

ALLEN & UNWIN

'page-turning . . . about the pain and exhilaration of life and art'
—GERALDINE BROOKS, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *People of the Book*

THE LAST PAINTING OF SARA DE VOS

'quite simply, one of the best novels I have ever read'
—BEN FOUNTAIN, author of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*

Dominic Smith



READING GROUP NOTES

Contents: About the book (2) About the author (2)
Reviews (2) Suggested points for discussion (3)
Further reading (4)

About the book

A dazzling and mesmerising story that charts the collision course between a rare landscape by a female Dutch painter of the golden age, an inheritor of the work in 1950s Manhattan, and a celebrated art historian who painted a forgery of it in her youth. A literary novel of breathtaking scope, ambition and achievement.

In 1631, Sara de Vos is admitted to the Guild of St. Luke in Holland as a master painter, the first woman to be so honoured. Three hundred years later, only one work attributed to de Vos is known to remain - a haunting winter scene, *At the Edge of a Wood*, which hangs over the Manhattan bed of a wealthy descendant of the original owner. An Australian grad student, Ellie Shipley, struggling to stay afloat in New York, agrees to paint a forgery of the landscape, a decision that will haunt her. Because now, half a century later, she's curating an exhibition of female Dutch painters, and both versions threaten to arrive.

As the three threads intersect with increasing and exquisite suspense, *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* mesmerises while it grapples with the demands of the artistic life, showing how the deceits of the past can forge the present.

About the author

Dominic Smith is the author of three previously published novels. His awards include a Dobie Paisano Fellowship, the Sherwood Anderson Fiction Prize, the Gulf Coast Fiction Prize, and a new works grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. His debut novel, *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre*, was a Barnes & Noble Discover New Writers Book, and received the Turner Prize for First Fiction from the Texas Institute of Letters. His second novel, *The Beautiful Miscellaneous*, was a Booklist Editors' Choice and optioned for film by Southpaw Entertainment. His most recent novel, *Bright and Distant Shores*, was named by Kirkus as one of the 'Best Books of 2011' and chosen by the ALA for its annual reading list. In Australia, he was shortlisted for the Age Book of the Year and the Victorian Premier's Prize for Fiction. His fiction has appeared in numerous journals and magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Reviews

'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* . . . A masterly, multilayered story that will dazzle readers.' - *Library Journal*

'This densely layered, finely wrought book is a delight. The characters are complex and believable, the story compelling, the writing simply beautiful.' - Nicole Abadee, *Australian Financial Review*

'This quietly beautiful novel offers storytelling at its most masterful' - Juliet Reiden, *Australian Women's Weekly*

'*The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* is a deeply researched, beautifully written, intellectually absorbing novel that also has the qualities of a page-turner.' - Stephen Romei, *The Weekend Australian*

'page-turning... about the pain and exhilaration of life and art' - Geraldine Brooks, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *People of the Book*

'quite simply, one of the best novels I have ever read' - Ben Fountain, author of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*

For discussion

- ☞ 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?
- ☞ How does the memory of Kathrijn influence Sara's art? What are Sara's perceptions of mortality and the natural world?
- ☞ 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?
- ☞ What empowers Ellie and Sara despite the chauvinism they face when they launch their respective careers?
- ☞ 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?
- ☞ 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?
- ☞ 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?
- ☞ If you had been in Ellie's situation, would you have accepted Gabriel's invitation to "restore" *At the Edge of a Wood*?
- ☞ 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?
- ☞ What is Marty seeking on his sojourn to Sydney? What realizations emerge when he and Ellie are reunited? What misconceptions are laid to rest?
- ☞ Beyond additional paintings, what is Ellie seeking when she makes the pilgrimage to Edith Zeller's bed-and-breakfast?

- ☞ 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?
- ☞ 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?
- ☞ 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?

Suggested further reading

Bright and Distant Shores – Dominic Smith

The Goldfinch – Donna Tartt

Girl With a Pearl Earring – Tracy Chevalier

How to Be Both – Ali Smith

A Month in the Country – J.L. Carr

What's Bred in the Bone – Robertson Davies