

“A compelling tale of the intoxicating power of friendship, female rivalry, and romance.”
—KATE MARSHALL, author of *I Am Still Alive*

MERCURY BOYS

A NOVEL



CHANDRA PRASAD

BOOK CLUB KIT

A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

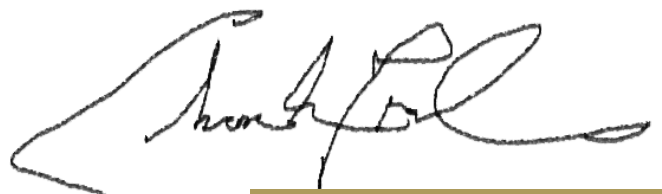
Dear Book Club members,

I can't tell you how thrilled I am that you've decided to read and discuss my novel *Mercury Boys*. I began the journey of writing this book when I happened across the memorable daguerreotype of Robert Cornelius, a pioneering American inventor. The more I learned about him and daguerreotypes in general, the faster the plot of this book coalesced in my head. Interestingly, Saskia, the teenage protagonist of *Mercury Boys*, also begins her journey when she encounters Robert Cornelius' daguerreotype. I guess you could say I related to Saskia from the very beginning.

In the process of writing, I frequently wondered which aspects of the story readers like you would hone in on. Would it be the glimpses of Cornelius' fascinating life story? The unexpected lore and mythology behind elemental mercury? Or perhaps the highlights of 19th-century American history woven into the novel — from the official launch of the women's suffrage movement to the heyday of New York City's Crystal Palace, a celebrated building that burned to the ground in 1853 and is now all but lost to memory?

Maybe as you're reading, you'll focus more on the present, and specifically on the trials and tribulations of the teen girls in the Mercury Boys Club. Adolescence is a time in which friendships and relationships feel incredibly urgent — sometimes even momentous. And the girls' friendship and relationships in this tale are no different. Saskia, Lila, Paige, and the other girls develop and manage their secret club with now-or-never verve and intensity. The character Paige explains the club this way: "What we've discovered is a big deal — groundbreaking, actually... Maybe even sacred." Her fervor reminds me that adolescence, especially for girls, can often feel overwhelming and fraught, for about a thousand different reasons. But it yields truth, too. And that's what Saskia finds by the end of the story.

Whether in *Mercury Boys* you focus on the past or the present, the friendships or the rivalries, the timelessness of some of the book's themes or the brevity of young innocence, I hope you find something that feels both memorable and personal, in the way that daguerreotypes now feel to me.



CHANDRA PRASAD



AN INTERVIEW WITH

CHANDRA PRASAD

WHY DID YOU WRITE *MERCURY BOYS*?

Years ago, the daguerreotype of Robert Cornelius made national headlines. I think I first read about it on CNN. This daguerreotype was evidently the first photographic self-portrait, or in today's vernacular, the first "selfie" (now, as we know, the taking of selfies is practically a rite of passage for today's teenagers!). After reading up on Robert Cornelius specifically and daguerreotypes generally, I learned how early photographers like Cornelius had to be skilled chemists in order to properly handle the toxic substances early photography required.

I also learned that Cornelius was a fascinating individual — an inventor, lighting entrepreneur, photographer, and metallurgist.

When I researched the history of elemental mercury, and how it was seen, variously, as an antidepressant, fertility aid, poison, miracle cure, and alchemical device, I saw the potential for an exciting story — one that melds together photography, bits of American history, early American pioneers, the problematic notion of female hysteria, and the complicated minefield that is modern female adolescence.

The possibility of enchantment and magic also permeate this novel.



HOW DID YOU ARRIVE AT THE TITLE: *MERCURY BOYS*?

The word “mercury” in *Mercury Boys* is significant in many ways. The Roman god Mercury was the ancient god of luck, boundaries, travel, and tricksters, all of which have a role in this book. Historically, mankind saw elemental mercury as enchanted or magical since it is the only liquid metal in existence. The possibility of enchantment and magic also permeate this novel. In addition, the adjectival form of mercury, “mercurial,” means changeable and volatile, which apply to the girls and their club. Finally, the girls require elemental mercury to access the boys in the daguerreotypes, so mercury, quite literally, is essential to the novel’s plot.

