

B. A. Shapiro

{ IN HER WORDS }

I'm a cowardly writer. Some writers sit down and begin a novel without knowing where it will end, trusting the process to bring their story to a satisfying conclusion. But not me. I don't have the courage to begin a book until I know there's an end — and a middle too. I need an outline that allows me to believe my idea might be transformed into a successful novel. Some writers need a working title; I need a working plot. Which is why it takes me so damn long to get from that first glimmer of an idea to a complete manuscript.

The Art Forger was no different. The first time I encountered art collector and museum founder Isabella Stewart Gardner in 1983, I fell in love. I wanted to hang out with her, walk lions down Boston streets with her, buy famous paintings, and do all kinds of outrageous things that would scandalize the stuffed shirts around us. But, alas, she died in 1924. I dismissed the idea of a “Belle” novel because she intimidated me — see, more cowardice — but I never forgot her.

Then in 1990, she burst on the scene, or at least her namesake, Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, did, when two men dressed as police officers bound and gagged two guards and stole thirteen pieces of art, including Rembrandt's *Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, Vermeer's *The Concert*, and works by Degas and Manet from the collection. Now, I thought, now I might just be able to make it work.

But despite the media taking the theft international, suspects who ran the gamut from the Mafia to the Vatican, and the lack of any arrests, I just couldn't find my story. What could Belle possibly have to do with a heist seventy years after her death? How could I write a book about a robbery that hadn't been solved? What if it was solved before I was finished — or worse just after I'd completed it — and the real solution was nothing like mine? Cowardly writer that I am, I put the idea back in the drawer.

Nineteen years later, the mystery of the Gardner heist still hadn't been

solved, and Belle was still haunting me. I read half a dozen biographies and hundreds of letters, and I scoured the Internet. I was thinking I might do something like Irving Stone or Gore Vidal would, writers whose books I loved, and considered a fictionalized biography. But embracing the entirety of Isabella Gardner's action-packed life was too daunting—some things never change—so, once again, Belle was shelved.

Around this time I began taking a series of art courses that toured galleries and museums with a well-known artist for a guide. She opened my eyes, not just to the wonder of what we were seeing, but to the complicated worlds of creating, collecting, curating, and selling works of art. I also developed a fascination with art theft and art forgery. Now, I thought, now I really might have my Belle book. So I wrote synopses, created plot charts, developed character sketches, then scratched it all and did it again. I was growing closer, but the pieces weren't all quite there; something was missing: I couldn't see the end.

Simultaneously, I was struggling with writing and wondering if I should just give up the whole endeavor. One day, as I was ruminating on how difficult life was for anyone in the arts and feeling more than a bit sorry for myself, my missing link appeared in the form of a question: What would any of us be willing to do to secure our ambitions? Unknown artists, famous artists, collectors, brokers, and gallery owners? Me? Belle?

So I expanded my cast of characters and gave each one a temptation their egos couldn't resist, including a struggling artist willing to make the ultimate Faustian bargain, and then I added them to the mix of art theft, art forgery, the Gardner Museum heist, and, of course, my buddy Belle. Suddenly, just like the Cowardly Lion, who became brave when he had his medal, I became brave when I had my plot. *The Art Forger* is the result.