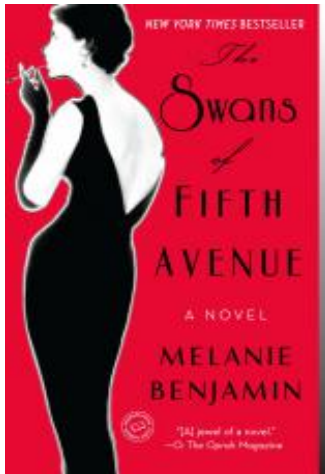


The Swans of Fifth Avenue

by Melanie Benjamin



About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling author of *THE AVIATOR'S WIFE* returns with a triumphant new novel about New York's "Swans" of the 1950s --- and the scandalous, headline-making and enthralling friendship between literary legend Truman Capote and peerless socialite Babe Paley.

Of all the glamorous stars of New York high society, none blazes brighter than Babe Paley. Her flawless face regularly graces the pages of *Vogue*, and she is celebrated and adored for her ineffable style and exquisite taste, especially among her friends --- the alluring socialite Swans Slim Keith, C. Z. Guest, Gloria Guinness and Pamela Churchill. By all appearances, Babe has it all: money, beauty, glamour, jewels, influential friends, a prestigious husband and gorgeous homes. But beneath this elegantly composed exterior dwells a passionate woman --- a woman desperately longing for true love and connection.

Enter Truman Capote. This diminutive golden-haired genius with a larger-than-life personality explodes onto the scene, setting Babe and her circle of Swans aflutter. Through Babe, Truman gains an unlikely entrée into the enviable lives of Manhattan's elite, along with unparalleled access to the scandal and gossip of Babe's powerful circle. Sure of the loyalty of the man she calls "True Heart," Babe never imagines the destruction Truman will leave in his wake. But once a storyteller, always a storyteller --- even when the stories aren't his to tell.

Truman's fame is at its peak when such notable celebrities as Frank and Mia Sinatra, Lauren Bacall and Rose Kennedy converge on his glittering Black and White Ball. But all too soon, he'll ignite a literary scandal whose repercussions echo through the years. *THE SWANS OF FIFTH AVENUE* will seduce and startle readers as it opens the door onto one of America's most sumptuous eras.

Discussion Guide

1. The Swans all have very complicated relationships with one another --- perhaps most notably, Slim and Pamela were both married to the same man. What ties these women together, despite their differences and the sometimes competitive nature of their friendships?
2. Truman is embraced wholeheartedly by the swans when he first appears on the New York social scene. What do you think draws them to him?
3. Discuss Babe's marriage with Bill. What are its strengths? What are its weaknesses?
4. What do you think of Truman's relationship with fame? At times, he seems willing to sacrifice almost anything (love, his health and his friendships) in pursuit of the limelight. How does that serve him, ultimately?
5. Why do you think Truman published "La Cote Basque, 1965"? What point was he making about (or to) the story's subjects?
6. Truman and Babe were both heavily influenced by their mothers. In what ways were their childhood experiences similar? In what ways were they different?
7. Babe and her sisters were raised for successful marriages. Did they live up to their mother's hopes?
8. Pick three words to describe Truman and Babe's friendship. Or, pick one word to describe Truman, one to describe Babe, and one to describe their friendship.
9. Do you think Babe forgave Truman, in the end?
10. There are a number of stories told throughout the novel. What are some of the stories that you tell --- about yourself or about others? In what ways do stories shape our experiences?
11. Who was your favorite character? Why?
12. Who surprised you the most? Why?
13. Aging is a prominent theme throughout the novel, as the opulent 50s come to an end and a new generation of socialites supplants the glamorous Swans. What did you think of that? How do you feel about getting older?
14. Discuss the significance of memory in this novel. In what ways do we distort our memories? What, if anything, is the significance of this?
15. Can you think of a woman who is the modern equivalent of Babe Paley and her circle of friends?
16. Babe always presents a very carefully composed face to the world. Only occasionally do we see that mask slip. Discuss those moments. Who is the real Babe, beneath the makeup and jewels?
17. How has the role of women in society shifted from the 1960s to today?

18. If you have read any of Melanie Benjamin's previous books, compare and contrast this work with her earlier novels. Is this story a departure? If so, in what ways? If not, how is it in keeping with her other writing?

Author Bio

Melanie Benjamin is the *New York Times* bestselling author of nine works of historical fiction: ALICE I HAVE BEEN, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MRS. TOM THUMB, THE AVIATOR'S WIFE, THE SWANS OF FIFTH AVENUE, THE GIRLS IN THE PICTURE, MISTRESS OF THE RITZ, THE CHILDREN'S BLIZZARD, CALIFORNIA GOLDEN and THE WINDSOR AFFAIR.

Her novels have been translated in over 15 languages, featured in national magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*, and optioned for film.

Melanie is a native of the Midwest, having grown up in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she pursued her first love, theater. After raising her two sons, Melanie, a lifelong reader (including being the proud winner, two years in a row, of her hometown library's summer reading program!), decided to pursue a writing career. After writing her own parenting column for a local magazine, and winning a short story contest, Melanie published two contemporary novels under her real name, Melanie Hauser, before turning to historical fiction.

Melanie lives in Chicago with her husband. In addition to writing, she puts her theatrical training to good use by being a member of the Authors Unbound speakers bureau. When she isn't writing or speaking, she's reading. And always looking for new stories to tell.

Photo Credit: Maria Rivera

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