

The Last Painting of Sara De Vos Study Guide

The Last Painting of Sara De Vos by Dominic Smith

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Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide refers specifically to the 2016 Sarah Chrichton Books/Farrar, Straus, and Giroux First Edition of the Last Painting of Sara de Vos, by Dominic Smith.

The Last Painting of Sara de Vos, a novel by Dominic Smith, focuses on Ellie Shipley, an art historian and former forger. Ellie attempts to learn more about obscure, but superbly talented, seventeenth-century Dutch painter Sara de Vos. The novel is set in three different eras: the 1950s, the 1630s, and the year 2000. The plot revolves around the only known surviving painting of Sara de Vos, *At the Edge of a Wood*.

In 1636, Sara de Vos and her husband, Barent, are painters belonging to the Amsterdam artists' Guild of Saint Luke. Indeed, Sara is the first woman admitted to the Guild. However, the death of their daughter and Barent's inability to complete commissions on time plunge the family into debt. In grief, Sara paints a picture of her daughter at the edge of the woods, looking down below at skaters on a frozen river, caught between two worlds –the living, and the dead. Sara and Barent create paintings illegally and without signatures to sell outside the Guild, and in so doing, run afoul of the Guild. When Barent is posed for debtor's prison, he abandons Sara. Sara then turns to the Guild for help, which agrees to help pay down her debts in exchange for an auction of her works from which the Guild will take a commission. A visiting shipper, Pieter de Groot, observes Sara's woodland scene and purchases it. The painting will be handed down through the generations of the de Groot family.

During an Aid Society dinner hosted by Marty and Rachel de Groot at their New York apartment in the late fall of 1958, "*At the Edge of a Wood*" is stolen. A short time later, the original surfaces at Ellie Shipley's apartment. Ellie, a native-born Australian, has come to New York in anger after being rebuffed by the art community in London. Taking on restoration work, Ellie ekes out a living and saves as much money as she can. She is tasked with copying the de Vos painting, not realizing what she believes to be a harmless copy requested by the owner will actually be a forgery. Meanwhile, Marty is stunned and disturbed by the theft of the painting, and hires a private investigator, Red Hammond, to track it down. He eventually tracks down Ellie, and hands her information over to Marty.

Marty is struck by the fact that the much-younger Ellie is not a criminal. Marty decides he wants to get to know her before turning her over to the police. He hires her to help him buy paintings for his collection, and the two fall in love with each other. When they finally have sex, Marty is horrified that he has cheated on his wife, and leaves Ellie. Ellie learns the truth about Marty and the painting she has forged, and for the next several decades –through a failed marriage and taking on a professorship at Sydney University –always worries that the ghosts of her past will wreck her career. In August 2000, the Art Gallery of New South Wales hosts an exhibition of old Dutch paintings, including Sara's "*At the Edge of a Wood*." When both the copy and the original are loaned to the exhibition (in addition to a newly rediscovered work of Sara's), Ellie believes her career is over. Instead, Marty and Ellie make peace about the past. Marty buys the copy in



order to protect Ellie, while Ellie agrees to keep him informed as she decides to continue to search for more about Sara's life. As she does, she discovers yet another painting of Sara's in an attic of the woman who also had the other undiscovered painting by Sara. The painting Ellie discovers is a self-portrait of Sara, painted just before her death in 1649.



Part One: Upper East Side, November 1957 - Upper East Side, May 1958

Summary

Part One

Upper East Side, November 1957 – Marty de Groot, a patent lawyer, and his wife Rachel are set to host a party at their New York place for the Aid Society. Clay and Celia Thomas are the first to arrive. Clay is Marty's boss. Sixty or so people attend, and the evening is going well. Marty addresses the guests as he clutches his Beagle, Carraway. He comments that the Russians have launched a dog into space, a dog whose final meal is laced with poison. Marty tunes the radio in to hear Sputnik 2 as it orbits the Earth.

