



## The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre

*Dominic Smith*

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## **The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre** Dominic Smith

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Smith's compassionate and thought-provoking novel reinvents a famous life with delicacy and precision. At the age of 12, Louis Daguerre fell in love with women and light on the same day. Several decades later, the founder of modern photography invented a process that ignited 19th-century Paris and secured his wealth and fame. But the years following find him delusional and ill, racked with terrible fevers. Slowly dying from repeated exposure to mercury, the very means by which he was able to capture image and light, Daguerre is now convinced the world will soon end. Fashioning a "Doomsday List" of ten photographs he must take before "The End," perhaps none is more urgent than that of Isobel Le Fournier, the object of a youthful crush, lost to Daguerre years ago.

Navigating the Paris streets with his friend Charles Baudelaire and a mysterious prostitute named Pigeon, Daguerre encounters a city awash in excess, cafes charged with the talk of revolution, and a countryside blanketed by the smell of gunpowder. As the search for his doomsday subjects intensifies and his health grows more precarious, Daguerre learns, quite improbably, that he may actually have one last chance at love.

In *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre*, Smith has fashioned a novel as beguiling as it is strange; an intoxicating blend of history and imagination. (Summer 2006 Selection)

## **The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre Details**

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Author : Dominic Smith

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## **From Reader Review The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre for online ebook**

### **J. says**

A clever depiction of Louis Daguerre -- a historical figure -- set against the backdrop of an authentic 19th century France results in this alluring historical novel by emerging novelist Dominic Smith. The beauty of this piece is in the balance between the story -- about a man's obsession with capturing forever a fleeting moment -- and the storytelling.

Daguerre, having invented the daguerreotype, finds that his brain has been poisoned by the mercury process he discovered. Believing the apocalypse is near, he sets out to capture on film 10 images before it commences. His quest leads him to a chance encounter with the daughter of his childhood sweetheart and life-long love, Isobel Le Fournier. Isobel broke Daguerre's young heart by marrying an older man, more stable than Daguerre, whom she viewed as a dreamer. Rejecting him in the manner she did drives Daguerre to attain success and fame, but alas, without Isobel (who from afar watches Daguerre's star rise with more than a little regret), it means little.

At the peak of his artistic popularity, as his madness grows, Daguerre hires Chloe, a middle-aged woman who works in a Paris brothel, to pose for him -- the nude he wishes to capture on film. When he learns she is the daughter of his beloved Isobel, he tries to rescue her from the life she has "chosen" -- never touching her and looking at her nudity only through the lens of his camera. Ignorant that he is her mother's childhood love, Chloe tells Daguerre that her mother forbid her from marrying the man she loved for much the same reason her mother eschewed her childhood love to instead marry a man she did not love -- she wished her daughter to be well-provided for. Now she claims she is incapable of loving any one man, consenting instead to loving her many patrons.

In the end, Daguerre finds his lost Isobel, now widowed, and the love story is brought to a conclusion that some may find unsatisfying but which is the only logical conclusion.

While there may not be any major surprises to "Visions" there are many "a-ha" moments that lure the reader to continue turning the pages. Smith uses no bells and whistles, no tricks to bait the reader, but instead uses good storytelling technique and a passion for language to create a sense of period and to establish relationships between all the main characters. Readers who enjoy well-crafted sentences and beautiful prose will find it easy to immerse themselves between the covers of "Visions."

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### **Evelyn Porter says**

Filled with historical detail that brings 19th century Paris alive. An interesting novel about the man responsible for developing the 'daguerreotype' (the precursor to our modern day photograph) and his muse. A good read for those interested in art and photography.

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### **Ann says**

This is a reinvention of the life of one of the pioneers of photography. After a decade of absorbing poisonous mercury vapours as he processes his daguerreotype images, Louis Daguerre begins having visions and suffering delusions. Believing the world will end in a year, he creates his 'Doomsday List' - 10 items he must photograph before the final day. On the list is Isobel Le Fournier, the woman he has always loved but not spoken to in 50 years. Assisted by poet Charles Baudelaire and Pigeon, a beautiful prostitute, Louis searches Paris for memorable images and for the woman he only kissed once but never forgot.