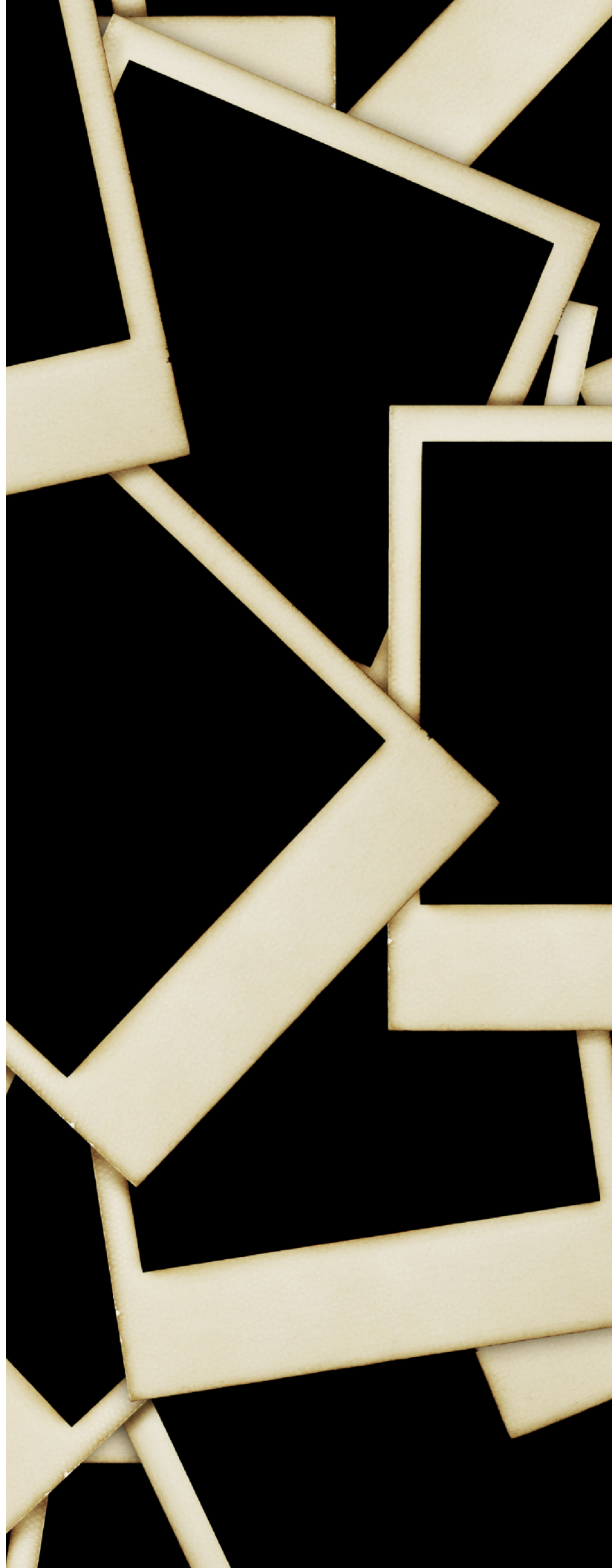
WHAT ARE DAGUERREOTYPES AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT IN *MERCURY BOYS*?

The daguerreotype was the first publicly available photography. Daguerreotypes were popular in the mid-1800s. They were named after their inventor, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, a French artist and photographer. While daguerreotypes were very popular for a brief time, they faded into obscurity with the advent of other forms of photography such as tintypes, ambrotypes, and cyanotypes.

Daguerreotypes are important to the novel because they require the use of mercury vapor during the photographic process. Liquid mercury, in turn, is required by the girls in the book when they “visit” their Forever Boyfriends.

WHAT RESEARCH DID YOU DO FOR THE BOOK, AND IN PARTICULAR, FOR THE CHARACTERS WHO ARE FROM THE MID-1800S?

Three of my previous books— *On Borrowed Wings*, *Death of a Circus*, and *Breathe the Sky* — are historical novels that required extensive research. I love learning about history, so it’s no coincidence that *Mercury Boys* also has a few characters from the mid-19th century. To get the details right, I read extensively about Civil War field hospitals, early American women’s suffrage conventions, the California Gold Rush, and the New York Crystal Palace exhibition, among other subjects.



CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE MAIN CHARACTER, SASKIA BROWN?

