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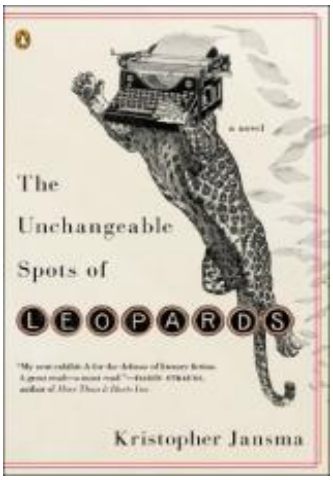
# The Unchangeable Spots of Leopards

by Kristopher Jansma




## About the Book

"F. Scott Fitzgerald meets Wes Anderson" (*The Village Voice*) in this inventive and witty debut about a young man?s quest to become a writer and the misadventures in life and love that take him around the globe.

As early as he can remember, the narrator of this remarkable novel has wanted to become a writer. From the jazz clubs of Manhattan to the villages of Sri Lanka, Kristopher Jansma?s hopelessly unreliable --- yet hopelessly earnest --- narrator will be haunted by the success of his greatest friend and literary rival, the brilliant Julian McGann, and endlessly enamored with Evelyn, the green-eyed girl who got away. A profound exploration of the nature of truth and storytelling, this delightful picaresque tale heralds Jansma as a bold, new American voice.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** What do you think is the significance of the title THE UNCHANGEABLE SPOTS OF LEOPARDS, and how do you think it relates to the novel as a whole?

**2.** In his "Author's Note," how does Jansma set the tone for the remainder of the novel? What themes are introduced to which the story later returns?

**3.** Why do you think Jansma's narrator chooses to conceal his identity behind a long series of aliases? How, if at all, would the novel have been different if the narrator had divulged his real name?

**4.** The narrator posits that the writing of fiction boils down to the ability "to tell lies, for a living," and that "the best novelists make you believe, as you read, that their stories are *real*" (p. 129, p. 130). Do you believe that a great novelist is, in essence, a highly convincing liar? Or is there something more to great writing than masterfully sustained deception? If so, what?

**5.** The narrator proclaims, "I'm a liar! That's just what I am. I lie like I'm breathing. I lie to everyone, myself most of all" (p. 178). For all his confessed lying, are there truths to be gathered from the narrator's stories? What kind of truth do his lies reveal?

**6.** Colette Marsh appears first in a portrait in the Raleigh Museum of Art that the narrator smudges with his thumb. She surfaces again in the story embedded in chapter four, and her portrait (or one eerily like it) re-emerges at the end of chapter 10. What does Marsh appear to signify in the narrator's mind, and why are the vignettes in which she appears important to the meanings of the novel?

**7.** The characters in the first part of the novel are inseparable. Do you think they make up a classic love triangle?

**8.** Jansma's narrator repeatedly acts as a substitute for someone else --- for Betsy Littleford's escort at her deb ball, for Julian at his literary reading, for Professor Wallace at CCNY. How do these substitutions both contribute to and undermine the narrator's sense of identity?

**9.** Readers of novels sometimes expect good characters to be rewarded and bad characters punished. However, the moral mathematics of THE UNCHANGEABLE SPOTS OF LEOPARDS is not nearly so straightforward. Is it a strength or a weakness of Jansma's novel that its plot does not make a point of punishing evil and rewarding virtue?

**10.** Jansma's narrator appears almost literally to make himself up. How are his self-inventions different, if at all, from the ways in which real people go about defining themselves? How is the narrator's self-creation an ironic commentary on how identity is formed and subverted in the world we live in?

**11.** Julian/Jeffrey makes it big with a "luminous" novel called NOTHING SACRED. However, we learn basically nothing regarding what this novel is about. Imagine a plot and some major characters for NOTHING SACRED (try to write a few pages of his novel if you're feeling brave) and have a conversation about your version of Julian/Jeffrey's novel.

**12.** Why is Julian so insistent that he and the narrator must never, ever write about each other? Are they too much alike or too different? Might Julian even be another version of the narrator himself?

**13.** Jansma suggests through his narrator "America no longer desires the truth, only the reasonable facsimile thereof. Like battered lovers, we're willing to settle. Our sense of values still holds us to dismiss that which we know, outright, to be blatant lies, but we avoid truth with equal intensity" (121). How valid is this criticism regarding the state of our culture? What do you think needs to be done about it?

## Author Bio

Kristopher Jansma is the author of WHY WE CAME TO THE CITY and THE UNCHANGEABLE SPOTS OF LEOPARDS, winner of the Sherwood Anderson Foundation Fiction Award. A graduate of Columbia University?s MFA program, he is now an assistant professor of English and creative writing at SUNY New Paltz and a graduate lecturer in fiction at Sarah Lawrence College. He has written for the *New York Times, Salon, The Believer, The Millions, Slice, BOMB* and *Electric Literature*. He lives with his wife and son in Brooklyn, New York.