The entertainment for the evening, the Rent-A-Beats (three women and three men, all beatniks) arrive, but they make a mess of things as some of them are high. Clay takes the initiative by shoving one of the beatniks toward the door while Rachel calls the police. The Beats all leave. Before going to sleep that night, Marty notices the painting over his bed is slightly askew. It is "At the Edge of a Wood," a 1636 painting by Dutch artist Sara de Vos. It is only later that Marty learns the painting has been stolen and replaced with a very good forgery. Marty is not happy about the painting's loss, for it has been in his family for three centuries and was given to him by his father on his father's deathbed. He also secretly wonders if the painting has been the cause of his wife, Rachel's depression, or has been the reason no one in his family has ever lived past the age of sixty.

Amsterdam/Berckhey, Spring 1636 – Sara de Vos has learned a giant whale has beached near the fishing village of Berckhey and that thousands from Amsterdam are traveling over to see the sight. Sara and her husband, Barent, both painters and members of the Guild of Saint Luke, travel to paint the sight. Their daughter, seven year-old Kathrijn, comes with them. While Barent does not mind his wife is a painter, he considers himself superior. Sara keeps a watchful eye on her daughter while preparing paints and brushes for Barent. Sara and Kathrijn also both sketch the scene before them. Kathrijn contracts a fever while purchasing food from the child of a local farm family selling produce, and she dies not long after. Heartbroken, Sara loses the will to paint while devastated, while Barent's whale scene becomes dark in composition and unable to be sold. While out that winter, she sees a young girl emerging from the woods overlooking a frozen branch of the Amstel River. Sara transforms the scene into the painting that will become "At the Edge of a Wood."

Brooklyn, November 1957 – Ellie Shipley writes back to her parents in Sydney, Australia, telling them about all the things in New York she only pretends to do, such as attending art exhibits. Ellie, in her twenties, originally came to New York to restore art,



but after meeting Gabriel Lodge, a British dealer, begins creating exact copies of paintings as well. One such painting is “At the Edge of a Wood.” She is told the owner wants an exact replica made. Ellie learns the painting is the only surviving work of Sara de Vos, who was the first woman admitted to the Guild of Saint Luke. Ironically, Sara is remembered as a still-life painter, though her one surviving painting is not a still-life. Ellie commits to the task of forgery. Ellie works angrily, for her skills have for so long been overlooked by the art world because she is a woman. A month in, Ellie realizes she is not just working on a copy, but painting an outright forgery. Gabriel admits as much when he brings the real painting, and the money, to Ellie.

Amsterdam, Winter 1636 – Although Sara is supposed to be painting tulips, she sneaks away to the attic whenever she can to work on her painting “At the Edge of a Wood.” Almost a year after Kathrijn’s death, Sara is still angry with God for taking Kathrijn from her. She wonders if the painting is an allegory for Kathrijn existing between life and death. She decides to give the girl at the wood’s edge Kathrijn’s face, but has difficulty summoning it up. Sara again considers she should be painting tulips, for paintings of tulips are selling quickly and she and Barent have both been suspended from the Guild for selling unsigned paintings without giving the Guild commissions due to a desperate need for money because Barent’s whale painting did not sell. They continue to sell unsigned paintings.

Upper East Side, May 1958 – New York is in a heat wave. Marty has been given the rest of Friday off after being taken out to lunch to celebrate his being named a partner. He heads to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He and Rachel live just across the street, donate regularly, but have not visited in years. Marty calls his secretary, Gretchen, to tell her the good news about being made partner, and asks her to come out to meet him. Gretchen asks about Rachel, but Marty says Rachel is out in the Hamptons caring for her sick mother. He then calls home to tell Rachel he will be out for dinner. Marty then meets Gretchen at Claude’s Tavern in the Village. They have a drink but leave as a fight breaks out. Gretchen invites Marty in for a nightcap. Marty begins feeling a little fatherly toward Gretchen. Marty has never cheated on Rachel, though now it seems possible. Gretchen asks if Marty has ever wanted a family, to which he explains his wife has miscarried twice. After their nightcap, Marty thanks Gretchen for helping him celebrate, then heads out. At home, Marty studies the painting above the bed, noting he can no longer see the discolored nails in the frame. He thinks this must be because Rachel has had the frame cleaned.