Saskia Brown is a 16-year-old high school student who is going through a hard time. Her parents are going through a divorce. Estranged from her mother, Saskia has chosen to move with her father from Arizona to a small town in Connecticut. Though she used to be outgoing, the dissolution of her family and her “new kid in school” status have made her shy and self-conscious. Her shyness is further exacerbated by the fact that she is biracial in a mostly white school. While she quickly manages to make a caring friend, Lila, Saskia is nonetheless impressionable and vulnerable when she makes the acquaintance of the most popular girl in school, Paige, who holds a dark secret.

MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Being half-Asian herself, Prasad has long acknowledged the dearth of significant multiracial characters in literature, especially for teens and children, and has sought to bring awareness to this issue. While multiracial kids now comprise anywhere between 7 and 14 percent of this country’s youth population, the Cooperative Children’s Book Center says that less than 1 percent of children’s books currently feature a significant multiracial character. For this reason, Prasad chose multiracial protagonists for both *Damselfly* and *Mercury Boys*.

Prasad’s shorter works have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Week*, the official magazine of the U.S. Department of State, *Teen Voices*, and numerous literary, arts, and poetry journals. Prasad is also a contributor to *New Haven Noir*, a short story anthology edited by Amy Bloom.

A graduate of Yale, Prasad is currently working on several books and writing projects. She lives in Connecticut with her husband, sons, and assorted pets.

Chandra Prasad’s first young adult novel, *Damselfly*, was published by Scholastic to critical acclaim. *School Library Journal* called it a “compelling modern-day adventure,” while *Booklist* pronounced it “a compulsive read.” Across the country, educators in grades 6-12 teach *Damselfly* in their curricula, often as a modern, female-centric parallel text with *Lord of the Flies*.

The author previously wrote general fiction, including the novel *On Borrowed Wings*, which was a Connecticut Book Award finalist. Her other novels include *Death of a Circus*, which *Booklist* called “richly textured [and] packed with glamour and grit,” and *Breathe the Sky*, a fictionalized account of Amelia Earhart’s last days. Wally Lamb wrote, “*Breathe the Sky* brings us into Amelia Earhart’s cockpit and her psyche. From lift-off to landing, [this] is a novel that soars.”

Prasad is also the originator and editor of — and a contributor to — *Mixed*, the first ever anthology of short stories on the multiracial experience, which was published by W.W. Norton.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. During the historical interstitials in the novel, we meet a pickpocket, a Union soldier, a poet, an inventor, and a young women's rights activist. Which of these characters (and their setting) do you find the most appealing and why?

2. Saskia's father is a supportive and stabilizing influence in her life. By contrast, her mother has made decisions that have caused Saskia considerable worry and upheaval. Discuss Saskia's view of each of her parents. Do you think her assessment of each of them is fair? Why or why not?

3. Saskia's obsession with old movies is a kind of escapism from her real-life problems. It could be argued that Robert Cornelius is also a means of escape and that Saskia conjured him, consciously or not, in order to avoid difficulties in her regular life. Do you think Saskia "invented" her encounters with Robert Cornelius? Why or why not? Do you think Lila and Adrienne "invented" Cassie and Emery, respectively? Why or why not?

4. Paige and Sara Beth, the antagonists in *Mercury Boys*, revel in each other's malevolence. Allies in the worst way, the sisters seem to provoke each other to be increasingly cruel. Do you think Paige would be as sadistic without Sara Beth, and vice versa? What drives the sisters to such malicious lengths? Do you think their behavior will continue into adulthood?

5. In the novel, Robert Cornelius tells Saskia, "I became addicted to the lure of mercury, and I'm not the first. Mercury's the most fascinating of the elements." He goes on to explain that throughout history, mankind has believed mercury can do all sorts of wondrous things, from enhancing fertility, to granting immortality, to achieving alchemy. Of course, in the present day, Saskia and her friends know that mercury is a highly toxic substance capable of causing injury and death. Discuss mercury's complex and at times conflicting status within the book.

6. Saskia clearly feels like an outsider in Coventon, Connecticut, because of her newcomer status, her anxious state of mind, and being biracial in a predominately white town. For different reasons, Lily could also be considered an outsider. Do you think this feeling of being apart from the Coventon norm makes the girls closer? Why or why not? Conversely, who in Coventon is an "insider" and why?

