

Back Bay Readers' Pick

READING GROUP GUIDE

THIRTY-THREE SWOONS

A novel by
Martha Cooley

A CONVERSATION WITH MARTHA COOLEY

Camilla says, “Intimacy seemed beyond my reach—no, beyond my ken, really,” yet once she lets herself open up about her mysterious past, she can finally stop “loving only from the sidelines” (pages 52 and 305). Do you think most people must confront their own pasts in order to participate fully in their present lives?

Well, the past does seem to assert itself, one way or the other. Everything depends, I suppose, on what one means by “confront.” I’ve always been interested in how people manage the inner traffic, so to speak, between the past and the present—by what they willingly let through, and what they delay or reroute or hold up altogether. My novels have given me a chance to explore this in some detail—to imagine various strategies for engaging with the past, both personal and political.

Your previous novel, The Archivist, and Thirty-Three Swoons both fold real historical figures into their stories. What are the challenges of combining real and imagined characters in your fiction?

Perhaps the largest challenge for any fiction writer dealing with historical characters or events is that of remaining clear about what’s

imagined versus what's used or exploited for storymaking purposes. Overly researched fiction is airless; historical characters have to be used judiciously, and always with an eye toward their role in the *fiction* itself. One must be free—and ready—to invent, always.

What attracted you to Meyerhold's story?

While I was living in Moscow in the mid-1990s, I sometimes walked past a theater named after Meyerhold. One day I asked someone who he was and learned just enough about his strange, remarkable career to make me curious. It turned out that Meyerhold and Chekhov knew each other—a fact that endeared me to Meyerhold right away, since Russia's most famous playwright has always been a favorite of mine. Once I discovered what an amazing theatrical artist and innovator Meyerhold really was, I got hooked—I just couldn't get him out of my mind.

How has your reading life informed your writing life?

My reading sparks my writing—not necessarily immediately or directly, but the connection is always there. Or else my writing begins in something personal but gets fanned by something I've read, and flares into something larger, wider, more capacious. I read a good deal of poetry, to keep the music of the English language in my ear, and to watch how poets play with its possibilities.

You write that Jordan “was a master of forest scents culled from ferns, mosses, lichen, roots, bark, and resin. He harnessed their shade and smoke to the sweetness of hyacinth and violet, or the assertive spiciness of sandalwood and patchouli, creating perfumes that were overtly lush and serene but covertly turbulent, their sensuality in constant flux” (page 64). Did you have to research the perfume industry in order to write about it so descriptively? If so, how did you go about undertaking that research?

I did the minimal amount of technical research necessary for me to understand the rudiments of perfume manufacture. And I took myself to many perfume counters in department stores and did a lot of spritzing and smelling! I'm not very good at describing scents, so I found it useful to read a couple of books about the astonishing variety of ingredients that go into perfumes. Devising a good fragrance makes cooking a fancy meal seem ridiculously easy.

Did you know the identity of Danny's father from the start, or was this a mystery you had to solve for yourself before finishing the novel?

Absolutely a mystery to me! And I had no idea how to solve it, either—even though after I finally did, I realized the solution was “hiding in plain sight,” so obvious as to be invisible. I think for many fiction writers, certain puzzles can't be worked out intellectually. They have to be untangled on the page, through the act of writing.

What are you working on now?

A novel in which money is a central theme. I figured, since I worry about money a lot, why not write about it? The story involves a winning sweepstakes ticket and an unlikely love affair. I am still puzzling away at it . . .

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

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 fa-

vorite 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?