Analysis

No one knows what the future holds, author Dominic Smith argues in his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*. The author’s claim is substantiated by an event in the life of Martin “Marty” de Groot, who is the heir to the Groot family fortune. Marty has no idea that an evening meant for charity will result in the stealing of a family heirloom. The heirloom is the painting *At the Edge of a Wood* by an artist from the 1600’s, Sarah de Vos. The painting has been in the family for centuries.



The idea that no one knows what the future will bring is also given credence by the structure of the novel itself which is established in Part I. Smith leapfrogs back and forth through time, -- the 1630s, the 1950s, and the year 2000. This rapid movement allows the reader to experience various points in time. It is as though pieces of a puzzle from hundreds of years are being fit together to form an overall image. Neither Marty nor Ellie will know what even a few decades of difference have in store for them.

The painting itself is symbolic. Painted after the death of the artist's daughter (Kathrijn), *At the Edge of the Wood* suggests an allegory of existing between life and death for Sara. Being stuck between life and death forms the physical suffering of Kathrijn while being ill between perfect health and death. It also suggests Sara's own place at the moment where she is caught between the life she knew and life as it has turned out. Life is full of phases and changes, stemming from the idea that no one knows what the future holds. Sara herself has gone from a place in life where she is happy and content to a place where she is heartbroken and feels a tremendous sense of loss. A phase of such happiness has given way to a phase of sadness.

While the painting itself suggests a simple scene --a girl looking down on skaters on a river --the truth is more cogent. Sara's daughter, Kathrijn, now dead, looks down upon the living, for she is no longer among them. The truth is not necessarily what it appears to be, argues Smith through the painting itself. The idea that things are not always as they first appear becomes an important theme in the novel. The reader should also bear in mind Marty's initial discovery that something is off with the painting as it is askew by a few inches --and as the frame seems completely different than the frame he previously knew the painting to have. At first, this appears to be proof to Marty that his wife has had the painting cleaned. Later, it becomes proof to Marty that the painting has been stolen. At the same time, Ellie begins working on a copy of the painting, believing it at first to be a genuine request from the owner through Gabriel. Later, her first impression is proved wrong when Gabriel confesses that Ellie is painting a forgery.

Discussion Question 1

Despite attempting to gain traction in the art world and make a legitimate name for herself, Ellie is unable to do so. Why? Why do you believe she chooses to continue painting the de Vos copy, even when she learns it is a forgery? How does her choice contradict her intentions for making it on her own in the art world?

Discussion Question 2

Though Marty de Groot celebrates his promotion with his secretary, he does not engage in an affair with her. Why not? Why does Marty choose to celebrate with Gretchen instead of his own wife?



Discussion Question 3

Why does the painting “At the Edge of a Wood” come to mean so much to Sara, especially as she paints it? What does the painting symbolize? Why?

Vocabulary

meticulous, prodigy, forgery, adagio, anthropological, venerable, impasto, maudlin, inscrutable, diffusely, insufferably, commiserate, bifurcated



Part One: Sydney, July 2000 - Part Two: En Route to Sydney, August 2000

Summary

Part One, continued

Sydney, July 2000 – A small party, planned by Ellie's sister Kate, has gathered together to celebrate Ellie Shipley's lifetime achievement award from the Women's Caucus for Art and the new edition of her book, *Dutch Women Painters in the Golden Age*. Now in her sixties, Ellie has been living in Sydney for three years after a failed marriage in London and a job offer at Sydney University. She has taken a rural, isolated house. Ellie takes a call from Max Culkins, director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, who is on the way to a conference in Beijing. He reports that an upcoming show of Dutch women painters at the gallery has been given permission to display "At the Edge of a Wood." This unsettles Ellie, who believes Marty De Groot must now be dead, or he would have never loaned out the painting. Ellie is stunned when she learns Marty is still alive and that he will be bringing the painting himself. Ellie realizes she has invited ruin back into her life. She recalls how, at least as of 1958, Gabriel had both the original and the forgery of "At the Edge of a Wood" in his possession, that in December Marty sought the public's help after discovering the forgery. Ellie has no idea what has happened exactly, for she had moved to Europe by that point. She imagines Gabriel must have returned the original for the reward, then sold the copy years later, believing Marty to be dead.

