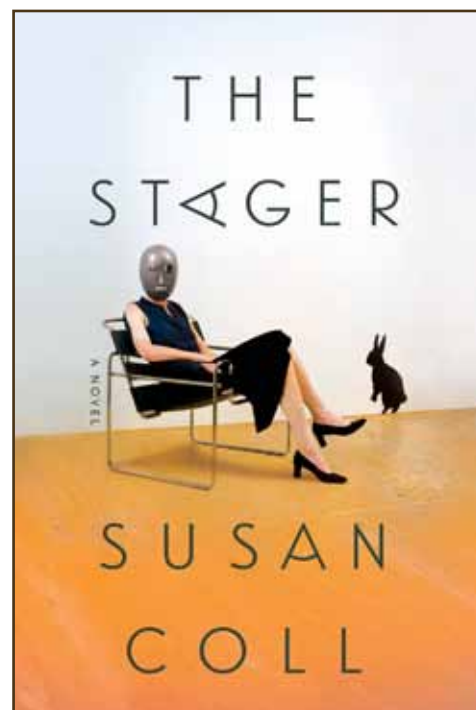


Reading Group Gold

The Stager

A novel

by Susan Coll



ISBN: 978-0-374-26881-7 / 288 pages

Susan Coll enjoys speaking to book groups, so go ahead and ask. Visit www.susancoll.com for more information.

A comedy about rabbits and real estate from the acclaimed novelist Susan Coll, *The Stager* chronicles one family's surreal descent into madness and discord as they attempt to sell their faux "Flemish villa." It's not that they ever loved the house; it's a bloated cruise ship of a McMansion in a soulless suburban enclave, and it's infused with a bad smell. The family's pet rabbit, Dominique, doesn't much like the place either; he's been slowly destroying the house, gnawing on furniture and eating holes in the carpet. When he sees an opportunity to escape, his owner, ten-year-old Elsa, begins to unravel, alarming her parents, who are in London preparing the move into the family's new house.

While the parents—a former tennis pro who has now become obese and addicted to an alphabet soup of prescription drugs, and his beautiful investment banker wife—are overseas, a professional home stager, Eve Brenner, is set loose in the house. Eve understands the quick, shallow cosmetic fixes that make a house desirable to a new owner. But when she steps into the foyer, she immediately understands that she should not be here. She recognizes objects of emotional significance that pull her into the past, and into a rabbit hole of emotional treachery that she can neither disguise nor escape.

As questions of sobriety, sanity, and fidelity arise, the rabbit emerges as the voice of reason, bringing a sparkling and hilarious conclusion to Coll's portrait of consumption and cutthroat careerism.

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We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your tour of *The Stager*'s elegant manse and its wickedly funny inhabitants.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In *The Stager*, which character has the firmest grip on reality? Which characters were you rooting for? Whose voice did you enjoy reading the most?
2. The very concept of staging a house—depersonalizing it so others can imagine themselves living there—is rich with metaphor. What is the author trying to say about the illusions we create about our lives?
3. What are your theories about Dominique's location, and his identity? What would he say about your life? Why is a rabbit the ideal focal point for this novel?
4. How does the Unfurlings housing development serve as an apt metaphor for contemporary American culture and our widening economic gap? What do we expect from our dwelling places? What do Bella and her family discover about feeling at home in The Flanders and in the world beyond Bethesda?
5. What does the novel say about the nature of greed and the nature of generosity?
6. Who (if anyone) is to blame for Lars's downfall? How is his competitive nature different from Bella's? Why does Lars tolerate Bella's behavior?
7. In a pivotal scene, Elsa turns on music and dances in the street. What is the meaning of this?
8. After ten years, Eve remains bitter and resentful toward Bella. How would you have moved forward after experiencing Eve's misfortunes?
9. How does Eve's approach to "shelter" shift throughout her life? Does she ultimately prove to be more resilient than Bella?
10. What is at the root of Raymond's seductive charms? Why does he naturally get everything he wants? Is there any justice in this?
11. Nabila gives hints of her own harrowing personal backstory, but no one ever asks her about her past. Why?
12. What does the hallucinogenic tea reveal about the characters' true selves and about the nature of novel writing itself?

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13. What is unique about Susan Coll's approach to humor and the human condition? Which scenes made you laugh? How does *The Stager* enhance your enjoyment of the author's previous novels?
14. If Eve staged your house, what would she have to do to depersonalize it? What original symbolic artwork would she produce as the final touch?

PRAISE FOR *THE STAGER*

"Sometimes a book just takes you by the hand and swings you deliriously in a new dance—that is *The Stager*, Susan Coll's brilliant comic novel. Peopled by rabbits and woefully wise little girls, by adulterers and other unfortunate adults, this is a world sharp with secrets, grudges, mania, odors, and profound sweetness. I loved it." —Cathleen Schine, author of *Fin & Lady* and *The Three Weissmanns of Westport*

"What a delight to follow Susan Coll on her tour of one family's surreal unraveling. Sly and wise, Coll is a stager extraordinaire, allowing us to peer behind the curtain of suburban success and excess. I loved this novel's wild wit. Now I want to adopt the Jorgenson family's precocious kid—and their stoned rabbit." —Lisa Zeidner, author of *Love Bomb*

"Dark, luminous, and hilarious, *The Stager* draws its radiant power from the great time-tested themes: love, betrayal, and the redemptive power of rabbits. At the height of her powers, Susan Coll reveals her mastery of the wry and delicious line, of the bizarre and tender moment—and of hope." —Dylan Landis, author of *Normal People Don't Live Like This*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Coll is the author of the novels *Beach Week*, *Acceptance*, *Rockville Pike*, and *karlmarx.com*. A television adaption of *Acceptance*, starring Joan Cusack, aired in 2009. Coll works at Politics & Prose bookstore and lives in Washington, D.C.

Guide written by Amy Clements