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Reading Group Guide

*The*  
Swan Thieves

*A novel*

*by*

Elizabeth Kostova



## GALLERY I

Elizabeth Kostova visits Washington's National Gallery of Art  
with Mary Louise Kelly of NPR's *Weekend Edition*

There's been an incident at Washington's National Gallery of Art. That is, in the National Gallery that exists in the mind of Elizabeth Kostova, and in the pages of her new novel, *The Swan Thieves*:

*I climbed the stairs to the tremendous marble rotunda at their summit and wandered among its gleaming, variegated pillars for a few minutes, stood in the middle, taking a deep breath. Then a strange thing happened—the first of many times. I wondered if Robert had paused here, and I felt his presence, or perhaps simply tried to guess what his experience must have been—here, where he preceded me. Had he known he was going to stab a painting, and known which painting?*

*The Swan Thieves* moves backward and forward in time, telling the story of a disturbed artist named Robert Oliver through the eyes of his psychiatrist. Kostova weaves that together with the nineteenth-century tale of the woman with whom Oliver is obsessed.

In the French Impressionist gallery where an opening scene from *The Swan Thieves* unfolds, Kostova told Mary Louise Kelly that her protagonist—a psychiatrist named Andrew Marlow who paints as a hobby—visits the museum after Oliver is arrested and given over to his care to see if he can get into the head of his patient.

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“Robert Oliver is a landscape and portrait painter who is really reaching the peak of a great career,” said Kostova. “When he is brought into Marlow’s care, he refuses to speak. He refuses to tell his own story.”

If Oliver wasn’t going to tell his own story, Kostova said it was important to bring other characters into Oliver’s orbit, to give his life shape.

“I wanted this to be the portrait of an artist, but to have that artist rise up through other people’s voices,” Kostova said.

So Marlow’s efforts to uncover Oliver’s motivations lead him to speak with the many women in the artist’s life, and ultimately to discover a packet of old letters written in France during the nineteenth century.

That’s the setting for the other story that winds through *The Swan Thieves*. While Marlow tries to uncover Oliver’s motivations, a pair of artists—a young woman and a much older man—become entwined.

“It’s a story of people who I think really would not be drawn together except through the power of art, and I wanted it to be much more than a story of just the cliché of mentorship,” Kostova says.

The young artist has to reckon with her lover’s age. She won’t be his first or only love, but he will die with her name on his lips.

“In a way they really love each other universally almost in spite of these differences in age, and they understand each other because of it,” Kostova says.

The two stories dovetail in a twist at the end of the book, but Kostova said that when she sat down to write the book, she didn’t know where the stories would take her.

“It was a huge risk, but it was also very exciting,” she said. “My first novel was heavily plotted, and although it’s a deeply felt novel for me, it’s kind of an intricate puzzle that I had to work out ahead of time. And this book I really wrote imagining scenes

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almost the way you would stand in front of a painting. And it was a moving experience to be sort of there with the reader, not knowing exactly how this would turn out.”

Kostova said that the success of *The Historian* ensured that she was aware of her audience while sitting down to write *The Swan Thieves*, something she didn’t have to deal with the first time around.

“There is a difference in writing a second book,” she said. “You write a first novel—if you write it in total privacy, and not necessarily with the expectation of publication, which was the case with *The Historian*—you do write it in a kind of privacy, an innocence, and it’s very much just for you. And writing a second book, you have a feeling of audience.”

Happily, she said, when she sits down to write, time and again she manages to lose herself in the process.

“I do forget everything else,” Kostova said. “I don’t remember that there’s any reader. I don’t remember who I am or what year I was born. I really am with those characters. I think writing fiction is a very benign form of insanity.”

## GALLERY 2

Elizabeth Kostova visits the Art Institute of Chicago  
with Christopher Borrelli of the *Chicago Tribune*

Elizabeth Kostova, the serene, ethereal author of *The Historian* and a new novel, *The Swan Thieves*, stood at the top of a staircase in the Art Institute of Chicago, surrounded by Impressionist masters. She glanced at a guard in the corner of the room, then whispered about what she did at the National Gallery:

“You know, I wished I had spoken to the guards there,” she said. “Instead, I watched their behavior for a long time. I chose a room, and I just stayed there for a while. I observed how often a guard would come in and out of the room. And as I did this, I thought a lot about how difficult it would be to stab one of the paintings.”

She spoke softly, then stopped. “We should be careful what we say. My book deals with the late nineteenth century. Security was slacker. In Washington, DC, they search bags now. Your readers should know.”

Right, don’t stab the art.

*The Swan Thieves*, though, opens with an attempted act of vandalism—a man named Robert Oliver attacks a famed (though fictional) painting. Afterward, Oliver, an accomplished painter himself, says nothing for eleven months. Which leads our hero, a psychiatrist-painter named Marlow, on a globetrotting journey to understand the man, and the work he attacked. As with *The Historian*, it is intensely researched, long, and, as Kostova explained, “holds a historical mystery at its core.” Indeed, only two books into her career, her subject has become “ways in which past and

present interact, and how we as contemporary people can be haunted by our past, even as we are formed by it or obsessed with it.” So, historical fiction with a twist.

