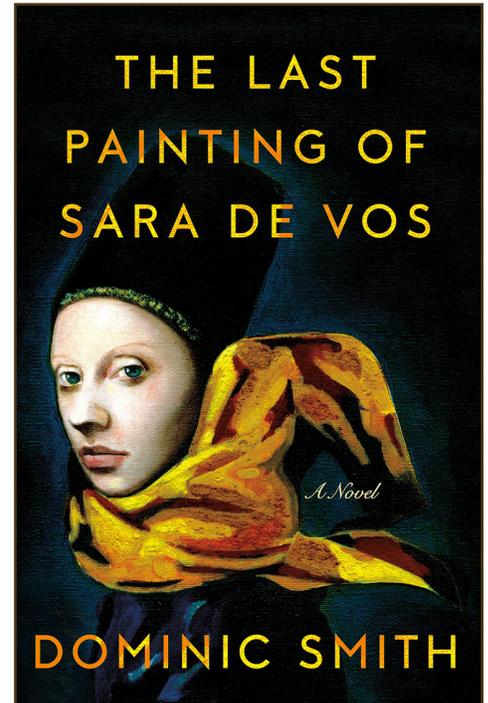


Reading Group Gold

The Last Painting of Sara de Vos by Dominic Smith



ISBN: 978-0-374-10668-3 / 304 pages

Spanning three centuries and three continents that are linked by a mesmerizing work of art, *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* is itself a masterwork from the acclaimed novelist Dominic Smith. Bridging the historical and the contemporary, the cast of characters in this finely woven story includes a female artist of the Dutch Golden Age (the first woman to be admitted as a master painter to a Guild of St. Luke in the Netherlands), a blue-blooded New Yorker whose family has owned the artist's only known work since the seventeenth century, and a celebrated scholar who painted a forgery of the painting during the 1950s. Featuring a haunting winter scene in which a barefoot girl watches ice skaters at dusk, the painting transcends its origins, falling under the gaze of collectors and curators, lovers and thieves.

Inspired by the little-known women who became professional artists in the age of Rembrandt and Vermeer, *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* is ultimately a fascinating exploration of the nature of truth and the role of creative expression in our lives. We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group's experience.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What does *At the Edge of a Wood* mean to Sara, Marty, and Ellie? How did your reactions to the painting shift throughout the novel?

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2. How does the memory of Kathrijn influence Sara's art? What are Sara's perceptions of mortality and the natural world?
3. What does the novel reveal about the distinctions between artists and art historians, and between collectors and dealers? Is art forgery a form of art?
4. What empowers Ellie and Sara despite the chauvinism they face when they launch their respective careers?
5. Would you want the Rent-a-Beats at your party? In their disdain for capitalism, do they do a good job of exposing the plight of someone like Sara?
6. As you read about the great lengths taken to transport the painting from the museum in Leiden, what came to mind about the value of a fake? What value should Ellie's painstakingly created painting possess? How does the muddy nature of falsehood and illusion shape her relationship with Marty?
7. As you observed the stark difference between the Guild of St. Luke in the Netherlands and the modern auction scene in Manhattan, what did you discover about the economics of the art world? Has the patronage system that provided Sara with a benefactor (through Barent's creditor, Cornelis Groen) disappeared?
8. If you had been in Ellie's situation, would you have accepted Gabriel's invitation to "restore" *At the Edge of a Wood*?
9. Discuss the three marriages portrayed in the book: Sara and Barent, Sara and Tomas, Marty and Rachel. When does love flourish in the novel? What causes it to fade?
10. What is Marty seeking on his sojourn to Sydney? What realizations emerge when he and Ellie are reunited? What misconceptions are laid to rest?
11. Beyond additional paintings, what is Ellie seeking when she makes the pilgrimage to Edith Zeller's bed-and-breakfast?
12. Consider the author's decision to make the Dutch Golden Age his backdrop. What particular qualities permeate the novel as a result of that choice?
13. Does *At the Edge of a Wood* convey any messages that endure across the centuries? What would Sara think if she could have known the fate of her work?
14. How does *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* enhance the portraits of humanity presented in other novels by Dominic Smith that you have enjoyed?

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PRAISE FOR *THE LAST PAINTING OF SARA DE VOS*

“As this story of art, beauty, deception, and the harshest kinds of loss ranged over continents and centuries, I was completely transfixed by the sense of unfolding revelation. *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* is, quite simply, one of the best novels I have ever read, and as close to perfect as any book I’m likely to encounter in my reading life. It’s one of those rare books I’ll return to again and again in the coming years.” —Ben Fountain, author of *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk*

“Gliding gracefully from grungy 1950s Brooklyn to the lucent interiors of Golden Age Holland and the sun-splashed streets of contemporary Sydney, *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* links the lives of two troubled, enigmatic, and hugely talented young women, one of them an artist, the other her forger. A page-turning book with much to say about the pain and exhilaration of art and life.” —Geraldine Brooks, author of *The Secret Chord*

“Highly evocative of time and place, this stunning novel explores a triumvirate of fate, choice, and consequence and is worthy of comparison to Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* . . . Just as a painter may utilize thousands of fine brushstrokes, Dominic Smith slowly creates a masterly, multilayered story that will dazzle readers of fine historical fiction.” —Susanne Wells, *Library Journal* (starred review)

“In *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*, Dominic Smith moves effortlessly between his seventeenth-century artist and those who fall under the spell of her work more than three hundred years later. Smith is a writer of huge gifts, and his descriptions of the painting and of those who fall in love with it (and with each other) are rendered with wondrous intelligence and keen wit. The result is a novel of surprising beauty and piercing suspense. I couldn’t stop turning the pages even while the last thing I wanted was to reach the end.” —Margot Livesey, author of *The Flight of Gemma Hardy*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dominic Smith grew up in Australia and now lives in Austin, Texas. He’s the author of three other novels: *Bright and Distant Shores*, *The Beautiful Miscellaneous*, and *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre*. His short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Texas Monthly*, and the *Chicago Tribune’s* Printers Row Journal, among other publications. He is the recipient of a new works grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, a Dobie Paisano Fellowship, and a Michener Fellowship. He teaches writing in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. For more information, visit his website, www.dominicsmith.net.

Guide written by Amy Clements