I struggled with the first half of the book, despite it being the kind of historical/biographical/romantic novel that I enjoy, and I put it aside. However when I picked it up again, after a 2 month break, I found the second half much more satisfying and I read it quickly. It's not a happy, entertaining book, but it was interesting. And learning about the early photographic process was fascinating!

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### **Jeffrey Keeten says**

**”I consider myself a scientist as much as an artist,...’ Louis said, placing the phials beside each other.**

**‘And this is science? Asking strangers to pose naked for you?’**

**‘I’m a student of light,’ Louis said.**

**‘And a poet.’**

**‘No, I leave that to Charles Baudelaire. My job is to capture things before they disappear.’**

**‘Am I going to disappear, Monsieur Daguerre?’**

**‘No, I meant---capture things in their essence.’**

### **Daguerreotype of Louis Daguerre.**

Louis Daguerre is a lonely, brilliant man. He has never married, and as this tale unfolds, we will discover that he did fall in love once at the age of fourteen and never fell out of that love. He sustained it, remained steadfastly loyal to it, and never looked for it elsewhere. He checked the box for unrequited love and spent a lifetime trying to become famous so that the woman he lost would know he was worth losing.

He was always a strange lad.

**”I see things others don’t; I always have.”**

It is hard to be someone who sees a miracle in the mundane or beauty in the grotesque or a revelation in a particle of dust caught in a beam of sunlight. A conversation with Daguerre is a non-linear experience.

*”We’re having a conversation that moves from leeches to marriage. That’s what I’ve missed about you. The fact that everything is linked to everything else---love to insects, dirt to heaven.”*

I don’t know when I first realized that I was seeing things that other people didn’t see. I’m not talking about...I see dead people, nothing that strange. Everything has always been more of a source of mystery to

me than it was to other people. I see connections in novels that other people don't see. I don't know how many times I've had people say on one of my review threads that I saw much more in a book than they did. Some of that is due to how old I am. I've logged a lot more hours of reading than most people on GR, so there are a lot more points of reference in my head. I do have to accept that I'm always going to see things differently. Fortunately, I'm not a crazy genius like Daguerre or I would have, over the years, become more and more removed from "reality."

### **A daguerreotype of Edgar Allan Poe.**

The daguerreotype of photography is named after him, of course. With the help of another scientist, he discovered how to chemically etch images into plate. A revelation! I think one of the things that I really like about Daguerre the most is that he was a scientist with the heart of a poet. Speaking of poets, Charles Baudelaire shows up a few times in the novel as a friend of Daguerre, but if you are a Baudelaire fan, don't expect any insights into his character. If this were a movie, the actor playing Baudelaire would be demanding more lines.

Daguerre is beginning to have health issues, and a lot of that has to do with the poisonous chemicals he uses to make his photographs. *"This metal that would not yield to form, that resisted the clutch of the human hand and yet was absorbed by the skin upon touching. A gift from the cinnabar mines of Spain. A metallic sonnet, a love letter written by God and veined through the earth for millennia, fissured through slate and sandstone, waiting for its highest calling."*

He has absorbed too much mercury. He has this growing sense of doom, as if the earth was truly about to stop spinning or explode. Illusions, delusions, prophecy, or just too many chemical wrapped thoughts? With a French revolution destabilizing Paris, he decides that it is now or never if he wishes to see his life's love one more time.

I was really taken with the unexpected poignancy of the novel. Dominic Smith managed to convinced me that a 14 year old's love for a another was not just an infatuation, but actually true love.

