful comedy, it's a warmly intelligent feat of historical sympathy. Mary Anning of Lyme Regis, with her dead-reckoning gaze, moves through these pages like a muddy-booted angel." Greg Hollingshead, author of *Bedlam* "Rich. . . . [Thomas] practically burrows into the characters. Hers is magnificent prose that appeals to all the senses without grandiloquence. Equally important, Thomas handles the doctrinal debate raised by the then-budding field of geology with [great] subtlety and nuance." *The Toronto Star* "Right from its powerful opening, the novel buffets readers with the inescapable momentum of waves against the Dorset cliffs. . . . Curiosity is without question the best novel this reader has come across in the past year. . . . Lush. . . . Thomas draws [her] characters with such depth, power, and heart tha they remain with the reader long after the novels covers are closed." *Quill Quire* [starred review] "Thomas handles beautifully the class-afflicted nuances of a doomed love story." *More magazine* "A brilliant, soulful, multi-layered novel. . . . We are drenched in all the sights, sounds and smells of the era [and] become privy to the ecstasy and the agony of the doomed love affair between the two main characters. . . . Lush prose, compelling narrative and vivid characters [make] this one of the best books of the spring publishing season." *Ottawa Citizen* "A precise reconstruction of the social and intellectual world of early 19th-century England. . . . [Thomass] research gives the characters depth [and] provides Mary with a delightfully distinctive voice. . . . A beautifully wrought . . . work of literary art." *Winnipeg Free Press* "Extraordinary. . . . A timeless story, and an unforgettable one." *Edmonton Journal* "Gripping. . . . Mary Anning as portrayed by Joan Thomas stands in her own right as a memorable figure, vulnerable and indomitable at the same time." *National Post* "[Curiosity] explores the exquisite fragility of a love story that turns upon the lovers unblinking curiosity before the metaphysical change their work uncovers. . . . A beautiful, erudite, and deeply pleasurable work." *The Walrus* From the Hardcover edition.