Ellie then e-mails Max, saying that two copies of the De Vos painting will be coming to the exhibit, for a man in Leiden has agreed to loan his copy to the exhibit as well. Ellie tells Max in the e-mail that she will get to the bottom of things. Ellie, in her mind, feels as if the police will be involved in her future. Wednesday afternoon, Ellie learns that two paintings have arrived by special courier from Leiden, Henrik Klapp. The paintings are signed for, and Hendrik faxes the paperwork to Leiden to let them know of the paintings' safe arrival. Ellie asks Henrik about the two paintings Leiden is loaning – "At the Edge of a Wood" which Henrik says was purchased recently, and "Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession," painted in 1637, but that Van Foort likes to keep the details of finding and buying such paintings to himself. It is revealed no death records or graves exist for Sara or her husband, so it is possible that Sara went on to paint many more pictures after the death of her daughter. If "Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession" is authentic, as Ellie will be determining, then it would rewrite history. Ellie, in her mind, thinks the new painting may simply be a misattribution. The next day, Hendrik oversees the unpacking. Ellie believes she is looking at the forgery she made many years before; and she is impressed by the supposedly newly-discovered painting, "Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession." It is signed and dated in the lower left-hand corner.

Part Two



Amsterdam, Spring 1637 – The tulip market collapses, making all of Sara’s tulip paintings impossible to sell. Sara takes to doing illustration work while Barent continues work at a bookbinder’s shop. Barent announces that he has thirty days to pay off his debts, or he will go to debtor’s prison. Sara goes to the Joost Blim, who heads up the Guild of Saint Luke. Sara denies she and her husband have painted anything in the last year, and that she is willing to paint more still-lives to clear the family debts. Blim consents to this, provided the paintings are exacting to their standards. At home, she discovers her husband has abandoned her to avoid debtor’s prison. She is both angered and heartbroken by this.

New Jersey, August 1958 – Red Hammond is the private investigator hired by Marty De Groot to find the missing painting. Red is overweight, eccentric, and lives on a houseboat in Edgewater, New Jersey. Red reports on his progress, saying none of the Rent-A-Beats were to blame for the theft. Red explains he next pursued finding the shop where the fake frame was made. Red explains he was able to sneak a look into the company’s records, learning that a certain Shipley always showed up a few days after a certain Jergens. From the books of the company, Red explains he has an address for Shipley. Red now plans to stake out the apartment belonging to Shipley in Brooklyn.

Brooklyn, August 1958 – Ellie spends much of her time writing in a notebook, compiling forgery techniques, methods, and recipes. She goes to meet with her professor, Meredith Hornsby. Ellie has vowed to put Sara de Vos back on the map by writing a chapter of her dissertation about Sara. Hornsby believes Ellie’s introduction is too combative rather than reasonable. She is also interested in the new chapter, wanting to know if the painting described is in New York. Ellie says it is, but she cannot tell Hornsby who has the painting thanks to a confidentiality agreement. Sara argues in her dissertation that Sara’s still-life training dominates her landscape “At the Edge of a Wood.” Hornsby recommends against such arguments, especially because the validity of the painting cannot be verified since it has never before been displayed in public. Hornsby reminds Sara that their profession is not an easy line for women. She cautions Ellie to keep Sara de Vos in the margins, not in the center of her dissertation. Ellie responds that she believes Sara de Vos was the most important female painter of her age. Hornsby tells Ellie that anger is unbecoming, which makes Ellie feel as if she has been slapped across the face.