### **Nudes of course were very popular. One of Daguerre's bucket list items was to photograph a beautiful nude woman.**

Daguerre not only changed photography, but he was also the inventor of dioramas. He was a gifted canvas painter and also used those skills to bring theatre backdrops to life. His name is one of the 72 great French people inscribed on the Eiffel Tower. I've contemplated many daguerreotypes. They were very popular during the Civil War. Almost every soldier paid to have himself immortalized in uniform. I would pay good money to see a picture of my ancestor Thomas Newton Keeten in his Confederate uniform, but if one ever existed it seems to be lost to history. The daguerreotype was the original selfie. Self-obsession is not a new concept, though I do feel that self love may have reached an all time high if the pictures of my friends I see in the Facebook feed every day is any indication. Narcissus doesn't stare at himself in a pool of water anymore, but rather into the lense of his phone camera.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>  
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

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## **Kristen Long says**

“Love is not like choosing a partner for whist. It has a life of its own. Our duty is merely to follow its call.”

While suffering from mercury poisoning, Louis Daguerre—father of the daguerreotype—has a vision of Armageddon and becomes convinced that the world is ending very soon. But before the end, he has a list of daguerreotypes that he wants to take, including one of the woman he has always loved. The completion of his list, with the help of a poet and a prostitute, takes him all over Paris. The question remains—will he find his love?

I rarely give a book five stars, but this one just sang to me. Smith employed words in such a beautiful way and was able to describe things in a succinct yet poetic manner. It was enjoyable to learn about a character from photography history, and the setting, Paris, is one of my absolute favorite places on the planet. The city literally feels like it breathes history and culture. It is one of my favorite things to read books about the history of places that I've been or that I'm currently at, and I loved being able to picture the view from Notre Dame as Louis was there, L'Hotel de Ville, or one of the many bridges.

I would love to read another one of his books!

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## **Jeanette Lewis says**

This author has a love of language and it's not often that I read a book where the English language is written with such eloquence. Spoken English does not have the flow and romanticism of French and Italian, however in the written form with an abundance of descriptive words it can give a story the romanticism of either of the other languages. I loved this read, the author has created a living Louis Daguerre to his very soul as an artist and inventor. Louis has observed so much upheaval in France, revolutions and the era of Napoleon but who seems to have lived unscathed by it all. However, the dismissiveness by both his parents, the use of so many poisons required for his Daguerreotype images, his unrequited love as a young man for a servant girl from his household that became a lifetime obsession, the bohemian life of Paris and the uses of Opium, Absinthe etc all played a part of creating an illusion of life rather than the reality of life, not dissimilar I suspect to that of Lautrec and Van Gogh. The chance meeting of Isobel's daughter throws Louis into a loop back into the past , he writes Isabel a letter, his doomsday madness takes over his life and as it is nearing the perceived time and as another public upheaval starts he and “Pidgeon” leave Paris to where Isabelle lives and where he hopes for a reconciliation for both Isabelle's daughter and himself. The author has concluded this story with a beautiful and warm ending.

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## **Sharon says**

Beautiful and moving, Smith unravels the yearnings and heartache of Louis Daguerre, one of the early inventors of photography, in a novel sprawling Daguerre's lifetime. The descriptions invoke all of the senses, but sometimes the writing dips back into fairly plain prose, leaving the feeling that the novel is just a few paces off greatness. The characters are well rounded, each shaped by time and revolution, while the plot feels gripping and tense in some moments, and stretched out and slow in others. I would recommend it (I learned a lot about the history of photography), but look forward to trying Smith's newer works to see his evolution as a writer.

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## David Katzman says

I'll admit it. I cried.

To write some back-cover copy, "This is a finely wrought tale of love lost, found, and then lost again." And then misplaced somewhere in that damn garage. No, seriously, this is quite a lovely book. I chose *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre* because I thought it was going to be the portrayal of an artist (the inventor of photography, Louis Daguerre) going mad, wandering Paris and experiencing hallucinations. Something I hope to do someday. I was mistaken. The "mercury visions" in the title are primarily referring to the surreal quality of the Daguerreotypes, the photo imprinting method Daguerre invented, which use mercury as a fixative. Daguerre does in fact go a bit mad from mercury poisoning, but he doesn't hallucinate so much as fall into a state of mild to moderate dementia. Even so, I wasn't disappointed. This is a well-crafted book.

