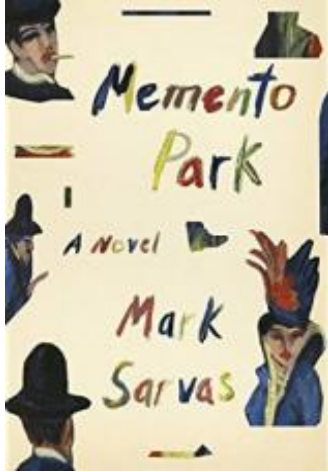


# Memento Park

by Mark Sarvas



## About the Book

After receiving an unexpected call from the Australian consulate, Matt Santos becomes aware of a painting that he believes was looted from his family in Hungary during the Second World War. To recover the painting, he must repair his strained relationship with his harshly judgmental father, uncover his family history, and restore his connection to his own Judaism. Along the way to illuminating the mysteries of his past, Matt is torn between his doting girlfriend, Tracy, and his alluring attorney, Rachel, with whom he travels to Budapest to unearth the truth about the painting and, in turn, his family.

As his journey progresses, Matt's revelations are accompanied by equally consuming and imaginative meditations on the painting and the painter at the center of his personal drama, *Budapest Street Scene* by Ervin Kálmán. By the time MEMENTO PARK reaches its conclusion, Matt's narrative is as much about family history and father-son dynamics as it is about the nature of art itself, and the infinite ways we come to understand ourselves through it.

Of all the questions asked by Mark Sarvas' MEMENTO PARK --- about family and identity, about art and history --- a central, unanswerable predicament lingers: How do we move forward when the past looms unreasonably large?

## Discussion Guide

1. As MEMENTO PARK begins, Matt Santos, a moderately successful actor, is spending the night at an auction house contemplating *Budapest Street Scene*, a painting scheduled to be auctioned the next day. The only other person present is a security guard, whom Matt calls Virgil. Matt reflects on the sequence of events that brought the painting into his possession, musing that he might explain his presence to the guard by telling him that "it's possible to spend an entire lifetime looking at something, and even then, to fail to behold it in any meaningful way." How does Matt's story explain this statement? What is the significance of the name Virgil?

2. Matt is an assimilated Jew with little knowledge of his faith or culture. He tells us he has only two childhood memories of Judaism --- one a visit to a temple, one to a cemetery, each featuring a grandparent. What impact did these experiences have on him? What does he learn from Rabbi Wolfe? Do his feelings about his identity change as he learns about Jewish faith, history, and tradition from Rachel, his research and his trip to Budapest?

3. Matt has a difficult relationship with his father, Gabor, and is frustrated that he knows almost nothing about Gabor's life. Why might Gabor have been an angry, demanding and uncommunicative father? Is there another side to him, as a parent, husband, friend, etc., that Matt fails to see? "My father taught me nothing," Matt declares. In truth, what did his father teach him?

4. What role does Matt's mother play in the family? What does her revelation, "Your father was such a softie" imply about the reliability of memory? Are there other instances, within Matt's soliloquy, that demonstrate the fragility of memory or how history can be revised to support a particular narrative?

5. Matt is drawn to Rachel Steinberg, the attorney assigned to work with him on recovering the painting. He says of their first meeting: "I have encountered moments that have seemed, in turn, like the ones that changed all that followed." What are the critical moments in Matt's story that "changed all that followed"? In the end, what has changed for Matt? Can it be said that there were moments in Ervin Kálmán's life that changed all that followed? How do these compare to Matt's experiences? To Gabor's?

6. Memento Park is an outdoor museum in Budapest where statues and other artifacts of Communist Hungary are on display. The park was created not only to preserve the history of dictatorship but also to celebrate democracy. Why is Memento Park central to Matt's story? Why is it the title of the book?

7. What is the picture of marriage that emerges as Matt reflects on his parents' relationship, his own relationship with Tracy, and what he learns about Kálmán and his wife, Ágnes? Do he and Tracy have a healthy partnership? Why is Matt almost immediately attracted to Rachel?

8. Why does Matt describe *Budapest Street Scene* as ugly? What does he find repulsive about it? What draws him in? Ultimately, which of the two paintings --- the authentic *Budapest Street Scene* or the counterfeit --- proves to be more valuable?

9. What does Matt begin to understand about Gabor after his death? What does he learn from his visit with Klara? Matt tells us that as a young actor, he played Hamlet. What was the "something deeper in the role" of Hamlet that he felt spoke to him? What other father-and-son pairs appear in the story? How do these illuminate Matt's view of his relationship with Gabor?

10. As he sorts through his father's collection of toy cars, Matt thinks, "Perhaps there is something hopeful about the collector, striving toward an elusive completeness." What are other collections of art or objects that play a role in the story? How are they valued or devalued? Do they fulfill their promise of hope or completeness, as Matt imagines?

11. Matt cannot understand why his father refuses to claim the painting or even talk about it. He says to Rachel, "The thing that I can't figure out...well, it's just...my dad. You know? He grabbed at every angle. He would have been all over this. I know it. I know *him*." Rachel responds, "Do not make the mistake of assuming that because you know what

someone will *do*, that you know who they *are*.” Later, Tracy says exactly the same thing, also in reference to Gabor. Why doesn’t Matt see the distinction between what someone will do and who they are? How well does he really know Tracy and Rachel?

**12.** Matt spends his last day in Budapest looking for --- and perhaps finding --- ghosts. Where does he go? What emotions does he experience at each stopping place? What hard lessons does he learn about the Jewish experience in Hungary, both past and present?

**13.** Are there parallels between Matt learning the true story of his family’s painting and Tracy learning the truth about Ricky McCabe? What does each revelation have to say about the reliability of evidence, the fallibility of human judgment, and what people choose to believe?

**14.** Matt Santos is the sole narrator of *MEMENTO PARK*; therefore, we must rely on his version of events. What kind of person is Matt? Was he satisfied with his life before Rachel Steinberg and *Budapest Street Scene* came into it? Are there parts of his story that one of the other characters might have told differently?

**15.** What is next for Matt? Has he experienced more than a fling, a breakup, and a trip to Budapest? Does he have a better understanding of love and family bonds? Of the interplay of history, culture, faith, and tradition? How might his long night contemplating *Budapest Street Scene* lead him to change his life?

*Guide written by Patricia Daneman*

## **Author Bio**

Mark Sarvas is the author of the novel *HARRY, REVISED*, which was published in more than a dozen countries around the world. His book reviews and criticism have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Bookforum* and many others. He is a member of the National Book Critics Circle, PEN/America and PEN Center USA, and teaches novel writing at the UCLA Extension Writers Program. A reformed blogger, he lives in Santa Monica, California.

## **Critical Praise**

“Sly, searching.... Sarvas is astute in portraying how relationships can calcify in childhood, and the exquisite pain of attempting to repair them in adulthood.... [He] tackles big questions --- about what constitutes restitution, the nature of faith, the essential role of storytelling in our lives. A twist at the end, the book’s ultimate con, is too good to spoil, and left me rethinking the characters and the story. It’s a testament to Sarvas’s skill that such a trick felt like a gift.”

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