



# The Swan Thieves

By Elizabeth Kostova

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## Genre and Subject

Psychiatrists Fiction

Art Appreciation

Psychological Fiction

## Synopsis

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.

## Author Biography

Elizabeth Kostova was born Elizabeth Johnson in New London, Connecticut and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee where she graduated from the Webb School of Knoxville. She received her undergraduate degree from Yale University and a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Michigan, where she won the 2003 Hopwood Award for her Novel-in-Progress. She is married to a Bulgarian computer programmer.

In May 2007, the Elizabeth Kostova Foundation was created. The Foundation helps support Bulgarian creative writing, the translation of contemporary Bulgarian literature into English, and friendship between Bulgarian authors and American and British authors.

## Discussion Starters

- 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?
- Each of the artists in the book—Robert, Marlow, Mary, Kate, Beatrice, 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?
- 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 Beatrice 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?

- 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?
- In Chapter 95, just before Marlow flies to Paris to learn more about Beatrice 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?
- *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?
- At many points in the story, artists paint or sketch one another. What are these occasions and how is each significant to the story?
- In Etretat, as she considers her relationship with Olivier, Beatrice realises that whatever happens between them “she must effect herself and live with later.” Is this true of other characters’ experiences? In what senses?
- 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?
- Kate says of her second meeting with Robert Oliver, “His apparent unawareness of himself was mesmerising.” What else mesmerises other people about Robert? Why do some of the other characters find him compelling?
- 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?

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