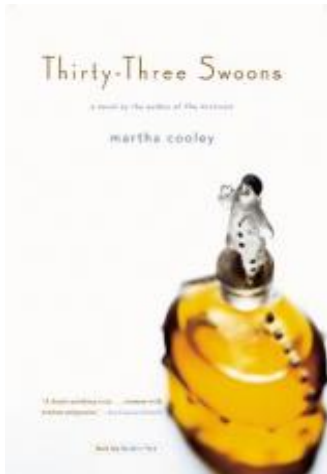


# Thirty-Three Swoons: A Novel

by Martha Cooley

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## About the Book

Years after the end of her marriage and the death of her father --- a supremely talented perfumist --- Camilla Archer's tightly reined existence is upended by her dreams. A man who seems utterly real begins appearing to her as she sleeps, a mysterious figure wearing a mask and a tuxedo, offering up distorted versions of key moments in her life.

So begins Camilla's piecing together of the puzzle of her family's past. Traveling in memory and reverie back to Moscow and Paris between the wars, Camilla finds that she has been granted the chance to unknot her life --- if only she's willing to ask what the ghostly double who has infiltrated her dreams is wanting her to discover.

## Discussion Guide

1. At its heart, **Thirty-Three Swoons** is about searching for a father amidst long-buried family secrets. By the end of the novel, Danny knows who her father is, and has also learned more about who her mother was. Where do you imagine Danny going from here? Do you think the answers she found will give her a sense of stability?
2. Martha Cooley uses the device of a dream-infiltrating doppelgänger, or double, to help Camilla unknot her life. Who are your favorite doppelgängers in other fiction or film? Do you believe that some people actually have doubles?
3. Did you think Camilla's role in her father's death was appropriate? Why or why not?
4. Mothers are noticeably absent in **Thirty-Three Swoons**? Camilla's mother died shortly after she was born, and Eve is not around for much of Danny's childhood. How does not having a mother affect Camilla and the choices she has made? How has having an absent mother made Danny into who she is?
5. Have you ever had a dream that helped you understand your life better? Do you think it can be useful to look closely

at your dreams?

**6.** While awaiting trial, Seva discusses his future with Dapertutto, saying he'll ask for mercy from the judge. Dapertutto responds that mercy won't be given, at which point Seva says he will ask for truth?knowing it won't help him?because "it's the only thing to do." Is telling the truth always the best course of action? How does Seva and Dapertutto's discussion (page 228) reflect on the turmoil that is taking place in Camilla and Danny's lives?

**7.** For several of the novel's characters, theater is a major preoccupation. **Thirty-Three Swoons** itself could be said to be structured as a series of one-act plays with intermissions, called "interludes." How does this structure affect your reading of the novel?

**8.** Scent is considered the most primal of our senses, with powerful effects on the ways in which we process memories and feelings. In your own experience, have recollections ever been unlocked or clarified by a particular scent? Do you believe in the erotic power of perfumes?

**9.** In Camilla's life there are three men, apart from her father, who play important roles: Sam, Stuart, and Nick. What questions or challenges, explicit or implicit, does each raise for her?

## Author Bio

Martha Cooley lives in Brooklyn, New York, and teaches in the Bennington Writing Seminars and the master's program in creative writing at Boston University.

## Critical Praise

"Martha Cooley has mastered the art of folding historical figures into her fiction, without making the final product feel gimmicky. . . . Her language throughout is haunting. . . . Her descriptive powers are spellbinding."

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### **Thirty-Three Swoons: A Novel**

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**Publication Date:** July 11, 2006

**Paperback:** 320 pages

**Publisher:** Back Bay Books

**ISBN-10:** 0316154539

**ISBN-13:** 9780316154536