7. Lila, who is smart, trustworthy, funny, and full of moxy, is perhaps the most likeable character in the book. Yet she is often treated poorly by the other girls, and her best friend, Saskia, repeatedly puts her in unfair situations. If you could give Lila advice on friendship, what would it be?

8. Lila and Saskia make their own daguerreotype in the hopes that after they die, their images will live on and become a portal of sorts. If there really were a magical way to conjure the deceased in dreams, would you want to participate? Discuss.

9. Before coming up with the moniker "Forever Boyfriends," Paige says to the other girls, "Guys were different then, weren't they? More mature, more worldly. They wanted to make a mark, take a stand. They risked their lives for what they believed in. What do guys do now? Play video games and chase girls. There's no comparison." In light of what we learn about the sisters, it's hard to know if Paige meant what she was saying. Regardless, do you think she's correct? Why or why not? Do you think the same point could be made about girls in the 1800s and girls today?

10. The allure of secret societies and clandestine clubs is undeniable and has been for centuries. If you were given the chance to join one, even one that might be dangerous, would you? Explain.

JOURNEY INTO HISTORY

WHAT IS A DAGUERROTYPE?

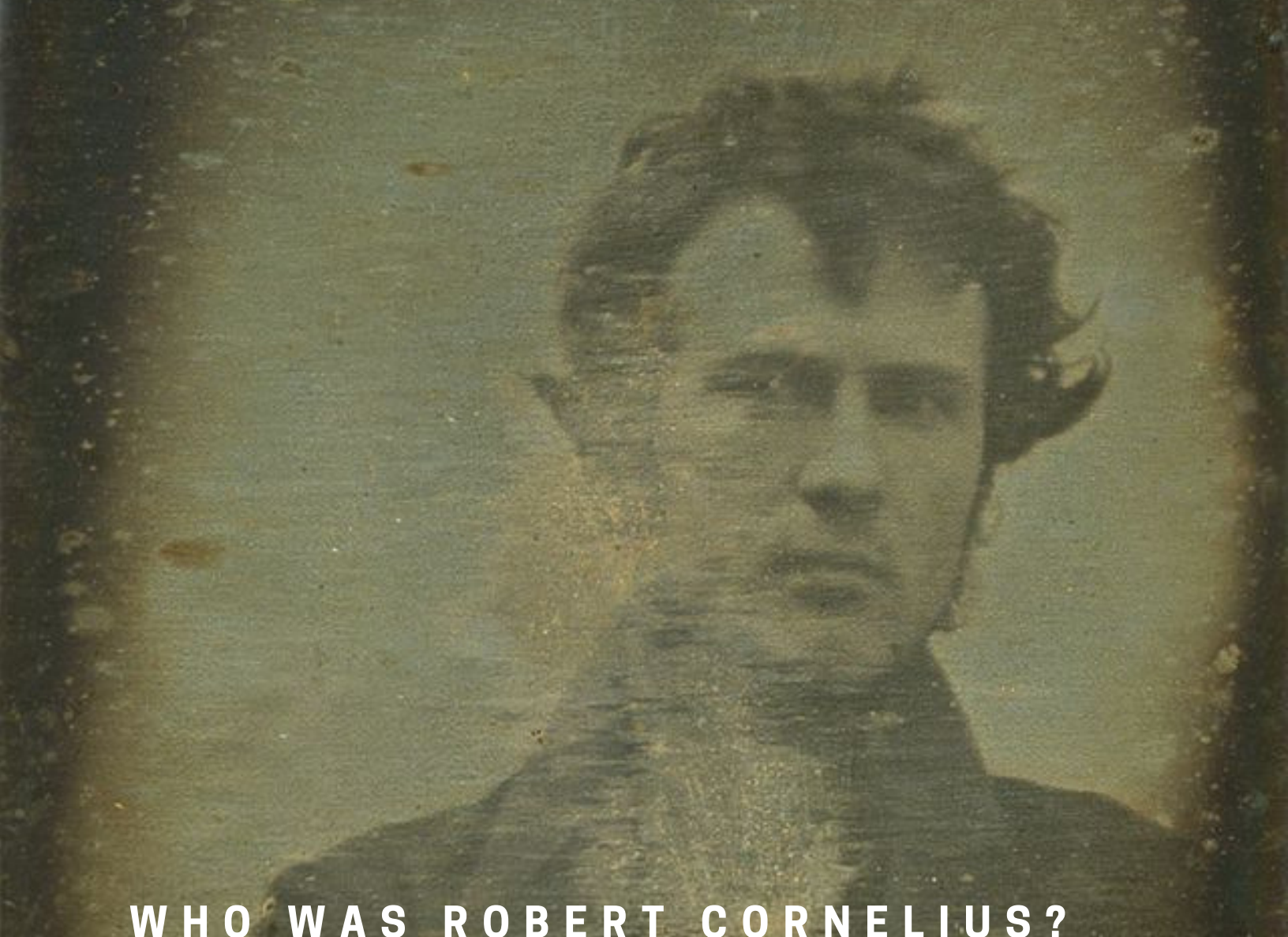
Named after their inventor, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, daguerreotypes were an early photographic process. Originated in France in 1839, daguerreotypes swiftly spread throughout Europe and made their way to the United States, where they were embraced. The Industrial Revolution had created a burgeoning American middle class with cash to spend. Eager for excitement and new experiences, individuals and families eagerly lined up to have their portraits taken. Prior to the invention of photography, only the wealthy could afford to hire a professional portraitist to create a likeness. But daguerreotypes allowed a much larger swath of the population to take home accurate representations of loved ones. By 1850, there were dozens of daguerreotype studios in New York City alone.