En Route to Sydney, August 2000 – Marty travels by air with his painting First Class, going so far as to buy the painting its own seat to ensure it is always with him. The only time it is out of his sight is when he goes to the bathroom. Marty is old, but still manages to get around. In Sydney, Marty hails a taxi to take him first to the Art Gallery of New South Wales instead of his hotel. There, Marty meets with Max Culkins. He is happy to be in Sydney, and says he was hoping to hand off the painting to the show’s curator herself. Max explains Eleanor is on loan to them from Sydney University and does not actually work at the museum. Max invites Marty to stay for the opening of the exhibit the following week as a guest of a honor. Max also asks if Marty’s de Vos painting could be used in some tests along with some other de Vos paintings. Marty says he will consider this once he sees all the paperwork. Max asks to see Marty’s de Vos. Marty agrees, and



unwraps the package. Max lays eyes on the painting, but his expression is not a happy one.

Analysis

Smith continues weaving his novel's events from three different points in time –the 1630s, the 1950s, and the year 2000 –blending together the past, the present, and the future, all through the lens of the painting “At the Edge of a Wood.” The year 2000's appearance in Sydney with Ellie accepting a lifetime achievement award and preparing for a new edition of her famous book reveals the truth that no one knows what the future holds. Ellie could certainly not have imagined so prestigious a future while holed up in a tiny apartment painting a forgery in New York in her twenties. Neither Sara nor her husband could predict the collapse of the tulip market, running afoul of the Guild –and Sara could certainly not foresee Barent abandoning her like a coward.

As such, life is full of phases and changes that can come on without warning –and change everything forever. As if life was already difficult enough without Kathrijn in it, Sara must now live life without her husband and is to be held responsible for his debts. Thus begins a new era of her life in which she will be forced to pay off these debts while surviving on her own. Several centuries later, Marty has now entered a new phase in his own life –the pursuit of recovering the stolen painting. To this end, he hires Red Hammond, who in turn tracks down Ellie Shipley. In her prestigious phase of life in 2000, Ellie is stunned to learn that Marty will personally be bringing the painting over to Sydney. Ellie realizes two copies of the same painting –one the original, and the other the forgery –are set to appear back in her life. She realizes this might completely destroy her life's work, career, and reputation. The successful phase of her life appears poised for ruin.

This is especially important for Ellie from the standpoint of her own life, but from the fact that she is a woman in a profession dominated by men. Ellie, in the art world in her twenties, was still surrounded by men in the profession. The reader should note the scene in which Ellie's own mentor admonishes her to be careful about proceeding with an obscure female painter because of male dominance in their field of study. Every step forward women take in the field can easily be undone. Ellie's mentor wishes to take no such chances by taking a risk on an obscure painter. Despite Ellie's determination to plow ahead, and her mentor's determination to proceed cautiously, it is clear that both Ellie and her mentor are trailblazers for women. So too is Sara de Voss, who is a recognized female painter –the first woman ever admitted to the Guild of Saint Luke. Two more women follow through the door that she opens. However, her running afoul of the Guild threatens not only herself, but other women as well.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ellie's mentor, Meredith Hornsby, caution Ellie about writing about Sara de Voss? Do you believe Meredith is right to be concerned? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Do you believe that Barent's decision to abandon Sara is from necessity or cowardice? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sara go to the Guild for help after Barent abandons her? Why does she not try to get by on her own? What does this say about the socio-cultural conditions in which she finds herself?

Vocabulary

morbidly, prominence, requisite, underlings, inquisition, hackneyed, grandeur, picturesque, jocular, admonishes, provenance, bereft, patronizing, consternation



Part Two, Manhattan, September 1958 - Sydney, August 2000

Summary

Part Two, continued

Manhattan, September 1958 – Marty receives an envelope from Red Hammond containing one of Ellie’s business cards, reading Eleanor Shipley, Art Restoration; and a photo of Ellie at work at her kitchen table. Marty does not think Ellie looks like a typical art forger, especially given her living conditions. Red also reports that Ellie has some kind of accent. Marty heads to play squash with friends Frederic Kriel (a Swiss-German art auctioneer at Sotheby’s), Will Turner (a surgeon), and Boyd Curry (a copywriter for a Madison Avenue ad agency). Afterward, having drinks, Marty updates them on the search for his missing painting. He explains he wants to know who Ellie is before giving the information to the police, because his life has somehow been better without the painting in it. His friends do not believe the painting is cursed, and think it is too risky to not go to the police. Marty is determined, however, so Boyd suggests asking Ellie to meet him at an Old Masters auction the following week. Marty likes this idea, and he decides he will use the name Jake Alpert to engage her. At home, Rachel reminds Marty about taking a river cruise in Europe the coming spring. Using the number on Ellie’s business card, Marty calls her and puts the plan into action. He explains he is looking to build out his father’s collection and looking to engage an expert on the Dutch Golden Age. Ellie agrees to assist him.

