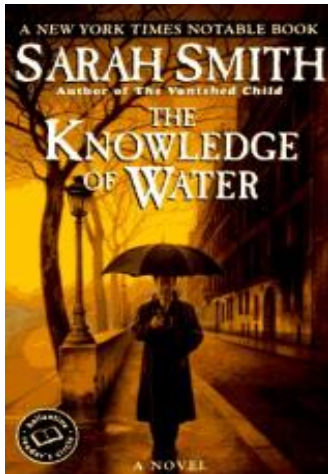


# The Knowledge of Water

by Sarah Smith

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## About the Book

An enigmatic man haunted by guilt and a dark secret from the past... A beautiful young woman consumed by a desire that could destroy her lifelong dream... A madman who stalks them both in retribution for a murder they know nothing about. They are all part of one of the most critically acclaimed suspense novels of the year.

The author's Web site has more information on this book and the author's others.

## Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think the author chose the Great Paris Flood of 1910 as the historical reference point for **The Knowledge of Water**? What important part does water play in this story?
2. We recently suffered though a disastrous series of floods here in the United States. Keeping the video and photographic images from those floods in mind, how do you think Paris changed after the great flood of 1910?
3. One of the underlying themes of this book is the mystery of identity--determining what is real and what is forgery. Which do you think is most real with Perdita--love, art, or both? And who is the deceptive artist? Do you believe that people create forgeries of themselves and their relationships?
4. Characters in **The Knowledge of Water** have some secret they can't tell. They don't have the words; they don't know what it is or are ashamed to tell it; Leonard can neither write nor speak clearly. What's the relationship between learning to speak, finding the right words, and solving a crime? Can not speaking, or speaking what is not factually true, ever be as true as finding the right words and saying them?
5. Family histories connect with identity in **The Knowledge of Water**. For example, Reiden says he is Dotty's cousin.

To what extent can one use or create family to create one's self? How can families hurt or help one's search for identity?

6. Another major theme in **The Knowledge of Water** is the notion that women can't have it all--love, family, and a profession. Perdita says, "the best possible way of life" would be "to have love and music both," and her friend Florrie tells her, "The best possible way of life--isn't possible" (p. 38). Who do you think is right? Can women have it all--and is that what women want?

7. "I accept my difficulties," Armand Inslay-Hochstein says about the swindle he perpetrated, "and [my son] will have Mallais" (p. 453). Madame Mallais asks her husband, "Was it really worth it, for them paintings?" (p. 308). Do you think their crime was worth it? Of the various solutions to the Mallaises' problem given at the end of the book, which one do you prefer? How would you solve the problem?

8. At the end of the book, George Vittal declares, "I have come to free you from the tyranny of Art!" (p. 463). Mallais believes, "Art's to fail at ... it changes you ... makes anything possible; and then you ... try the impossible ..." (p. 436). What is art? What's the difference between art and forgery?

9. Perdita thinks, "Even if you can't live up to your destiny, you can at least have one" (p. 456). What do you think she means by this?

10. Perdita accuses herself of wanting to be married rather than loving Reidsen; he accuses himself of wanting companionship, and sex, but not truly wanting her. At the end of the book, we can foresee that their love won't run smoothly. Is this a friendship that has turned awkward? Why do you think the author chose to make the question of their love so ambiguous?

11. Leonard says, "The more trouble a man has in loving [a woman], the more worthy he is of her" (p. 48). Leonard is the romantic in an anti-romance, a book that's been accused of having a deeply pessimistic view of love. Is he right? Is there a value in sacrificing for love, even love of the wrong kind?

12. Madame Mallais tells Perdita to "take yourself back" (p. 245). Did she ever give herself away?

13. "All love is selfish," says Milly Xico, the cynical French ex-writer; love, she says, is a male want, a trick men play on women--and on themselves (p. 57). Why do Reidsen and Perdita fall in love? In what ways is that love selfish? Can one be in love for selfish reasons?

14. Reidsen criticizes Perdita when she defends the forged reviews and Madame Mallais's forgery (pp. 363-365), but himself sees the value of forgery (pp. 236, 310). Does forgery have a value--sentimental, artistic, or monetary? Is art, as Mark Jones suggests in the epigraph, "mainly fashioned to be appreciated and acquired by others"? Can forgery be an "art" of deception?

15. In the classic mystery, there are three roles: victim, murderer, and detective. There is a crime, a process of discovery, and a solution. **The Knowledge of Water** has all these, but is it really a mystery? 16. Some readers think that the book should end with Perdita's decision to play the piano and Reidsen's to let her tour (pp. 455-456). But it ends nine pages later, after Milly's description of the flood ("On this night we have become history") and Milly's decision to write again, when she throws her own art into the Seine. Why do you think the author did this? (The author has said she doesn't

completely know why this ending is the right one but feels strongly that it is.) **17.** Some reviewers have said the book has too many story lines and characters. Do you think it loses impact because of them? **18.** Secondary characters add to the impact and tone of a book. How do characters like Dotty and Barry Bullard change the tone of **The Knowledge of Water**? **19.** Writing by actual people appears throughout **The Knowledge of Water**, and characters are based on real people. (Among the well-known substitutions are Esther Cohen for Gertrude Stein; Milly and Henry for Colette and Willy; George Vittal for Guillaume Apollinaire; and Gastedon for Picasso.) But everything is changed, renamed, and misquoted. Does this mean that all historical fiction is essentially a forgery, a collage, or an "impression" (p. 465)? Is this a bad thing?

## Author Bio

Sarah Smith grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, and has lived in Japan, London, and Paris. She is a graduate of Radcliffe College and Harvard Graduate School, where she got her Ph.D. in English. A former manager at a computer firm, Smith--who was also a Fulbright Fellow at the Slade Film School, University of London--has taught film and eighteenth-century literature at Tufts University, Boston University, and Northeastern University.

Smith's critically acclaimed first novel, **The Vanished Child**, was selected by the *New York Times* as one of the nine best mysteries of 1992 and has appeared on local, regional, and national bestseller lists. It has become an all-time bestseller at one of San Francisco's leading bookstores, outselling **The Bridges of Madison County** and **The Firm**. Critical praise continues for Smith's latest novel, **The Knowledge of Water**, a *New York Times* Notable Book. It is the second book in a proposed trilogy and follows the fortunes of three central characters from **The Vanished Child** when they find themselves in Paris on the eve of the worst flood the city has ever experienced. The *Boston Sunday Herald* said, "Smith--who has resided in Paris--uses her firsthand knowledge and convincing research to depict the city during its 1910 flood. Dark and engrossing, this production is magnifique."

Smith, a hypertext and science fiction author whose work has appeared in several anthologies, including Best New Horror, has served as a judge for the Philip K. Dick Award. She is also on the Regional Board of Directors of the Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime, and on the board of the Archives of Detective Fiction.

Sarah Smith lives in Brookline, Massachusetts, with her husband, two children, their twenty-two pound cat, Vicious, and Gracie, the assistant cat!

## Critical Praise

" Lushly erotic... The centerpiece of Sarah Smith's elegant period novel is the torrential flood that nearly swept Paris away in 1910.... An exquisite stylist, she observes her characters in the most intimate detail, defining them with witty precision and placing them in a rain-drenched portrait of Edwardian Paris that could hang in the Louvre. "--*The New York Times Book Review*"Compelling... Engrossing... Envelop[s] the reader with history, mystery, and passion. "--*The Boston Herald*" A haunting tale ... An accessible mix of historical speculation, literary allusion, and suspense, [this novel] could become this year's **Name of the Rose**. "--*Entertainment Weekly*

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