The daguerreotype process is a direct-positive process, which means no negative is required. The creation of daguerreotypes is complex and requires a fairly advanced understanding of chemistry. An early daguerreotype-maker needed to polish and buff a silver-coated copper plate until the surface was highly reflective (much like a mirror). He then sensitized the plate with chemicals like chloride of iodine and chloride of bromine. The sensitized plate would go into a light-proof portion of the camera in preparation for the shot. When the subject of the portrait was ready, the camera cover would be removed for the necessary exposure time. Exposure times for early daguerreotypes could be as long as 15 minutes — an eternity for anyone to sit perfectly still! Next, fumes from heated mercury were used to “develop” the photographic image on the silvered plate. Finally, the plate would be dipped into a chemical bath to “fix” the image. Clearly, the making of early daguerreotypes was a laborious and complicated endeavor — not to mention dangerous, given how many chemicals and chemical reactions were involved.

Even when the surface of a daguerreotype was strengthened by gilding, it was nevertheless delicate and prone to scratches, cracks, and tarnishing. To prevent damage, daguerreotypes were usually covered by a sheet of protective glass. They were typically stored in cases made of leather and lined with soft fabrics like velvet or silk. Even so, many of the daguerreotypes that have lasted until now are in need of restoration.

The heyday of daguerreotypes ended around 1860. Daguerre’s invention was replaced by cheaper and faster photographic alternatives like ambrotypes and tintypes. But diehard fans of the daguerreotype argued then — and now — that no other subsequent photographic process has produced such fine, detailed, and memorable images as the original “mirrors with a memory.”



WHO WAS ROBERT CORNELIUS?

Born in 1809 in Philadelphia to Christian and Sarah Cornelius (maiden name: Soder), Robert Cornelius grew up to be something of a Renaissance man: a high-achiever with a keen interest in a variety of subjects. As a child, he attended private school and had a particular fascination with chemistry. This fascination was nurtured when Robert began working for his father, who had left Amsterdam for America in 1783. Christian ran a silversmith business, and as the younger Cornelius honed his silver plating and metal polishing skills, he grew more adept at chemistry, too.

A meeting with Joseph Saxton, an inventor, watchmaker, and photographer who also lived in Philadelphia, sparked in Cornelius a newfound interest in photography. Soon after making Saxton's acquaintance, Cornelius decided to use his chemistry background to perfect the daguerreotype. This exercise led to the photograph Cornelius is best known for — his own self-portrait.

This image is, of course, now widely regarded in today's lexicon as the world's first "selfie."

But Cornelius was more than a flash in the historical pan. Over the course of his long and varied career, he also invented a new lamp called the "solar lamp," which burned lard instead of whale oil. The lamp grew so popular across the United States and Europe that Cornelius needed to build two huge new factories in Philadelphia to meet demand for it. Even as his business ventures thrived, Cornelius continued to invent new products. He applied for numerous patents, including one for lighting gaslights with electric sparks. Along the way, he married his wife, Harriet Comley. The couple had a large family: five daughters and three sons. Cornelius retired a wealthy man and lived a long life for his era, dying in 1893 at age 84. While he is best known for his self-portrait, he personally didn't care much about the image and could not have anticipated its important place in the history of photography.

