The great 17th-century Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn left us so many arresting self-portraits, painted at every stage in his eventful life, that his distinctive face and bearing are a familiar part of the 20th-century cultural landscape, a recognizable presence in galleries across Europe and North America. Nonetheless, the artist himself remains an enigma. Rembrandt was a notoriously difficult man and an inveterate risk taker in life and art: his aspirations to a grandiose Amsterdam lifestyle in the heyday of his popularity as a painter of portraits and large-scale historical works bankrupted him, and he died in relative poverty. His personal effects and treasured collection of paintings and natural rarities were sold off and dispersed, leaving the historian with a tantalizingly scant body of fragmentary records around which to build a convincing biography. In Rembrandt’s Eyes, Simon Schama—the leading historical craftsman of our era, with a career-long commitment to Dutch history—succeeds with consummate skill in bringing the heroic painter of such masterpieces as The Night Watch and Portrait of Jan Six vividly to life. Returning to the bustling Dutch world with which he first made his reputation in the bestselling Embarrassment of Riches (1987), Schama re-creates Rembrandt’s life and times with all the verve and panache of a historical novelist—while never for an instant losing his scrupulous grip on recorded fact and detail. The telling surviving fragments of archival information about Rembrandt’s personal and professional history are skilfully embedded in a rich, dense tapestry of the commercial whirl and political hurly-burly of the 17th-century Low Countries—a divided territory, split between the Catholic and Protestant faiths and the contested powers of the Spanish Hapsburgs and the Dutch Republic—with the tentacles of the tale reaching into the most unexpected shadowy corners of European love and war, aspiration and intrigue. Rembrandt’s Eyes is, in fact, two biographies for the price of one. From the outset, Schama contrasts the life of Rembrandt with that of his older, equally talented countryman Peter Paul Rubens, whose meteoric rise and sustained success as a society painter forms a revealing contrast with Rembrandt’s unhappier relationship with fame and fortune. The comparison is a telling one. Where Rubens furnishes the wealthy and powerful with glorious reflections of, and visual foils for, their social and political aspirations and glory, Rembrandt can never resist testing the envelope of taste and stylistic acceptability. His challenge to his clients to embrace the shock of his painterly experiments with technique, texture, and composition ultimately produced his downfall. The Amsterdam town
council took down his The Oath-swearing of Claudius Civilis, rolled it up, and returned his masterpiece to him to be cut down in an attempt to sell it to a suitable buyer. This is a gorgeous book to own, too. Rembrandts Eyes is printed on heavy, high-gloss paper and lavishly illustrated throughout in full color. The double-page color spreads of the most memorable of Rembrandts works will take readers breath away. But above all, this is narrative history at its very best, a page-turner and an adventure story that will make the reader laugh and cry by turns in the time-honored tradition of masterly writing. --Lisa Jardine

**Personal Review: Rembrandts Eyes by Rembrandt Harmenszoon Van Rijn**

Being Dutch, I remember as a kid how my teacher was mesmerizing about how wonderful it would be to have a big enough telescope to catch all the emitted light from long ago and to be able to see Rembrandt paint. I did not know why then, but now I do agree. How wonderful it would have been had he only lived 300 years more to light up all the museums in the world! This book is about, to my opinion, the best painter of mankind, his life and work. It is also a dual biography about Rubens, since he was so important for Rembrandt.

The book works nicely chronological and winds its way through the younger years of Rembrandt til his last years. In the mean time we also learn a lot about not only his life in Leiden and Amsterdam, but also about the history of Holland of the 17th century. It is absolutely great to learn about for instance the Night Watch, for whom it was painted, who the people are on it, why it was so revolutionary and still the most stunning 17th century painting.

I always wanted to know, as far as recorded history allows us, about the background of his paintings; who ordered it, did they and Rembrandt like it themselves? And most of all: analysis of the paintings themselves: what 'effects' are used, and how? This book goes into wide details of this all without getting repetitive or boring.

Rembrandt is unique among all painters in his combination of talent and 'raffinement'. He could do anything: super precise works, impressionistic style where the paint itself was the 3d effect, portraits, group portraits, history paintings, landscapes, the best etches off all time. His touch and well-aimed strokes immediately got to the essence. His works under scrutiny come out even more unsurpassable and amazing. It is true that none of his students ever came close to his talent, and some of them tried for the rest of their life to master just some aspect of his art (for instance the light effects) while Rembrandt moved on to a more 'rough' style, although it was justly called in this book deceivingly easy to imitate, and of course, 'rough' here does not mean carelessly painted.

Basically he is the first (and best) impressionist in the history of painting. I have been at the Rijksmuseum many times, and it does not matter which work you look at: Jeremia, his mother reading, the Jewish Bride, his hypnotisingly beautiful self portrait at a young age, it just shows that this is a once in a mankind kind of thing. Rembrandt has shown us once and for all what the art of painting can do, how it can lift our lives by trying so
dramatically to imitate it. Indeed looking at his work, it almost seems that his paintings are triumphant over reality. This book is a great read and the many colour pictures of his work are, needless to say, a pleasure to look at. Only minus is, that Schama to my opinion is a little too modest about Rembrandt's genius.