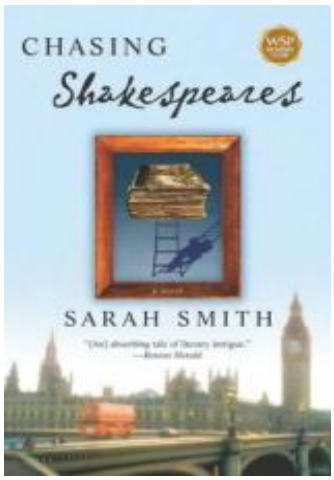
Chasing Shakespeares: A Novel

by Sarah Smith



About the Book

With this exhilarating novel from the author the *San Francisco Chronicle* calls "daring" and "splendid," Sarah Smith cuts to the heart of one of literature's most fascinating and enduring mysteries: the enigma of Sir William Shakespeare.

Meet Joe Roper, a thoroughly modern graduate student who has landed the job of a lifetime working in the famed Kellogg Collection of Elizabethan texts and curiosities. He's been passionate about Shakespeare since reading a duct-taped paperback copy of **Macbeth** as a kid. But if all the world's a stage, Joe's working-class roots do little to prepare him for his role in the academic arena. Enter Posy Gould, stage right. A glamorous rising star at Harvard, she insists that a letter Joe's found, signed by one W. Shakespeare of Stratford, is a career-making discovery for them both -- particularly because the letter suggests that the plays were not written from Shakespeare's quill. What follows is a literary adventure story that places Joe and Posy in a world where the London Eye looks out over Shakespeare's city, Hollywood producers rub elbows with the Queen's court, and an unsolved mystery spans across five centuries and two continents. A first-rate thriller from one of the masters of the genre, **Chasing Shakespeares** is also an enduring tale about love, art, and poetic justice.

Discussion Guide

1. "Shakespearean is a word, like love," Joe says. Why are readers so fascinated by Shakespeare?

2. "Print the legend," Posy tells Joe. She's quoting from John Ford's film The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. Shakespeare's traditionally accepted life is a powerful myth of genius, an ordinary man creating great poetry. Is the legend as important as "the truth"?

3. "God is a librarian," says Katherine Darnell, and tells the extraordinary story of the discovery of Blake's manuscripts. The story isn't all true, and the story about Elizabeth waiting in the park at Hatfield probably isn't true, but Sarah Smith

uses both legends in **Chasing Shakespeares**. Do these legends have anything to do with the Shakespeare myth?

4. A big theme in this book is parents and children. Joe Roper and Henry Roper, Posy and Ted Gould, Posy and her absent mother, Edward de Vere and his father, Edward de Vere and his father-in-law William Cecil, William Cecil and Robert Cecil, Edward de Vere and Susan de Vere, and even, possibly, Oxford and his potential son-in-law Southampton. Of all the characters, only Mary Cat doesn't have a family life; she has a "mother house" instead. Why the theme, and why is Mary Cat an exception?

5. God, fate, coincidence, and that other kind of deus ex machina, genius, play big roles in **Chasing Shakespeares**. Does this bother you? Why or why not? Does it make any difference that the evidence that Joe gets is supposedly real evidence?

6.Is **Chasing Shakespeares** a historical novel? Is it a mystery? Is it "true crime"?

7. Who do you think wrote the plays? Is it important who wrote the Shakespeare plays?

8. Do you think Joe actually found a Shakespeare poem? An Oxford poem? Are they the same? Does what you think of the poem make a difference to what you think of the book?

9. Joe argues that Shakespeare writing in 1580 wouldn't sound like Shakespeare. Do you agree? What makes "Shakespeare"?

10. Do people change fundamentally from age to age? Are the concerns of national political figures like the Cecils fundamentally different from those of entertainers like the Goulds? Can we understand the Cecils through the Goulds?

11. In the last scene of the book, Joe says that the Goscimers have seen Stratford through the eyes of post-World War II intellectual Boston. Joe himself sees Stratford, and Shakespeare, through the eyes of East Bradenton, Vermont. What are the advantages and disadvantages? The New Historicist movement argues that you can see the past in other ways. Can you ever really see a historical period through eyes "not your own"? How?

12. Who should Joe end up with, Posy or Mary Cat (or neither)?

Author Bio

Sarah Smith grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, and has lived in Japan, London, and Paris. She is a graduate of Radcliffe College and Harvard Graduate School, where she got her Ph.D. in English. A former manager at a computer firm, Smith--who was also a Fulbright Fellow at the Slade Film School, University of London--has taught film and eighteenth-century literature at Tufts University, Boston University, and Northeastern University.

Smith's critically acclaimed first novel, **The Vanished Child**, was selected by the *New York Times* as one of the nine best mysteries of 1992 and has appeared on local, regional, and national bestseller lists. It has become an all-time bestseller at one of San Francisco's leading bookstores, outselling**The Bridges of Madison County** and **The Firm**. Critical praise continues for Smith's latest novel, **The Knowledge of Water**, a *New York Times* Notable Book. It is the second book in a proposed trilogy and follows the fortunes of three central characters from **The Vanished Child** when

they find themselves in Paris on the eve of the worst flood the city has ever experienced. The *Boston Sunday Herald* said, "Smith--who has resided in Paris--uses her firsthand knowledge and convincing research to depict the city during its 1910 flood. Dark and engrossing, this production is magnifique."

Smith, a hypertext and science fiction author whose work has appeared in several anthologies, including Best New Horror, has served as a judge for the Philip K. Dick Award. She is also on the Regional Board of Directors of the Mystery Writers of America and Sisters in Crime, and on the board of the Archives of Detective Fiction.

Sarah Smith lives in Brookline, Massachusetts, with her husband, two children, their twenty-two pound cat, Vicious, and Gracie, the assistant cat!

Critical Praise

"[An] absorbing tale of literary intrigue."

Chasing Shakespeares: A Novel
by Sarah Smith

Publication Date: May 18, 2004
Paperback: 352 pages
Publisher: Washington Square Press
ISBN-10: 0743464834
ISBN-13: 9780743464833