

# The Last Painting of Sara de Vos

by Dominic Smith

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## About the Book

Spanning three centuries and three continents that are linked by a mesmerizing work of art, *THE LAST PAINTING OF SARA DE VOS* is itself a masterwork from the acclaimed novelist Dominic Smith. Bridging the historical and the contemporary, the cast of characters in this finely woven story includes a female artist of the Dutch Golden Age (the first woman to be admitted as a master painter to a Guild of St. Luke in the Netherlands), a blue-blooded New Yorker whose family has owned the artist's only known work since the seventeenth century, and a celebrated scholar who painted a forgery of the painting during the 1950s. Featuring a haunting winter scene in which a barefoot girl watches ice skaters at dusk, the painting transcends its origins, falling under the gaze of collectors and curators, lovers and thieves.

Inspired by the little-known women who became professional artists in the age of Rembrandt and Vermeer, *THE LAST PAINTING OF SARA DE VOS* is ultimately a fascinating exploration of the nature of truth and the role of creative expression in our lives

## Discussion Guide

1. What does *At the Edge of a Wood* mean to Sara, Marty and Ellie? How did your reactions to the painting shift throughout the novel?
2. How does the memory of Kathrijn influence Sara's art? What are Sara's perceptions of mortality and the natural world?
3. What does the novel reveal about the distinctions between artists and art historians, and between collectors and dealers? Is art forgery a form of art?

4. What empowers Ellie and Sara despite the chauvinism they face when they launch their respective careers?
5. Would you want the Rent-a-Beats at your party? In their disdain for capitalism, do they do a good job of exposing the plight of someone like Sara?
6. As you read about the great lengths taken to transport the painting from the museum in Leiden, what came to mind about the value of a fake? What value should Ellie's painstakingly created painting possess? How does the muddy nature of falsehood and illusion shape her relationship with Marty?
7. As you observed the stark difference between the Guild of St. Luke in the Netherlands and the modern auction scene in Manhattan, what did you discover about the economics of the art world? Has the patronage system that provided Sara with a benefactor (through Barent's creditor, Cornelis Groen) disappeared?
8. If you had been in Ellie's situation, would you have accepted Gabriel's invitation to 'restore' *At the Edge of a Wood*?
9. Discuss the three marriages portrayed in the book: Sara and Barent, Sara and Tomas, Marty and Rachel. When does love flourish in the novel? What causes it to fade?
10. What is Marty seeking on his sojourn to Sydney? What realizations emerge when he and Ellie are reunited? What misconceptions are laid to rest?
11. Beyond additional paintings, what is Ellie seeking when she makes the pilgrimage to Edith Zeller's bed-and-breakfast?
12. Consider the author's decision to make the Dutch Golden Age his backdrop. What particular qualities permeate the novel as a result of that choice?
13. Does *At the Edge of a Wood* convey any messages that endure across the centuries? What would Sara think if she could have known the fate of her work?
14. How does *THE LAST PAINTING OF SARA DE VOS* enhance the portraits of humanity presented in other novels by Dominic Smith that you have enjoyed?

## Author Bio

Dominic Smith is the author of six novels, including *THE LAST PAINTING OF SARA DE VOS*, which was a *New York Times* bestseller, a *New York Times Book Review* Editors' Choice, and a best book of the year at Amazon, *Slate*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Kirkus Reviews*. His writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Texas Monthly*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times* and *The Australian*, among other publications. He grew up in Sydney, Australia, and now lives in Seattle, Washington.

## Critical Praise

“As this story of art, beauty, deception and the harshest kinds of loss ranged over continents and centuries, I was completely transfixed by the sense of unfolding revelation. *THE LAST PAINTING OF SARA DE VOS* is, quite simply, one of the best novels I have ever read, and as close to perfect as any book I’m likely to encounter in my reading life. It’s one of those rare books I’ll return to again and again in the coming years.”

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### **The Last Painting of Sara de Vos**

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**Publication Date:** April 4, 2017

**Genres:** Fiction, Historical Fiction

**Paperback:** 304 pages

**Publisher:** Picador

**ISBN-10:** 1250118328

**ISBN-13:** 9781250118325