

The
ART FORGER

A Note from the Author
Questions for Discussion



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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 having taken 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.

One day, as I was wondering if I should just give up the whole endeavor, 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, including a struggling artist willing to make the ultimate Faustian bargain, and gave each one a temptation their egos couldn't resist, 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.

Questions for Discussion

1. At the novel's opening, Claire is a pariah in the art world. Has the community been unfair to her? In what ways, if any, is she responsible for her own exile? Does she share any blame for Isaac Cullion's death?

2. *The Art Forger* explores the darker side of human nature. All of the characters in the novel have a price, a line they're willing to cross to further their own ambitions. Do you think Claire does the wrong things for the right reasons? Is she a moral person or not? What about Isabella Stewart Gardener? What compromises would you make to secure what you most desire?

3. B. A. Shapiro juggles three plot lines in the novel, moving back and forth through time. Each section tells of secrets and deceit. How does each of these storylines intersect and deepen the themes of the novel?

4. This novel was inspired by an actual art heist, which included works by Manet, Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Degas. But what if Rembrandt didn't paint *Storm of Galilee*? What if an unknown

artist did instead? Would the painting be any less beautiful? Would it no longer be admired? Would it suddenly be worthless? What is it that gives an object value?

5. It is estimated that 40 percent of all artworks put up for sale in any given year are forgeries. Theodore Rousseau, an expert from the Metropolitan Museum, said, “We can only talk about the bad forgeries, the ones that have been detected. The good ones are still hanging on museum walls.” Does knowing this affect the way you view great art? How can we tell the difference between what is inauthentic and what is real?

6. The novel explores the idea that we often only see what we want to see. If an expert is told a painting is a masterpiece, she sees one. If an artist desires recognition, she convinces herself that her deal with the devil is for good. How are people complicit in missing the truth?

7. Art forger Han van Meegeren, whose techniques Claire uses to create her own forgery, was a frustrated Dutch painter. An unappreciated artist struggling for recognition, his intention was to hoodwink the art dealers and critics who refused to recognize his own artistic genius. How is Claire similar to or different from Meegeren?

8. Shapiro has a PhD in sociology and has studied deviant behavior. How do you think her background informs her characters and the ethically muddied—some might say unprincipled—decisions they make? Does it make her characters more sympathetic or less?

9. Boston features prominently in *The Art Forger*. How does the author use the city as a nod to Claire’s state of mind?

10. Gorgeous art can make people do incredibly ugly things, and the novel seems to suggest that it's not only for money. Why do you think that beauty and originality can have that effect on people?

11. What do the meetings between Edgar Degas and Isabella Stewart Gardner show about the relationship between a collector and an artist?

12. Claire falls hard for Aiden Markel, but she keeps secrets from him. He is also keeping secrets from her. Can a relationship survive this kind of betrayal? Do you think Aiden loves Claire? Why does Claire choose the wrong men? Do you think Aiden and Claire love art more than they love each other?

13. At the end of the novel, critics are praising Claire's work. Collectors are clamoring for the very same paintings that have hung, unsalable, in her studio for years. Why is her work suddenly more valuable? Is she successful only because she has become a celebrity?

14. Is art a commodity like any other product? What does the book suggest about the intersection of art and commerce, about talent and reputation?

15. Sometimes getting exactly what you want isn't quite what you expected. Our society loves to create celebrities and then tear them down. Can you give some examples? What happens when your dreams are realized and you can't handle it, or you don't feel you've earned it? Does Claire deserve the fame she is awarded at the end of the book?