Amsterdam, May 1637 – Pieter De Groot, in town on business for the family shipping firm, attends an estate auction held by the local chapter of the Guild of Saint Luke. He sees paintings he would like to buy, but none are signed. Pieter realizes it must be that these paintings were created by someone with debt who had problems with the Guild. Pieter speaks privately with the auctioneer, learning the house and its contents are being auctioned off by female member of the Guild whose husband abandoned her following a scandal of debts and unsigned paintings. Pieter, upon seeing the painting “At the Edge of a Wood,” is transfixed by it and ups the auctioneer commission fee to twenty percent to have the painting. The auctioneer then speaks to a woman (presumably Sara) about a price for the painting.

Sydney, August 2000 – The three de Vos paintings –Leider’s two and Marty’s one –are tested by Helen Birch. Ellie cannot help but remember her forgery days in New York. Helen calls sometime later, wanting to talk about anomalies she has found in the three de Vos paintings.

Manhattan, September 1958 – Marty meets Ellie at Thornton and Morrell auction house. He is struck by the fact that she is not wearing lipstick and is very kind. They agree to look through all the paintings from Holland and Flanders before getting back together to



discuss in fifteen minutes. Ellie finds four paintings from within two years of one another, all from the private collection of the late Mr. J. A. Simmons. She shows Marty at once. These include a floral still life by Christoffel van den Berghe, dated 1616; the only signed painting by Bartholomeus Grondonck, 1617's "The Kermesse of Oudernarde"; a river landscape by Anton Mirou; and a winter landscape by de Momper. All four pieces will cost north of eighty-thousand dollars. Ellie explains the frames are copper, which better preserves the painting, meaning that whoever Simmons was, he cared that much about his artwork. During the auction, Marty manages to take the paintings –and has Ellie do the bidding. Ellie is thrilled by this.

Leaving Amsterdam, Spring 1637 – Sara takes on work with Cornelis Groen, her husband's creditor, who commissioned a series of landscapes from Barent and never received them. Sara will only have to work one year to pay off her husband's debts. She is escorted to Groen's house by his manservant, Van Schooten. She is then introduced to Tomas Brouwer, who cares for the horses, the stables, and the gardens. Sara is given her own, spacious room. She meets Groen in the morning. Groen is in his late sixties, has rheumatoid arthritis, and is a bachelor. Groen explains Sara's work is to be considered a squaring of the ledger, not servitude. He also explains he has already hung up the paintings Sara has done that Van Schooten purchased at auction. He brings her to see the *Kunstkamer* (a room of curiosities or wonders, in this case, featuring paintings) where Sara's paintings have been hung along with countless others. Groen explains Barent helped him to arrange the paintings as they appear. He then brings her to the back room where a physical, miniature landscape has been set up on a table of the town and surrounding area of Groenstede, in honor of Groen's father. On the walls is a painting of the village begun by Barent that Groen now wishes her to complete. He explains that only a madwoman now lives in the village, as everyone else has left because they believe the place to be cursed after being struck by the plague. Groen explains he has no sons as heirs, only a nephew in Leiden.

