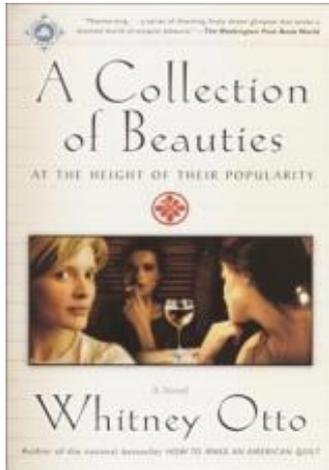


# A Collection of Beauties at the Height of Their Popularity: A Novel

by Whitney Otto

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## About the Book

In a novel about drifting and reckless youth looking for a more permanent form of happiness, Whitney Otto transports us to San Francisco, a magical, fog-shrouded city suffused with possibility and restless energy. Her characters congregate night after night at a North Beach bar called the Youki Singe Tea Room, their lives conjoined by bonds of friendship and shared experience, and by the poignant realization that true ecstasy may be found only in surrendering oneself to someone or something else. **A Collection of Beauties at the Height of Their Popularity** explores the intricacies, the pain, and the rapture of human connection.

## Discussion Guide

1. **A Collection of Beauties at the Height of Their Popularity** is structured as a series of episodes shifting between incidents that seem separate, despite the common setting and the characters' social connections. For example, what does Gracie and Theo's befriending Margot have to do with Nash's affair with Georgia? Is it odd that these people never directly interact? Does this book feel like a novel (as opposed to a story collection)?
2. Otto's characters in this novel are constantly roving, moving quickly between jobs, apartments, and lovers. Given their transitory natures, do you think these characters find meaning in their lives? Do the characters enjoy living in a kind of day-to-day manner? What would be pleasurable about such a life? What would be difficult? Do you think the characters are grappling with larger life questions, and, if so, what do you think those questions are?

3. Throughout **A Collection of Beauties**, Jelly, the most visually stunning of Otto's characters, exudes a sense of separation from the people surrounding her. Do you think that beauty can set someone so far apart as to bring on a sort of loneliness? How do you think the novel defines beauty?

4. Do you think the title is ironic -- that is, are the characters in any way "popular"? Many of them feel alienated even in their own crowded apartments and parties. Why do you think Otto gave her novel this title, besides the fact that it is the name of one of the woodblock prints in the book?

5. There has been some discussion lately about the "second adolescence" of American twentysomethings. It is said that this phase of development is a relatively new phenomenon, beginning only with the members of the Baby Boom Generation. Do you think this is true? Do you think that the style of living Otto's characters embrace -- no commitment to anything, anyone, or any place -- has value, in any phase of life? Or does it just seem self-indulgent?

6. Is it significant that the story takes place in the early 1980s? Politically? Socially? Do you think it would change the interaction of the characters if they had cell phones and e-mail?

7. **A Collection of Beauties** opens and ends with excerpts from Elodie's pillow book. Why do you think Otto frames her novel with this book? Is the pillow book some sort of representation or symbol? How is it relevant to these characters' lives?

8. What is the role of art in the novel? Do the illustrations lend an atmosphere, or some kind of illumination of theme, to **A Collection of Beauties**? Would the book be the same without them?

## Author Bio

"I was born and raised in California. My childhood was almost a casebook for the post-war suburban nuclear family, right down to the mid-1960s divorce. That is to say, it was all very uneventful. As much as I loved living there, I always had a sense of slight displacement, as if my real home were elsewhere. This combination of an ordinary childhood, which was conducive to imagination, and feelings of being on the outside, or not quite belonging, is more or less how I came to be a writer. I attended very good public schools, before a statement like that became an oxymoron, and went to three different colleges: the University of the Pacific, San Diego State University, and the University of California, Irvine, where I received an MFA in Writing. I call my post-high school education "The California College Tour," since I went to a private university, a state school, and UC. My husband, son, and I now live in Portland, Oregon, having moved from San Francisco. I love being a writer. That is probably the most fundamental thing I can say about myself."

## On the Novel as Collage

My work is like a collage: the images feel like found objects, and they reoccur from story to story. The structure of each novel is almost architectural, as if it is "built" or "assembled." Although my novels follow a certain plan, or logic, in my mind, there is room for the accidental or inspirational. As a writer, I cannot count on lucky accidents; I have to work at what I do. I toss out more pages than I keep and sometimes the transition from the story in my head to my hand is more approximate than exact. I write from my own curiosity. Something attracts me-a quilt, the idea of disappearing, the photographs of Madame Yevonde and James VanDerZee - and soon this interest expresses itself in my writing.

By writing a book that is not overtly about art - *The Passion Dream Book* is a love story, after all - but about two people involved in the arts, a casual discussion of art arises. The conversation is neither academic nor scholarly, but is thoughtful. If at all possible, I would like the reader to join in the matter. I want the reader to consider art as accessible, a part of everyday, ordinary life, because that is how I think art should be, and that is how I think about it.

To carry this idea further, another aspect of *The Passion Dream Book* is portraying the artist as a "working stiff." The photographers in my novel have to eat, so they have to work. And photography, like writing, can be a service or an art. Sometimes it can be both.

## Critical Praise

"Readers in the mood to be seduced [will be] beguiled by this thickly atmospheric book and its restless lovers [who] float languidly through . . . a place of seductive allure . . . where anything is permissible."

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### **A Collection of Beauties at the Height of Their Popularity: A Novel**

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