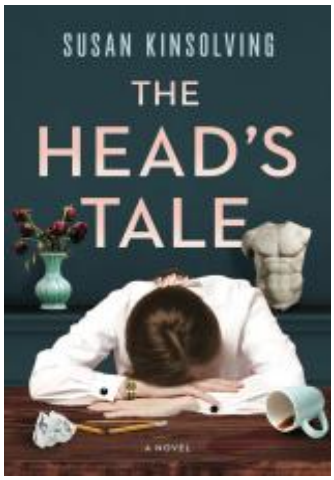
ReadingGroupGuides
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The Head's Tale

by Susan Kinsolving



About the Book

This secret could swamp her.

Miranda Crandell, the Head of Strutthorn Academy, has a brilliant idea to one-up the other elite New England prep schools with their piddling plots of organic veggies for experiential learning: She?ll buy a swamp. Yes, a bog, a quagmire, an oozy acre, where she intends to build a special science center. What she doesn?t account for is Paul Dickersen --- her newly hired freshwater biologist, who is strikingly handsome (even in cargo pants) and turns out to be an irresistible lover.

Miranda?s days are fraught with student and personnel issues, but soon she becomes her own big problem. The Head of School is supposed to be a steadfast and principled role model for impetuous teenage students. Instead, Miranda becomes crazed with lust, spiraling into a wild and messy journey of self-discovery.

Funny, sexy and irreverent, THE HEAD'S TALE is a delightful tromp through the muck of prep school drama --- and a reminder that the process of growing up never truly ends.

Discussion Guide

1. THE HEAD'S TALE satirizes the elite prep schools of New England. Have you attended a prep school, or are you connected to one in any way? If so, how were your experiences similar to or different from those at Strutthorn Academy? Were your preconceived notions about prep schools reinforced or challenged by the book?

2. You learn at the beginning of the story that Miranda is Strutthorn Academy?s first female Head of School. Do you think this influenced her decisions? There are several unstated feminist issues in her struggle. Identify some.

3. The story?s focus is on the adults at the Academy. Still the students, both privileged and problematic, are there. What scene with students interested you most?

4. The ?muskeg? is Miranda?s brilliant idea to set Strutthorn apart from other prep schools, though it becomes part of her downfall. This is one of many ironies among Miranda?s projections. What are some others?

5. How do you judge Paul? A self-serving player or a nice guy who happens to be physically gorgeous? Is he honest or manipulative? Why did Miranda pursue the relationship with him? Should Walter forgive her or give her up?

6. Miranda?s relationship with Lark, her stepdaughter, is sharply revealed after Lark announces her pregnancy and relationship with Jovan. What is your opinion of how Miranda receives her stepdaughter?s news? How would you advise Lark?

7. The Zelstein Environmental Study Center celebration is a disaster. Does this event foreshadow the eventual swamp disaster? How was the yacht emergency handled by the three principals: Lucress, Miranda and Paul? Who responded best?

8. When Miranda meets with Justine to discuss her relationship with Paul, Justine says: ?Maybe it was just some freedom you wanted to try. Freedom you never had as an adolescent?? Do you agree with this statement? How does Justine differ from Miranda?s projection of her? How does the power dynamic shift?

9. There are many laugh-out-loud funny moments in the novel. Do you have a favorite?

10. A difficult concern in this story is shame about sexual matters, body shapes and social conduct. Do you agree or disagree with these varying judgments?

11. Susan Kinsolving satirizes California health spas and sensitivity retreats. Have you ever attended one? Is her humor accurate or unfair? Why does Walter take to Rohatsu?

12. Did the book end in the way you were expecting? Did you have specific hopes for Miranda that did or did not play out in the end? What do you think about her choosing to go to a trade school in Detroit?

13. Who would you cast to play each of the characters in a movie or television adaptation of the book? (The novel is with a real production company now!)

Author Bio

Susan Kinsolving has published four collections of poetry, including DAILIES & RUSHES, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She has received critical acclaim from *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Vanity Fair* and *Publishers Weekly*. Kinsolving has taught in the Bennington Writing Seminars, University of Connecticut, Willard-Cybulski Men?s Prison, and California Institute of the Arts. Her libretti have been performed in California, New York, Italy and the Netherlands. THE HEAD'S TALE is her first novel.

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