MERCURY BOYS RULES + PLEDGE

OFFICIAL RULES OF MEMBERSHIP

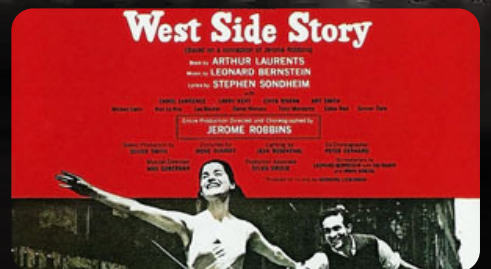
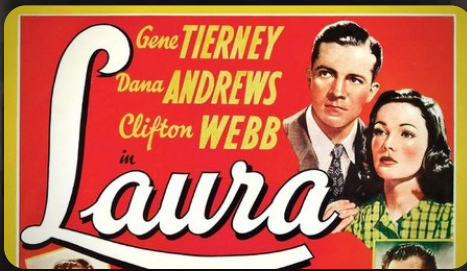
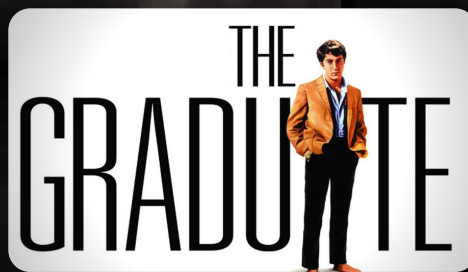
1. Mercury Boys Club members must attend all meetings of the MBC.
2. Becoming a member of the MBC is a lifetime commitment.
3. MBC members must pledge their love and devotion to their Forever Boyfriends.
4. MBC members must visit their Forever Boyfriends at least once a week (preferably every night!!!).
5. MBC members must get the official MBC tattoo.
6. MBC members must obtain and share all necessities (mercury, sleep medicines, etc.)
7. Membership in the MBC is top secret and must be kept strictly confidential. Revealing information about the MBC to outsiders is a PUNISHABLE OFFENSE.
8. Damaging or losing a Forever Boyfriend's daguerreotype is a PUNISHABLE OFFENSE.
9. If a member wants to leave, the group must vote on the issue. Majority wins. It is a PUNISHABLE OFFENSE for a MBC member to leave the club without permission!!!
10. MBC members get to decide all forms of punishment!!!
11. If a MBC member wants to break up with her Forever Boyfriend, she must seek permission from the club.
12. MBC members must support their club sisters and help them remain HONEST.
13. MBC members must abstain from all sexual activity (including kissing!!!) with boys other than their Forever Boyfriends.
14. When visiting their Forever Boyfriends, MBC members must wear APPROPRIATE CLOTHING.
15. MBC members will meet body and soul with their Forever Boyfriends in death!!

OFFICIAL PLEDGE

Today, INSERT DATE, I solemnly swear to take INSERT NAME as my Forever Boyfriend, my faithful companion and eternal love. In the presence of my fellow members, I make a commitment to be INSERT NAME's partner in good times and in bad, in joy and in sorrow, in life and in death. I promise to love him unconditionally, to honor and respect him, and to sacrifice myself for him, if need be. I swear to be a better girlfriend to my Forever Boyfriend than any other girl, living or dead.

SIGNATURE

SASKIA'S MOVIES



PRAISE FOR *MERCURY BOYS*

"*Mercury Boys* has daguerreotypes and dashing strangers, hiding spots and crossed lines. It's full of secrets and fraught with danger. Ultimately, it's like mercury itself — mesmerizing, terrifying, thrilling, and dangerously beautiful. It's pure alchemy."

Carrie Firestone, author of *The Loose Ends List* and *The Unlikelies*

"*Mercury Boys* is a thrilling journey into the perils of adolescent friendship and a touching commentary on love's timelessness."

Tochi Onyebuchi, author of *Beasts Made of Night* and *Crown of Thunder*

"With vividly drawn, multidimensional characters and a riveting voice, *Mercury Boys* weaves a compelling tale of the intoxicating power of friendship, female rivalry, and romance."