There are scenes set at the National Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. That said, Kostova—whose *The Historian* became a bestseller five years ago and told the story of a woman who unravels a family history connecting to Dracula—came to the Art Institute frequently while writing *The Swan Thieves*.

She came because No. 1, she lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, then, and it was the nearest large museum with paintings she had been thinking about, and No. 2, her book concerns French Impressionism, and the Art Institute holds some of the finest. She explained this while standing before Morisot’s *Woman at Her Toilette*.

She moved to the landscapes of Sisley, Monet’s *Woman in the Garden* and *A Woman Reading*, then she spoke: She came here mostly for Morisot and Sisley. She also “wanted to remember what it felt like to experience being up close and looking at a painting in a museum, of standing there and thinking. When I came here, I thought a lot about how radical these painters were in the nineteenth century. They upset the establishment. It’s interesting to consider paintings like these upsetting someone’s social standards. The problem was that they were pictures of life. They weren’t heroic works or classical myths. Look at them. They’re just quiet.”

We wandered over to a Rodin. I wondered if there were any patterns to the artworks that people attack.

“I haven’t done the research to say,” she said. “But it seems to be for individual reasons now. Not social standards. There was some of that in the 1980s with Mapplethorpe and issues of pornography. But it’s rare. There’s this weird phenomenon where people damage works because they love them too much, by throwing themselves on the work because they are overwhelmed. And

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there is an even stranger phenomenon of people who faint when they find themselves standing before a great work they had only seen in pictures.”

I saw someone touch a Jeff Koons lobster once, I offered.

Kostova laughed. I asked about her background.

She told me her family was like the family in *The Historian*, an academic family with Eastern European roots, “caring about history and art, valuing travel as education, and with a strong sense of social service.” She lives in North Carolina. She spent ten years in Ann Arbor writing *The Historian*, then sold it almost immediately after a bidding war between publishers—that and the book’s success bought her the ability to quit teaching and focus on *The Swan Thieves*, which took only about four and a half years to finish.

She does not move quickly. She said she likes galleries because “we live in a fast, distracted world, but art, unless it’s a multi-media thing, doesn’t make noise. It’s the same thing every time; it’s stimulating and calming.” She speaks like this, in a slow, patient voice, itself calming. “My main character says it’s a relief and a disappointment when you leave an art gallery. A relief because the real world is not as intense. And it’s a disappointment because it’s not as intense. You look hard at what matters, then you leave that world.”

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## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. At the beginning of chapter 2, the 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? How does Marlow’s imagination affect the telling of his 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 the 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 work? 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. Discuss the major landscapes of the book. 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?

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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 several points in the story, artists paint or sketch one another. Identify some of these occasions and discuss how each is significant to the story.
8. In Étretat, as Béatrice considers her relationship with Olivier, she realizes that whatever happens between them “she must effect herself and live with later.” Is this true of other characters’ experiences in *The Swan Thieves*? In what sense?
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 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?

ELIZABETH KOSTOVA'S SUGGESTIONS  
FOR FURTHER READING

Harriet Scott Chessman. *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper*. New York: Permanent Press/Seven Stories Press, 2001.

Anne Higonnet. *Berthe Morisot*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

*Impressionists in Winter: Effets de Neige*. Phillips Collection, DC, 1998. London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1998.

Ross King. *The Judgment of Paris: The Revolutionary Decade That Gave the World Impressionism*. New York: Walker & Company, 2006.

Berthe Morisot. *Correspondences*. Translated by Betty W. Hubbard and edited by Denis Rouart. Introduction and notes by Kathleen Adler and Tamar Garb. London: Moyer Bell Limited, 1987.

Kay Jamison Redfield. *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Graham Robb. *The Discovery of France: A Historical Geography from the Revolution to the First World War*. New York: Norton, 2007.

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Sue Roe. *The Private Lives of the Impressionists*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Jerrold Seigel. *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930*. New York: Viking Press, 1986.

Pamela Todd. *The Impressionists at Home*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005.

Paul Hayes Tucker. *The Impressionists at Argenteuil*. NGA/Wadsworth Atheneum exhibition, 2000. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.

## WEBSITES ON IMPRESSIONIST PAINTING

Béatrice de Clerval is a fictional character, but her “biography” and work are based on those of many real Impressionist painters. You can learn more about them at:

<http://www.marycassatt.org/>

<http://giverny.org/monet/welcome.htm>

<http://www.pissarro.vi/artist.htm>

[http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/search/citi/artist\\_id:93](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/search/citi/artist_id:93)

<http://www.alfredsisley.org/>