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Although much has been written lately on the links between painting and writing, little or no attention has been paid to those moments in literature when the narrative stops to allow for the description of those objects we associate with still life. Rosemary Lloyd's book shows how fascinating this overlooked area is; how rich in suggestions of class, race, and gender; how much it indicates about human pleasures and about the experience of space and time.

Lloyd focuses on the last two centuries, particularly at points marked by the irruption of images of contingency and rapid change into the fields of art: for example, the year of the Terror in French history; the decade in which Haussman's politically driven transformation of Paris led Baudelaire to write his great modernist poem "Le Cygne"; and "on or about December 1910," the date to which Virginia Woolf attributes a revolution in the definition of literary character.

Lloyd's central concern lies with the ways in which the still life, written or painted, both evokes and attempts to deal with the sense of contingency. While she makes frequent reference to paintings, she focuses above all on written still lifes, particularly those moments when novels pause to address the subject matter of still life_a bowl of fruit, a hat rack, a desk cluttered with pens and papers_in ways that invite contemplation of other and broader cultural domains. She draws on literary and art works from Australia, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, and the United States.