

The World to Come

by Dara Horn



About the Book

A million-dollar painting by Marc Chagall is stolen from a museum during a singles' cocktail hour. The unlikely thief is Benjamin Ziskind, a lonely former child prodigy who writes questions for quiz shows, and who is sure the painting used to hang on the wall of his parents' living room. As Ben tries to evade the police, he and his twin sister, Sara, seek out the truth of how the painting got to the museum, whether the "original" is actually a forgery, and whether Sara, an artist, can create a convincing forgery to take its place.

Eighty years prior, in the 1920s in Soviet Russia, Marc Chagall taught art to orphaned Jewish boys. There, Chagall befriended the great Yiddish novelist known by the pseudonym "Der Nister," the Hidden One. And there, with the lives of these real artists, the story of the painting begins, carrying with it not only a hidden fable by the Hidden One, but also the story of the Ziskind family --- from Russia to New Jersey and Vietnam.

Prize-winning author Dara Horn interweaves mystery, romance, folklore, theology, history, and scripture into a spellbinding modern tale. She brings us on a breathtaking collision course of past, present, and future --- revealing both the ordinariness and the beauty of "the world to come." Nestling stories within stories, this is a novel of remarkable clarity and deep inner meaning.

Discussion Guide

1. This book is about an art heist, or at least it starts out that way. What does Ben's theft suggest about ownership? Does anyone really own a work of art?
2. The novel incorporates the lives of two real artists, Marc Chagall and Der Nister. Are these portrayals fair? What are the limits of the artistic imagination --- that is, what are the limitations of each of these artists as they appear here, and

what are the limitations of the book's portrayals of these artists?

3. Members of the Ziskind family seem to be deeply or even spiritually connected to one another. What kind of potential do families have in this novel, and what is required for them to live up to it?

4. Throughout the book, there are references to various ways that life mirrors art, which in itself is created from the experience or observation of life. Which takes precedence in the novel, art or reality? Which one defines what it means to be alive for these characters?

5. Much of the novel's plot is built upon historical events that are rarely explored outside of scholarly circles, such as the pogroms of 1919 or the Stalinist purge of Jewish cultural leaders. How much of this history were you aware of prior to reading the book? Are there reasons why certain historical events (World War II, for instance) are frequently revisited in novels and movies, while others, like these, have been popularly forgotten?

6. The novel's plot is rife with forgeries as well as other forms of deception, ranging from the forged painting to the plagiarized children's books to Cung Thien Minh posing as a loyal interpreter to Sergei Popov pretending to be a friendly neighbor. What do these various deceptions have in common? For a deception to work, what is required of the deceiver, and what is required of the deceived?

7. The Rosalie Ziskind stories throughout the book are all adapted from Yiddish sources. What connections do these stories have to each other, or to the novel's main plot? Are there common themes among them?

8. A central question in the novel is one of trust. How does trust define the relationships between the characters, whether friends, relatives, lovers, or enemies?

9. Is there a life after death in this novel? For whom? How?

10. What happens to Ben and Erica at the end of the story?

11. What is the world to come?

Author Bio

Dara Horn is a two-time winner of the National Jewish Book Award for Fiction and one of *Granta*'s Best American Novelists. She lives in New Jersey with her husband and four children.

Critical Praise

"Horn's deft touch is often wryly funny --- but never maliciously so. . . . An accomplished work that beautifully explains how families --- in all their maddening, smothering, supportive glory --- create us."

The World to Come

by Dara Horn

Publication Date: October 17, 2006

Genres: Fiction

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company

ISBN-10: 0393329062

ISBN-13: 9780393329063