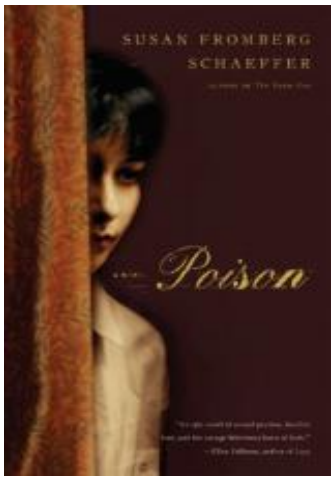
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Poison

by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer



About the Book

A tour de force about marriage, deceit, and envy, "rich in fairy tale imagery and in vivid metaphors" (Publishers Weekly).

The death of flamboyant writer and womanizer Peter Grosvenor sets in motion a series of spiraling events surrounding his legacy and his estate. His bitter third wife, his two children, his sister, his friends, and his would-be biographers are drawn into a maelstrom of intense memories and painful encounters as each of the major players in Peter's life seeks to appropriate Peter's estate for his or her own purposes. As a complex story of passion, jealousy, and loss unfolds, the figures that had once blossomed in Peter's presence spin off into their own orbits and turn against one another without the anchor of his charismatic presence. Ultimately, the tragedy and scandal that marred his life cannot be ended even by his death. Susan Fromberg Schaeffer writes with exquisite flavor and measure; character, history, and relationships build into a large, minutely detailed canvas and remind us why she is a master of the epic novel.

Discussion Guide

1. Peter?s brother, Martin, thinks he has wasted his life. What do you think? What do you think the author believes a worthwhile life is?

2. Had Peter met Claire when he was younger, do you think he would have been happy with her?

3. Is Peter?s relentless philandering the result of the tragedies depicted in **Poison**?

4. Some people have argued that Peter?s adulteries are excusable because adultery is tolerated?if not expected?in other countries. What do you think of this defense (an appeal to moral relativism) of Peter?s behavior? In real life, how would you judge or react to similar behavior?

5. Do you think (or do the characters in **Poison** believe) that moral or sexual latitude ought to be granted to individuals of great gifts, like writers or painters or movie stars?

6. In the end, are Sigrid?s sacrifices for Peter?s sake beneficial or destructive?

7. Rose believes that she has experienced a revelation when speaking to a relative of Peter?s who owns a grocery store. She feels, afterwards, as if an angel has spoken to her. What sort of revelation is it?

8. What is Penelope?s role in this novel?

9. Which characters do you find most sympathetic, and which ones least? Which characters does the author seem to like or dislike most?

10. There are many violent storms depicted in Poison. What role does nature play in this novel?

11. Poison sometimes explores the chasm between what actual people or events actually were to the mythic events and beings the world eventually sees them as being. Is the description of the ?famous? photograph of Peter and Evelyn meant to explore this idea?

12. Peter has two ?motherless? children. Can they recover from the disasters inflicted upon them by their parents, especially famous parents? Or is the fact of the parents? fame irrelevant?

13. In what way (if any) is the plot of **Poison** determined or fated? Is that fate created when Peter marries Evelyn? What could have avoided the many tragedies that occur in **Poison**? Is fate the same thing as character in this novel?

14. Meena may seem to be the classic evil stepmother, but Susan Fromberg Schaeffer has said that she finds her very sympathetic. Why does the author sympathize with Meena?

15. How would you characterize the author?s style, her way of telling a story?

16. When **Poison** ends, the controversy over Peter?s estate has not yet been settled. What do you think will happen to the estate? What do you think will become of the other characters, particularly Sophie and Andrew?

Author Bio

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer's novels include **Poison**, **Anya**, **Buffalo Afternoon**, and **The Madness of a Seduced Woman** . She lives in Chicago and Vermont and teaches at the University of Chicago.

Critical Praise

?Schaeffer?s adroit plotting and organization save the lengthy narrative from sprawl as numerous perspectives unfold and overlap.?

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