Kate Marshall, author of *I Am Still Alive*, soon to be a major motion picture

"In this snapshot of modern teenage life with a historical twist, Prasad creates a world as haunting as a daguerreotype and as vivid as a high-resolution photo. An exhilarating and thought-provoking ride that will make you think twice next time you're thumbing through a photo album."

Michael Belanger, author of *The History of Jane Doe*

"For history buffs and hopeless romantics alike, *Mercury Boys* is a compelling, imaginative romp that will leave teen readers longing for an alternate reality — and a Mercury Boy — of their own."

Natasha Friend, author of *How We Roll* and *Perfect*

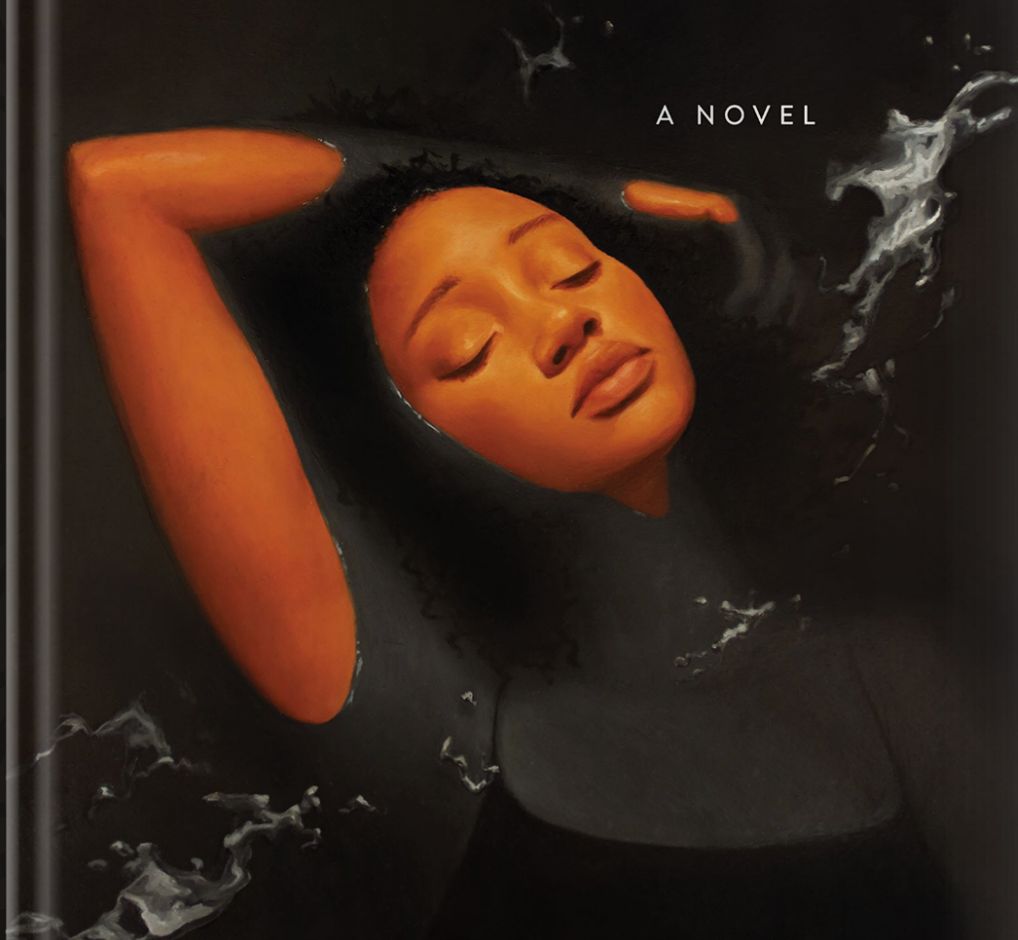
"The concept of 'mean girl' time travelers has enormous cinematic potential, particularly as it is tethered to the zeitgeist. In *Mercury Boys*, Chandra Prasad shows her unique ability to give voice to the acute angst of today's adolescents, caught between the malaise of contemporary society and an inchoate yearning for the values and romance of the past."

Amy Adelson, motion picture/television producer of *Above Suspicion* and *You Know My Name*

“A compelling tale of the intoxicating power of friendship, female rivalry, and romance.”
—KATE MARSHALL, author of *I Am Still Alive*

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