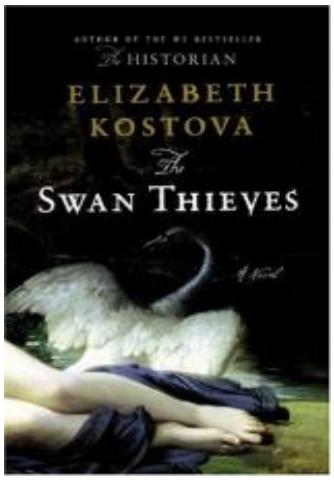
The Swan Thieves

by Elizabeth Kostova



About the Book

Psychiatrist Andrew Marlowe, devoted to his profession and the painting hobby he loves, has a solitary but ordered life. When renowned painter Robert Oliver attacks a canvas in the National Gallery of Art and becomes his patient, Marlow finds that order destroyed. Desperate to understand the secret that torments the genius, he embarks on a journey that leads him into the lives of the women closest to Oliver and a tragedy at the heart of French Impressionism.

Ranging from American museums to the coast of Normandy, from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth, from young love to last love, **The Swan Thieves** is a story of obsession, the losses of history, and the power of art to preserve human hope.

Discussion Guide

1. At the beginning of Chapter 2, psychiatrist Andrew Marlow confesses that the story he is going to tell is ?not only private but subject to my imagination as much as to the facts.? In what ways does this prove to be true, in the course of the book? How does Marlow?s imagination affect the telling of his own story?

2. Each of the artists in the book --- Robert, Marlow, Mary, Kate, Béatrice, and Olivier --- is faced with choices between art and personal life. What are some of these dilemmas, and how does each character resolve or at least experience them?

3. In Chapter 64, at their painting conference in Maine, Mary says to Robert, ??I have the feeling that if I knew why you were still painting the same thing after so many years, then I would know you. I would know who you are.? Why does Robert paint Béatrice for years and how does his obsession with her shape his artwork? What other obsessions appear in the course of the book, in Robert and in other characters?

4. Landscapes play an important role in **The Swan Thieves**, both in life and on canvas. What are the major landscapes of

the book, and what effect do they have on the characters?

5. In Chapter 95, just before Marlow flies to Paris to learn more about Béatrice de Clerval, Mary tells him, ??Please just let her die properly, the poor woman.?? What does she mean by this? Why is it important to her?

6. The Swan Thieves is partly a study of love that bridges gaps across time and age --- passion, mentoring, parenting. Which characters have these relationships? What do the old, or older, characters have to offer the younger ones? What do the younger ones offer their elders?

7. At many points in the story, artists paint or sketch one another. What are these occasions and how is each significant to the story?

8. In Étretat, as she considers her relationship with Olivier, Béatrice realizes that whatever happens between them ?she must effect herself and live with later.? Is this true of other characters? experiences? In what senses?

9. The myth of Leda and the Swan surfaces repeatedly in the narrative. Where do we encounter it and what is its significance in each of the main characters? lives? What other swans make an appearance in the book?

10. Kate says of her second meeting with Robert Oliver, ?His apparent unawareness of himself was mesmerizing.? What else mesmerizes other people about Robert? Why do some of the other characters find him compelling?

11. On leaving the National Gallery at the end of Chapter 7, Marlow notes ?that mingled relief and disappointment one feels on departure from a great museum --- relief at being returned to the familiar, less intense, more manageable world, and disappointment at that world?s lack of mystery.? What museums appear in the novel? Is Marlow?s craving for mystery ultimately satisfied by museums or by ?the world,? and in what ways?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Kostova is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of MYSTERY PLAY, THE SHADOW LAND, THE SWAN THIEVES and THE HISTORIAN. She graduated from Yale and holds an MFA from the University of Michigan, where she won a Hopwood Award for Novel-in-Progress. She is also co-founder of the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation for Creative Writing in Bulgaria.

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