

# De Potter's Grand Tour

by Joanna Scott

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## About the Book

In 1905, a tourist agent and amateur antiques collector named Armand de Potter mysteriously disappeared off the coast of Greece. His body is never recovered and his wife is left to manage his affairs on her own. But as she starts to piece together his life, she realizes that everything was not as he had said. Infused with details from letters and diary entries, the narrative twists forward and backward through time, revealing a lost world of fake identities, underground antiques networks, and a husband who wasn't what he seemed.

Originally from Belgium, young Armand de Potter comes to New York without a penny in his pocket. With cunning ambition, he quickly makes a name for himself as both a worldwide travel guide and a trusted --- if illegal --- antiques dealer. After marrying, he moves the family to a luxurious villa in Cannes and embraces an aristocratic life. But as he grows increasingly entangled in the antiques trade and his touring business begins to falter, Armand's control starts to fray. As the world closes in, he believes he only has one option left.

Told with masterful narrative agility, *DE POTTER'S GRAND TOUR* is a tale as grand as the tour guide at its center. Drawing on real letters, legal documents, and a trove of diaries only recently discovered, Joanna Scott points delicately toward the story's historical basis and unfolds a detective tale of the highest order.

## Discussion Guide

From the acclaimed novelist Joanna Scott comes a sumptuous tale of an enduring marriage --- and the masquerade that sustained it. Armand de Potter left his Belgian homeland in the 1870s without a penny in his pocket. An ambitious, imaginative young man, he crafted a new life for himself in New York as an international tour guide and a trusted dealer in antiques. His earnest wife joined him in these endeavors, helping him build a thriving tourism business. As the crowning achievement in his quest for prosperity, he moved his family to a luxurious village in Cannes, steeped in aristocratic refinements. But in 1905, Armand mysteriously disappears at sea off the coast of Greece. His body is never

recovered, and his wife begins to piece together the truth about his identity, along with his financial entanglements. Transporting us to intriguing locales through intricately woven history, *DE POTTER'S GRAND TOUR* is itself a grand voyage that raises as many provocative questions as it answers.

We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group's sojourn.

1. What does the novel reveal about the nature of marriage? How well can we ever know another person, even a life partner?
2. What were your theories about Armand's disappearance? How did your impressions of him shift?
3. What is at the heart of Armand's financial woes? Does he crave elevated social status because he's an illegitimate grandson of Louis de Potter, or is it simply part of his personality?
4. What motivates De Potter's customers to travel abroad, despite the potential hazards and discomforts? What do vacationers seek when they choose to visit a foreign country?
5. How were you affected by the photographs that appear throughout the novel? What realities do they capture in this work of fiction?
6. In his dealings with Professor Hilprecht and Mrs. Stevenson, what does Armand discover about the way antiquities are valued? What would he say about recent controversies over whether museums in Britain and America should return antiquities to their countries of origin? What ordinary objects from your home could be of interest to an archaeologist a thousand years from now?
7. Why was Amy Beckwith willing to transform herself into Aimée de Potter? As a widow, what new purpose in life does she find?
8. Discuss Armand's experiences in North Africa when he traveled with the photographer Alexandre Bougault. As Armand grew older, did he become more world-wise, or more naïve?
9. What does Armand try to teach his son, Victor, about becoming a successful man? When Aimée takes Victor to visit Armand's brother (also named Victor), what do we discover about the legacies of the de Potter men? How has your family history shaped your life?
10. In some ways, De Potter Tours is in the business of theater, with guides who dramatize history and a founder who impersonates a scholar. What does the novel say about the roles we all play as a part of everyday life?
11. What did the villa in Cannes mean to Armand, and to Aimée? What is your own ultimate symbol of success?
12. What is unique about Joanna Scott's approach to homelands and history? How does *DE POTTER'S GRAND TOUR* enhance your enjoyment of her previous novels and short stories?

13. If you were to book a De Potter tour, where would you want to go? What would you want to learn from the guides?

## Author Bio

Joanna Scott is the author of 10 books, including THE MANIKIN, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; VARIOUS ANTIDOTES and ARROGANCE, which were both finalists for the PEN/Faulkner Award; and the critically acclaimed MAKE BELIEVE, TOURMALINE, LIBERATION and FOLLOW ME. She is a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Lannan Award.

## Critical Praise

?An artful mystery set in an era of steamer ships and steam trains, when tourism was new and world travel was a glamorous and sometimes-perilous adventure.?

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