An example Daguerreotype:

The story takes place in the first half of the 19th century in France. Smith manages to conjure this period convincingly and imbues it with a rich atmosphere. Baudelaire plays a supporting role, and I even believed that characterization.

Other than exploring love—specifically what happens when love is abandoned for needs that are more practical—the primary subject matter of the book is the place of photography in the world of art, and art's value in general. For Daguerre, photography was a way to achieve fame and even immortality for both himself and for moments in time. Many artists consider art to be their route to immortality. And yet ironically, believing the world is about to end, Daguerre is driven to capture a final list of photographs in order to stash them in the crypts under Paris to preserve them after the Apocalypse. (As you might suspect, the Apocalypse is cancelled due to lack of advertising.) Who thinks of Daguerreotypes now? The implication is that art is a rather inadequate means to immortality. There is no way to achieve immortality when life is so fleeting. Instead, we're better off pursuing love because that at least might fulfill us during our existence. A rather romantic notion, certainly.

However, Smith indicates several times that Daguerre would not have achieved the success and fame that he had if he hadn't been scorned early in life by his great love. The implication is that love can actually make us complacent and less successful. We throw ourselves more aggressively into "achievement" perhaps if we fail at love. Some might; I suspect others give up pursuing their goals when they find misery in love. For Daguerre, it was like revenge—*look how great I became. You could have had me yet chose not to.* I appreciate the mixed messages about love, but one of the clear suggestions in this novel is that choosing financial gain over love is a sure route to life-long emptiness.

I can't say that I agree with any one portrayal of love as representative for all—for others love fulfilled can also lead to lifelong misery—but it's believable for the characters portrayed within this work and it's a worthwhile cautionary tale to ponder. The ending is rather tragic and beautiful and unexpected, too.

Despite this being the type of book that I don't seek out (realist, historical, and in some ways a love story), I

looked forward to picking it up and got lost in it. Recommended.

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## Marianne says

3.5★s

“I open the eye of the camera to something I sense is there but cannot fully name or see”

The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre is the debut novel by prize-winning Australian-born author, Dominic Smith. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre's claim to fame was as a pioneer in the field of photography, inventing the Daguerreotype. By the latter portion of his life, he knows that the mercury vapour has poisoned him physically, but is unaware of the mental changes it has wrought. He is gripped by a delusion, firmly believing that the apocalypse is nigh, so he makes a list of ten items he wishes to capture in Daguerreotypes (his doomsday list), to be stored in the Parisian catacombs:

1. A beautiful woman, naked
2. The sun
3. The moon
4. The perfect Paris boulevard
5. A pastoral scene
6. Galloping horses
7. A perfect apple
8. A flower (type to be determined)
9. The king of France
10. Isobel Le Fournier

The last is the woman with whom he has been in love since the age of twelve, and to whom he has not spoken for over forty years.

Smith's tale alternates between two time periods: the late 1840s, in Paris and Orleans, as Daguerre assembles his doomsday list and searches for Isobel; from 1800 to 1839, in Orleans and Paris, recounting significant events in Louis's life. Smith's extensive research is apparent on every page. Smith said he aimed “to capture the flavour of the real Daguerre's life and the historical context in which he achieved his fame” and this he has done. Both young Louis and the sixty year old man whose brain had been poisoned by mercury vapour are well depicted, as is mid-nineteenth century Paris.

Despite some stunning prose: “They sat motionless as it unfolded, as the cloudscape grew backlit and the trees gave off the shimmer of ice granules trapped in bark. The snow shadows gained definition in a sunburst, blued and deepened by a rise in contrast. Louis stood and moved slowly to the camera. He made a few Adjustments to the camera and looked out at the radiant sky. Here was the way the vault of heaven would crack open on the final day, with those dazzled and portentous clouds, with shunts of granulated light. It resembled nothing so much as a sea of glass. He imagined saints driven through with sabres, chariots of righteous angels, a red dragon rising through coal smoke”, this novel does not achieve the standard of his most recent novel, The Last Painting of Sara de Vos, but as a debut, it demonstrates his potential. An interesting read.

