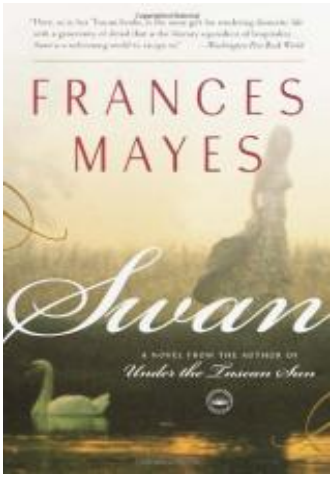
Swan

by Frances Mayes



About the Book

In her celebrated memoirs of life in Tuscany, Frances Mayes writes masterfully about people in a powerful and shaping place. In **Swan**, her first novel, she has created an equally intimate world, rich with striking characters and intriguing twists of fate, that hearkens back to her southern roots.

The Masons are a prominent but now fragmented family who have lived for generations in Swan, an edenic, hidebound small town in Georgia. As **Swan** opens, a bizarre crime pulls Ginger Mason home from her life as an archeologist in Italy: The body of her mother, Catherine, a suicide nineteen years before, has been mysteriously exhumed. Reunited on new terms with her troubled, isolated brother J.J., who has never ventured far from Swan, the Mason children grapple with the profound effects of their mother's life and death on their own lives. When a new explanation for Catherine's death emerges, and other closely guarded family secrets rise to the surface as well, Ginger and J.J. are confronted with startling truths about their family, a particular ordeal in a family and a town that wants to keep the past buried.

Beautifully evoking the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of the deep South while telling an utterly compelling story of the complexity of family ties, **Swan** marks the remarkable fiction debut of one of America's best-loved writers.

Discussion Guide

1. The first two chapters introduce J. J. and Ginger in settings where they seem fulfilled and at peace. What does J. J.'s cabin have in common with the farmhouse Ginger rents in Italy? Is there any similarity between Ginger's relationship with Marco and J. J.'s experience with Julianne, the teacher from Osceola? How does Julianne measure up to Georgia Larkin?

2. Discuss the narrator's voice in **Swan**. What traits do you recognize from Frances Mayes's non fiction and poetry? How did her accomplished writer's eye serve her in creating a novel?

3. Compare her depiction of small-town Georgia to that of Tuscany. Are there any similarities between the Mason's family house and Bramasole?

4. Frances told her editor that **Swan** is "a book of memory, how it cuts and comes again, and of a powerful landscape, which is always at work shaping the people who live on its surface." What are some of the ways in which memory and landscape define the inhabitants of Swan? Were Swan's "old days" good ones?

5. Holt's relationship with Lucy is considered just as taboo as Catherine's extramarital affair. As time passes, how is this legacy of racism handled in the town of Swan? In what ways do Tessie and Scott reflect their generations?

6. Frances Mayes is renowned for her description of Tuscany's cuisine. What are some of the most tempting Southern dishes presented in the novel?

7. From Big Jim to Ginger, the novel portrays a variety of traditional and highly non-traditional men and women. Discuss how **Swan**'s characters compare to the men and women in your life. Do you think that Southern gender roles are different from those found elsewhere in America?

8. Occurring early in the novel, Ginger's passionate scene with Marco is immediately followed by gruesome events in Magnolia Cemetery. How are attitudes toward sex and death entwined in the town of Swan?

9. Why do Ginger and J. J. have such opposing reactions to their father? How did your impression of Wills change when you learned of his connection to Dachau?

10. Do you suppose that Catherine would have rebuffed Austin's marriage proposal if she had been born twenty years later? Is her situation reflected in Ginger's first marriage? How does Catherine's affair compare with her children's romances?

11. Who were your primary suspects in Catherine's murder? How would you have reacted in Sonny's place?

Author Bio

Frances Mayes is the author of the classic UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN, which was a *New York Times* bestseller for more than two and a half years and became a movie starring Diane Lane. Her other international bestsellers include BELLA TUSCANY, EVERY DAY IN TUSCANY, A YEAR IN THE WORLD and three illustrated books: IN TUSCANY, BRINGING TUSCANY HOME and THE TUSCAN SUN COOKBOOK. Mayes is also the author of two novels, SWAN and WOMEN IN SUNLIGHT, six books of poetry, and THE DISCOVERY OF POETRY. Frances Mayes? writing has been translated into more than 50 languages.

Critical Praise

"This remains a solid read, sure to please readers who enjoy Southern fiction."

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