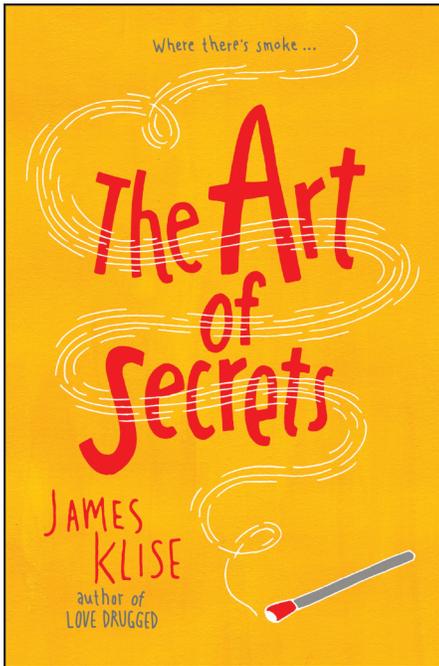


The ART of SECRETS

by James Klise



BOOK TALK

When Saba Khan's apartment burns in a mysterious fire, possibly a hate crime, her high school rallies around her. Saba's family moves rent-free into a luxury apartment, her Facebook page explodes, and she starts (secretly) dating a popular boy. Then a quirky piece of art donated to a school fund-raising effort for the Khans is revealed to be an unknown work by a famous artist, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and Saba's life turns upside down again. Should Saba's family have all that money? Or should it go to the students who found the art? Or to the school?

Greed, jealousy, and suspicion create an increasingly tangled web as students and teachers alike debate who should get the money, begin to point fingers, and make startling accusations. Through monologues, journal entries, interviews, articles, and official documents, characters reveal how they see what happened. As author James Klise describes it, "Everybody's got a different take—so to speak—and it's amusing, and sometimes shocking, to observe the subtle and overt ways characters respond to this tragic situation by asking, 'What's in it for me?'"

APRIL
 YOUNG ADULT FICTION
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Klise is the author of *Love Drugged*, which won an ALA Stonewall honor and received glowing reviews. He lives in Chicago, where he works as a high school librarian. His short stories have appeared in many journals, including *StoryQuarterly*, *New Orleans Review*, *Ascent*, and *Southern Humanities Review*. *The Art of Secrets* is his second novel.



PRAISE FOR THE ART OF SECRETS

★"This art mystery is that rare book that will be passed around by teens as well as teachers in the faculty lounge, discussed and dissected and immediately reread to scour for hidden clues and motivations. The incidents at Highsmith School will stay on readers' minds long after the last page."—*Booklist*, starred review

"Where there's smoke, there's fire . . . and apparently, valuable art! When the Khan family's home is mysteriously burned to the ground, the funds from a priceless painting come to their rescue. Through unique journal entries, articles, and interviews, a tangled web of unusual secrets unfolds."—*Teen Vogue*

"Relationships, secrets and lies aplenty for caper-loving fans."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"This darkly ambiguous, provocative novel highlights several themes worthy of discussion, including the destructive power of secrets and the politics of generosity."—*The Horn Book*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Saba Khan's Pakistani parents hold traditional beliefs—for example, fifteen-year-old Saba has to fight to play tennis, because her father objects to her wearing shorts in public. On page 122, Steve Davinski tells his friends that Saba has a whole extra set of rules to live by, like “Fit in with two cultures,” “Speak two languages fluently,” and “Try to look innocent.” Do any members of your family or any of your friends have to fit in with more than one culture or speak more than one language? What are the benefits and challenges of being part of a dual-culture family?
2. On page 121, Steve says, “I’ve been with girls for a lot of reasons . . . And who are we kidding? Girls date me for reasons of their own, too.” Describe some of the reasons Saba and Steve embark on a romantic relationship. Do they both get what they want?
3. Why do you think the author chose to write the story from multiple points of view? How would the novel have been different if only one person told the whole story—for example, Saba or Kevin Spoon or even one of the teachers?
4. The artist Henry Darger is known as an “outsider artist” because he created art independently, outside the known cultural establishment. *The Art of Secrets* is teeming with “outsiders”—Saba Khan with her Pakistani roots; Javier Conejera, the exchange student from Spain; Ariel Ames, the “new” English teacher who doesn’t feel accepted even after three years; Jean Delacroix, the gay art teacher who works solo; and newcomers Kendra and Kevin Spoon, who don’t quite fit in with the “legacy” students at Highsmith School. Do all the outsiders in the book long to be insiders? Is anyone happy being an outsider? Are there any true insiders in the story?
5. Steve Davinski struggles to complete his college application essay because he isn’t sure what to write. Ultimately, we learn, he writes about his recent experiences with Saba and Javier. How did you feel about the essay? Did it change your opinion of Steve?
6. Almost everyone in the story talks to the *Chicago Tribune* reporter at some point to tell him what “really” happened. On page 109, the principal even tries to feed the reporter the headline “We’re all victims now.” Based on the resulting *Tribune* articles, would you say the reporter was successfully manipulated by the principal and others?
7. When you first found out the Darger paintings were stolen, was there anyone you immediately suspected? If so, what were some clues that made you suspicious of that person? Did your mind ever change about who the thief might be? Were you surprised by the ending? Why or why not?
8. On page 173, Kevin Spoon says, “It’s naïve to think that people go around helping people without some motivation, without expecting something in return, right?” Do you think it’s true that people only help others if there’s some selfish purpose behind it? Can you think of any examples in *The Art of Secrets* where people helped people just out of kindness?
9. Many of the characters—including Javier, Jean Delacroix, and Ariel Ames—make choices that may have surprised you. In each case, was the character justified in doing what he or she did?
10. Henry Darger’s surreal paintings inspire wildly different reactions from this cast of characters. Saba finds them strange, violent, and ugly (page 98); Steve Davinski calls them “girly watercolor paintings” (page 78); and Kevin Spoon says he can relate to the images of fierce young kids who bravely take on grown-ups and defeat them (page 233). Javier says they “tell us a story of innocence and darkness” (page 133). Take a moment to do an online image search on the art of Henry Darger. What are your impressions of this outsider artist’s work?
11. Which character or characters do you hold responsible for the good things and bad things that Saba has experienced this year? Do you agree with Saba’s theory of what truly happened? Why or why not?