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## Matt Wood says

This fictitious account of the life of Louis Daguerre is at a vivid and sensuous tale. Small nuggets of fact coated with a candy sheen of fiction.

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### **Michaela says**

The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre was a surprise package for me. I didn't know what it was about and had little expectation going into it so just rode with the book. This novel tells the story of Daguerre, one of the father's of photography. After a decade working with the lethal mercury he suffers a prophetic hallucination. The world will end in one year and he must photograph ten objects before the apocalypse, including the mysterious Isobel Le Fournier.

I do love the concept of taking a sliver of history and weaving a fictional narrative around it. The writing in this novel is simple, easy to read and evocative creating a fascinating plot driven by the historical figure of Daguerre. I did note that this book is distinctly different at the beginning, middle and end. Each portion of the story was unique focusing on different aspects of the plot. I certainly did not predict where the end was going from the beginning or even the middle.

The characters are interesting and keep the reader invested in the story. Daguerre is a fascinating character intent on fulfilling his goals before the world ends and his affinity for mercury, what gave him his fame, was fascinating especially as the reader knows that the element he loves so much is doing him much harm. Pigeon is a great character playing the role of a beautiful bohemian making her way in life. The mysterious Isobel is a fascinating character that the reader spends the first half of the book wanting to know more about, learning more and more as the chapters slowly reveal her role in this book. I did find some of the characters started to frustrate me further into the novel but just as they began irritating the plot changes it's course again.

This novel is a bit of a slow-burn rollercoaster, if that even makes sense? The beginning is very promising and draws the reader right in, particularly with chapters cutting to Daguerre's childhood. The plot seems to dip a little in the middle before heading in a completely different direction and finishing strongly. This novel was very easy to read and was highly enjoyable. It is also easy to under-estimate due to the subtle complexities of the plot. I do highly recommend this read and I plan to read more of his work in the future, starting with the award-winning The last Painting of Sara de Vos. I give The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre three paint pallets, where Daguerre started his journey.

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### **George says**

“Louis Daguerre fell in love with women and light on the same day”---pg. 17

‘The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre’, by Dominic Smith is a wonderful and haunting story, well and

beautifully told. Dominic Smith is a 'phraseologist' of the first stripe. Let me borrow the words to further illuminate this novel, my own being inadequate.

"An unforgettable novel from an award-winning writer, 'The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre' is the story of enduring love, fame unraveling, and a prodigious mind coming undone."---from the back flap

"A lyrical journey into the world of a man lost to nostalgia and undone by beauty. Dominic Smith has generously rendered an artist in desperate pursuit of the sublime." ---Paul Jaskunas, author of 'Hidden', from the back cover.

"...By the time it reaches its final pages, 'The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre' has become a genuinely moving experience."---Anthony Giardina, author of 'Recent History', from the back cover.

That said, can anyone define for me the phrase/term: 'rag-cloth romantics'?---pg. 6

Recommended: For the poet in all of us.

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### **Laurie says**

Well, admittedly this was pretty much two different books, but I liked them both!

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### **Angela says**

I was so into this book until the end. I hate when I read a great story and read a disappointing end. It was all right, but the "love" storyline superseded the "photography" storyline and that's just not what I planned on reading. You could have substituted anyone for Louis Daguerre and achieved the same ending. The history was fascinating, the setting ideal, and Smith certainly knows how to tell a story. But it's like he changed his mind halfway through and went a completely different direction. Daguerre has mercury poisoning--I had nearly forgotten by the end of the novel.

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### **Mary Danger says**

Loved this book...it combines my interest in early photo history, the streets of Paris in early 19th Century turmoil and the story of a complicated man and artist. Hmm, maybe I'll read it again.

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