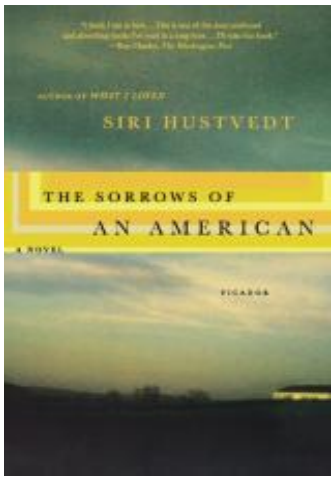
The Sorrows of an American

by Siri Hustvedt



About the Book

The Sorrows of an American is a soaring feat of storytelling about the immigrant experience and the ghosts that haunt families from one generation to another When Erik Davidsen and his sister, Inga, find a disturbing note from an unknown woman among their dead father?s papers, they believe he may be implicated in a mysterious death. **The Sorrows of an American** tells the story of the Davidsen family as brother and sister uncover its secrets and unbandage its wounds in the year following their father?s funeral.

Returning to New York from Minnesota, the grieving siblings continue to pursue the mystery behind the note. While Erik?s fascination with his new tenants and emotional vulnerability to his psychiatric patients threaten to overwhelm him, Inga is confronted by a hostile journalist who seems to know a secret connected to her dead husband, a famous novelist. As each new mystery unfolds, Erik begins to inhabit his emotionally hidden father?s history and to glimpse how his impoverished childhood, the Depression, and the war shaped his relationship with his children, while Inga must confront the reality of her husband?s double life.

A novel about fathers and children, listening and deafness, recognition and blindness; the pain of speaking and the pain of keeping silent, the ambiguities of memory, loneliness, illness, and recovery. Siri Hustvedt?s exquisitely moving prose reveals one family?s hidden sorrows through an extraordinary mosaic of secrets and stories that reflect the fragmented nature of identity itself.

Discussion Guide

1. The book?s epigraph comes from the eleventh-century Persian poet Rumi: ?Don?t turn away. Keep looking at the bandaged place. That?s where the light enters you.? The author has said that these lines summarize the novel?s journey. What metaphorical role do wounds and healing play over the course of the story, and how can suffering and not turning away lead to enlightenment?

2. The first line of the novel is ?My sister called it the year of secrets.? Later, Inga says, ?Secrets can define people.? The novel?s plot is generated by several secrets, which are followed by revelations or confessions. Inga talks about the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, whose father had a mysterious secret that changed his son?s life. Later, she stresses Kierkegaard?s preference for the sense of hearing, his argument that the ear ?detects human inwardness? better than the eyes. Erik listens carefully to his patients. How do secrets, confessions, and the human voice function in the book?

3. What role do dreams play in the novel? How does the author use dreams to address the characters? emotional states?

4. Siri Hustvedt has said that her novel is about the past in the present, the ghosts that haunt families from one generation to the next. How doe Erik?s immigrant past and Miranda?s relation to her Jamaican history summon ghosts that remain with them?

5. Miranda, Jeffrey, Lane, and Eggy all express themselves in images. What does Lane hope to communicate through his altered photographs? How do both he and Eglantine use art to express emotions that they are unable to convey in other ways? Miranda tells Erik that she uses her anger when she draws. How do these visual works relate to the novel?s theme offathers and children?

6. Reading Lars?s diaries, Erik tries to understand how forms of suffering are passed from one generation to the next, even when those pains haven?t been talked about. What qualities do you think Erik carries from his father and grandfather? Why is he startled and defensive when his former analyst, Magda, says, ?I know how much you identified with your father??

7. At the end of the book, Siri Hustvedt acknowledges using passages from her father?s memoir for the character Lars Davidsen. Does knowing that these texts tell true stories affect your response to the novel?

8. Eglantine?s presence in Erik?s life triggers memories of his childhood that even his own psychoanalysis did not touch: ?Memory offers up its gifts only when jogged by something in the present.? Erik?s mother, Inga, Sonia, Miranda?they all relate memories. Erik?s patient Ms. L. ?remembers? her mother hurting her, but Erik doubts her story. Lisa cannot remember the fire that killed her mother and brother. Discuss the complexities of memory in the novel.

9. Erik?s grandfather and father, his niece Sonia, and some of his patients suffer from trauma, what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder. What meaning does this illness have in the book?

10. Erik?s patient Ms. W. uses the word reincarnation to describe what has happened to her. At the very end of the book, Erik remembers his last session with Ms. W. And her use of the word. How does the word apply not just to Ms. W. but to Erik and the story as a whole?

11. Discuss the role of fantasy in the novel. Did your feelings about Edie changes as the story unfolds? Why does Max write his letters to a fictional character? How do some of the other characters invent or distort people in their lives? What

is Erik?s image of Miranda? What various perceptions do Burton, Rosalie, and Linda have of Inga? In what way do they differ from how Inga sees herself and others? How does Sonia?s view of her father change?

12. What do Erik and Inga finally discover on the trip to meet Lisa? How do the damaged dolls the two women make echo larger themes in the novel?

13. Did your reactions to Lane?s character develop as the narrative advances? Is he dangerous or merely emotionally unstable? What does he want from Miranda? How does Lane perceive Erik?

14. Erik?s view of Miranda deepens as the novel progresses. Discuss how it changes, and how it is different from Erik?s relationship to Laura.

15. Discuss the very last section of the novel. What has happened to Erik? What does he mean when he says, ??it struck me as a moment when the boundary between inside and outside loosens, and there is no loneliness because there is no one to be lonely?? How do these last pages illustrate the idea that the past is in the present?

Author Bio

Siri Hustvedt is the author of a book of poetry, five collections of essays, two works of nonfiction, and seven novels, including the international bestsellers WHAT I LOVED and THE SUMMER WITHOUT MEN. Her novel THE BLAZING WORLD was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and won the *Los Angeles Book* Prize for fiction.

Hustvedt is the recipient of many other awards, including the Gabarron Prize for Thought and Humanities, the Princess of Asturias Award for Literature, an American Academy of Arts and Letters prize, and the Sigourney Award for expanding psychoanalytic thought. She has a PhD in English from Columbia University and is a lecturer in psychiatry at Weil Cornell Medical College in New York. Her work has been translated into over 30 languages.

Critical Praise

"I think I am in love... This is one of the most profound and absorbing books I?ve read in a long time."

? Ron Charles, *The Washington Post*

"Beautiful... both a large-scale examination of the idea of America and a close inspection of the experiences of coping with trauma and loss."

? Margot Kaminski, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"**The Sorrows of an American** is a thought-provoking book that offers pleasures across many different registers... Here again [Hustvedt] proves herself a writer deftly able to weave intricate ideas into an intriguing plot."

? Sylvia Brownrigg, *The New York Times Book Review*

"**The Sorrows of an American** takes on elements of a suspense novel as the various mysteries unfold, but the real question is how we reconcile ourselves to the hard truths in our lives."

? Connie Ogle, *The Miami Herald*

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