## Critical Praise

"At times, the novel is a string of short stories; at others, it is a set of matroyshka dolls, containing, at one point, a novel within a short story wihthin a novella within a novel. ...Jansma approaches them with wry humor and a steady hand. The narrator's games never fail to entertain, even if he is constantly changing the rules."
?*The New Yorker*

?[A] tricky picaresque thick with literary allusion from Fitzgerald to Amis?[A] clever, tightly paced novel of ever-upping stakes.?
?Vogue.com

"Playfully weird...I'd call this book "postmodern," but that makes it sound like it's not as pleasurable to read as it is."
?Meg Wolitzer, author of the *New York Time* bestselling THE INTERESTINGS on NPR.com

?Though one might recognize bits of Dickens, Fitzgerald or Hemingway, this is simply a good case of stealing from geniuses. It?s a breathless work the celebrates the literary tradition, while making a strong case that its author belongs on the shelf beside his forebears.?
?*Time Out New York* (5 Stars)

?Couched in Jansma?s wildly recursive funhouse of a novel is a coming-of-age story?filled with clever literary allusions and insider jokes?[T]here?s plenty to relish in this noteworthy debut.?
?Heller McAlpin for NPR.org

?F. Scott Fitzgerald meets Wes Anderson?[T]he novel strikes a cord on questions of authenticity, love, and ambition, and it reminds us that life is often out of our control, even if we?re writing it down.?
?*The Village Voice*

?One of the best books of the year.?
?Jeff Glor for CBS Author Talk

?[Jansma is] a writer of extreme promise, who seems to belong to an older generation.?
?*Electric Literature* ?Recommended Reading?

?[A] slippery and energetic debut novel?rapid in pace, the language and details tightly controlled?It?s tremendous fun, this book.?

*?San Francisco Journal of Books*

?[T]his mind-blowing spiral of a book will also appeal to anyone who enjoys their fiction as playful as it is intriguing.?

?Bookreporter.com

?The Unchangeable Spots of Leopards? intricate narrative game and its carbon-burning escapades add up to a novel that is wise about identity and aspiration, competitive storytelling, romantic obsession and the assertion that ?all these stories are true, only somewhere else.??

*?Shelf Awareness*

?Captivating?[A] smart, searching debut about art and identity.?

*?Library Journal*

?[A] canny, seductive, and utterly transfixing tale about the magic of storytelling
and the misery of writing?Like a magician pulling a seemingly endless string of colorful scarves from a hat, Jansma streams stories-within-stories-within-stories, each a diabolically clever homage? Readers will detect riffs on Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Truman Capote, Bob Dylan, Tolstoy, Salinger, Borges, Kipling, and many more?A first novel with the strength and agility of a great cat leaping through rings of fire.?

*?Booklist* (Starred)

?[An] arresting debut?Jansma?s characters deftly explore the blurred lines between fact and fiction, discovering the shades of truth that lie in between.?

*?Publishers Weekly*

?Absorbing...Jansma [is] a writer to watch.?

*?Library Journal* (2013 Fiction Preview)

?A terrifically fun book that?s a little bit Calvino, a little bit Jennifer Egan, and a little bit the inside of every young artist that ever was. Concerned with the nature of storytelling, art, fallacy, and f**king up, and told as only a witty wordsmith can, we?re pretty sure it?ll be one of your favorites in the new year.?

?Flavorwire / Named one of their ?50 Up-and-Coming New York Culture Makers to Watch in 2013?

?THE UNCHANGEABLE SPOTS OF LEOPARDS is my new exhibit A for the defense of literary fiction. A great read --- a must read. Kristopher Jansma is more than the real-deal. He's made himself, with this book, essential.?

?Darin Strauss, author of MORE THAN IT HURTS YOU

?Light and airy, THE UNCHANGEABLE SPOTS OF LEOPARDS is a funhouse of a novel about the outsized ambitions of authors and the sneaky power of storytelling. Kristopher Jansma's debut is a whimsical round-the-world tour that recalls Calvino, Millhauser and The Confidence Man.?

?Stewart O?Nan, author of LAST NIGHT AT THE LOBSTER

?Emblematic of its many delightful complexities, the writer-as-narrator of this exciting debut novel brings to mind both Holden Caufield and Tom Ripley. This is a coming of age novel, albeit not an especially tender one; rather it is infused with wicked satire on the pursuits of wealth, fame and love. As if he were running the literary equivalent of a game of 3-card Monte, Jansma's protagonist artfully charms and deceives his friends and readers as a means to revealing what is true. THE UNCHANGEABLE SPOTS OF LEOPARDS is a remarkably smart novel and it's great fun, too.?

?Binnie Kirshenbaum, author of THE SCENIC ROUTE

?Kristopher Jansma is a brilliant writer of energetic, original, intelligent, skillful and highly imaginative and hysterically funny fiction. Few writers of any age succeed in the chances he took with THE UNCHANGEABLE SPOTS OF LEOPARDS. That he does so with such finesse, ease and maturity is astounding.?

?Stephen Dixon, author of WHAT IS ALL THIS?

?Lies are as essential to our lives as truth, time, and love. With THE UNCHANGEABLE SPOTS OF LEOPARDS, Kristopher Jansma escorts us through a carnival funhouse of literary mirrors where truth and lies are so delightfully melded that we, like the
characters themselves, don?t care to distinguish between them. The result is a dynamic, imaginative adventure featuring a trio of characters that are constantly shifting, yet instantly recognizable, as endearing as they are flawed. But the true leopards of Jansma?s novel may be the deep questions crouching deftly within its pages. I, for one, may never regard my own reflection with quite the same certainty again."

?Kenneth Slawenski, author of J.D. SALINGER: A Life

?The brilliance of this novel slays me! With an extravagance of wit and grace, Kristopher Jansma has masterfully composed a chimerical, matroshka doll of a story as gripping as it is inventive, as moving as it is hilarious, populated with fascinating,
singular characters about whom you long to know more and more and more. (Even the extras are drawn in pitch-perfect detail.) It reminded me of so many favorite novels, from David Mitchell?s Ghostwritten to Gary Shteyngart?s The Russian Debutante?s Handbook, and yet it?s so deeply original that all comparisons fall out the window. This is the most fresh and exciting novel I?ve read in ages.?

?Joanna Smith Rakoff, author of A FORTUNATE AGE

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