Sydney, August 2000 – Ellie meets with Helen Birch. Helen is not only the museum's chief conservation scientist, but she is also the emergency safety officer. Helen reveals that Leiden does indeed have an authentic, undiscovered work by de Vos in the winter funeral painting. She argues, based on the kind of yellow used in the Leiden version of "At the Edge of a Wood" is not authentic to the time period when viewed up close under a microscope. Helen also reveals X-Ray images of the paintings reveal the authentic "Wood" painting has a figure sketched in beneath the layers of paint that was never actually painted into the painting itself –something an art forger without an X-Ray machine could not have known about. The figure is a woman watching the girl at the edge of the woods watching skaters on the frozen river below. Helen explains only the real artist has the false beginning and that the forger was too exacting.

Analysis

No one knows what the future holds. Again, this is true for Marty when he accepts what information Red Hammond has gathered for him on Ellie Shipley. At the same time, Ellie Shipley never imagines in a thousand years that she will ever be traced as the source of



the forgery. Marty has no idea that his decision to corner Ellie with the painting will ultimately lead to having romantic feelings for her. It is the beginning of a new phase in Marty's life –and a new phase in Ellie's life as well, for she does not expect to find romantic possibilities with a man much older than her, let alone someone kind and cultured. It becomes quickly apparent that Marty is actually enjoying the time he spends with Ellie –including looking into old paintings at the auction house.

The kindness that Marty displays toward Ellie reinforces the idea that one never knows what the future will hold. For instance, does Marty still intended to turn her over to the police, or will he decide to let things go in another direction? Marty's show of kindness also underscores another important theme that emerges: human kindness is essential in life. By all accounts, Ellie does not deserve kindness from Marty, having willingly engaged in a forgery plot to dupe him. At the same time, given the sociocultural and legal aspects of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, Sara does not expect any kindness at all from Groen –the man to whom her husband was heavily indebted. Groen is remarkably kind and fatherly: he will only require Sara's services for a year, and will not consider her a servant. Instead, he wishes her to paint. If Groen is this kind with Sara, one can only imagine what lengths Barent must have pushed him to for Groen to finally call in his debts.

That Marty and Groen should be kind rather than angry is a testament to the thematic idea that the truth is not what always first appears to be so. Marty and Groen, despite their circumstances, prove to be remarkably kind. Marty's ancestor, Pieter, purchased Sara's woodland painting not only because he fell in love with it, but because of a desire to help Sara get out of debt as well. Marty now considers that Ellie is in something of a debt to him for having stolen the painting –but what this will mean is as of yet unknown. The truth is not always as it appears when it comes to the paintings themselves: the newly discovered painting of a funeral procession is judged to be authentic, while the forgery and the original of the woodland painting are documented due to the false start of the original, which perhaps included a self-portrait of Sara herself. The truth here is hidden, both literally and symbolically: who Sara was, if any other paintings of hers have survived, and what will become of Ellie herself all orbit the authentic De Vos painting.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Marty want to recover a painting he considers to be bad luck? Likewise, why does Marty seek to get to know Ellie rather than hand her information over to the police? What does this say about the situation and about Marty himself?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Sara so surprised when she goes to work for Groen? What do you believe explains the overwhelming kindness that Groen shows to Sara?



Discussion Question 3

How is Helen Birch able to differentiate between the original “At the Edge of a Wood” and the forgery made by Ellie? How does the discovery of the original relate to the symbolic concept of truth?

Vocabulary

leonine, impeccably, barrister, harrowing, imposition, functionary, myopic, mercantile, mortification, periphery, amalgamated, quintessentially, pompous, colloquialisms, elocution, febrile



Part Two: Manhattan, September 1958 - Manhattan, October 1958

Summary

Part Two, continued

Manhattan, September 1958 – Ellie charges Marty ninety dollars for her assistance at the auction. He invites her to meet him at a jazz club on Monday night. Ellie says she would like to see his painting collection sometime. Marty tells her his place is under renovation. Ellie says this must be tough on his wife. Charading as Jake Alpert, Marty says his wife has been dead for a year but that he has never taken off his wedding band. Marty goes on to ask what Ellie knows about Dutch women artists of the 17th Century. He wants Ellie's help finding some for his collection in honor of his dead wife. Ellie asks about family, but Marty must confess he does not have any children. They get a pizza and eat it while watching the lights from New Jersey across the river. Marty thinks Ellie would make a good teacher. After making a joke about Ellie's charges that comes out wrong, Marty hails a cab to drop Ellie off at home. He heads to her apartment later with coffee and ice cream as a peace offering and an apology. Ellie invites him in even though she is in pajamas. She offers to put on music. Marty asks if she ever listens to music while she paints. She tells him no because listening to music changes the brush strokes. They talk until Ellie falls asleep. He then quietly leaves her apartment and calls her from home, letting her know she should lock her door. She apologizes for falling asleep, and Marty says he will be in touch soon. In bed with Rachel, she asks him why he smells like old house paint. He then takes a shower and scrubs himself clean.

