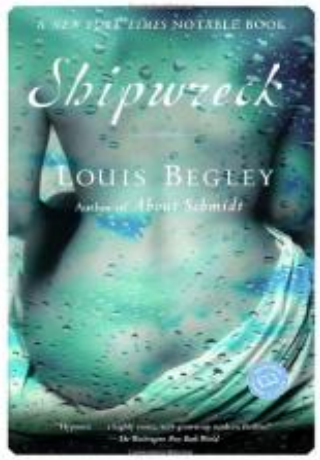
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Shipwreck

by Louis Begley



About the Book

A mesmerizing novel of deception and betrayal from the acclaimed author of **Wartime Lies** and **About Schmidt**.

John North, a prize-winning American writer, is suddenly beset by dark suspicions about the real value of his work. Over endless hours and bottles of whiskey consumed in a mysterious café called L'Entre Deux Mondes, he recounts, in counterpoint to his doubts, the one story he has never told before, perhaps the only important one he will ever tell. North's chosen interlocutor-who could be his doppelgänger-is transfixed by the revelations and becomes the narrator of North's tale.

North has always been faithful to his wife, Lydia, but when one of his novels achieves a special success, he allows himself a dalliance with Léa, a starstruck young journalist. Coolly planning to make sure that his life with Lydia will not be disturbed, North is taken off guard when Léa becomes obsessed with him and he with her elaborate erotic games. As the hypnotic and serpentine confession unfurls, we gradually discover the extraordinary lengths to which North has gone to indulge a powerful desire for self-destruction.

Shipwreck is a daring parable of the contradictory impulses that can rend a single soul-narcissism and self-loathing, refinement and lust.

Discussion Guide

1. John North has been faithful to his wife. Why does he suddenly turn adulterer?

2. Considering John North's obsession with Léa, are you skeptical of his love for his wife?

3. May North's resentment of Lydia's family provide a motive for his betrayal of Lydia? Or does North obsess about Léa

because he has decided that his own work is without value?

4. From what you know of John North's parents, can you imagine his upbringing? How has it affected his character?

5. John North will not accompany Lydia to Japan. Why? What is the effect on his marriage?

6. Will John North and Lydia live happily forever after?

7. Despite his conviction that his novels are without literary merit, North works with great concentration on his subsequent novel, *Loss*. Does this give the lie to his self-deprecation?

8. Throughout the book, there are foreshadowings. John North tells a story from *Daniel Deronda*: Gwendolyn does not throw the rope to the drowning Grandcourt, deliberately withholding
it. "I cannot tell you the resonance of this scene within me." In another place, he tells Léa that if Lydia finds out, "I believe I will kill you" --- and "I will kill you if you come near Lydia." Did you expect something like the conclusion?

9. "I had fallen in love," says John North after his first erotic encounter with Léa. Is he in love?

10. John North has no friends to play squash with. Does he have friends?

11. After John North abandons Léa to the sea, he rolls the dice on his own drowning. Is his gamble in character?

12. Is Léa dead?

13. Will Bunny Frank's "obituary envy" alter John North's feelings about the Frank family?

14. John North tells his listener, in the novel's last line, "You know more about me now than anyone else alive." Does this sentence in effect end the novel?

15. Imagine the rest of John North's life.

16. As a little boy evading Nazis in Poland, Louis Begley had to think ahead, planning every move. His prose style has been called lapidary. Can we associate this quality with the watchfulness and deliberation that he had to practice as a child?

Author Bio

Louis Begley?s novels include KILLER'S CHOICE, KILL AND BE KILLED, MEMORIES OF A MARRIAGE, SCHMIDT STEPS BACK, MATTERS OF HONOR, SHIPWRECK, SCHMIDT DELIVERED, MISTLER'S EXIT, ABOUT SCHMIDT, AS MAX SAW IT, THE MAN WHO WAS LATE, and WARTIME LIES, which won the PEN/Hemingway Award and the Irish Times/Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize. His latest novel, THE NEW LIFE OF HUGO GARDNER, was published in 2020. His work has been translated into 14 languages. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Critical Praise

"Compellingly and compulsively told . . . [North's] obsessive self-awareness, like a mirror, catches our attention and holds it fast."

Shipwreck

by Louis Begley

Publication Date: September 28, 2004
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 243 pages
Publisher: Ballantine Books
ISBN-10: 0345464095
ISBN-13: 9780345464095