Heemstede, Summer 1637 – Groen is suffering from a cold and depression. He does his best to fight it by drinking tea. When Groen recovers, everyone sets out for the village of Groenstede so that Sara may accurately portray it. When they arrive, Sara sees much of the place is in ruins. Groen explains this is due to the work of a mob. Along the river, Sara meets the madwoman, who reveals she has lost six children over time. She explains her grandmother was in the room when Groen was born many years before. The woman recounts how lovely Groenstede used to be before the plague and the fire. The woman ultimately gives her name as Griet.

Manhattan, October 1958 – Ellie realizes she is being courted by Jake Alpert as she puts together the list of paintings for him. They meet for a meal at a Midtown Spanish place. Marty, masquerading as Jake, asks Ellie what her favorite painting is. She reveals it to be a De Vos, which he pretends to be ignorant of so she must explain it to him. Ellie claims to have never seen it, but says she wants to. After their food, they decide to go see the movie musical *Gigi*. At home, Ellie checks on the De Vos painting, now being hidden in her apartment due to complications in the sale. Gabriel has told her that a sale is imminent, and Ellie hopes it is. She takes a phone call from Jake later that



evening, inviting her to the Cloisters on Sunday. Ellie begins to wonder what life might be like with Jake.

Sydney, August 2000 – Marty has been exploring Sydney, and is delighted with the city. He then heads to Sydney University, knowing his appearance in Ellie's life will be like a wrecking ball. He quietly sits in on a lecture Ellie gives about Vermeer. Ellie has secretly written two letters of resignation –one to Max, one to the university –should the need arise. Ellie talks about how an open mouth in old Dutch paintings meant sexual availability. She hears someone in the audience make a remark about this, and when she looks up, is stunned to see Marty in the audience. She must force herself to continue on with the lecture.

Heemstede, Summer 1637 – Griet's history becomes the setting for the painting "Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession." It is Sara's way of giving Griet's children a proper burial, and of honoring them. Once a week, Sara heads back to the village to visit with Griet and make sketches. As she paints, she asks Tomas for his opinion. He tells her it is the saddest and most beautiful painting he has ever seen.

Manhattan, October 1958 – Ellie dates Jake for a month, but Jake makes no romantic moves on her until he invites her upstate to Albany to go antique hunting. When he picks her up, he brings a wrapped package for her, telling her it is her next assignment – something which needs cleaning. Ellie wants to have a look. Marty, still masquerading as Jake, tells her it will be waiting for her upon their return. On the drive up, he tells Ellie he wants to acquire the only known de Vos painting she has described and that he has already begun making discreet inquiries. At the hotel, Marty and Ellie kiss. Ellie explains to him she has never had sex before and that he would be the first. They have sex, which is something Ellie finds desirable and strange. When she awakens hours later, Marty is gone. She wonders if he has gone home, so she calls his house to learn she has reached the residence of Marty and Rachel De Groot.

Ellie packs up both her suitcase and Marty's suitcase. She takes a train back to New York. She is stunned and heartbroken. At home, she discovers the wrapped package is her copy of the De Vos. She calls Gabriel to let him know she now has both paintings in her apartment. She tells him the original is wrapped in brown paper, and that he needs to come and pick it up. She then gathers together the things she needs, and leaves her apartment. Marty, meanwhile, has returned to the city and is overcome by guilt and remorse. He cannot bring himself to face Rachel, so he goes into his office where he spends the night and writes a letter seeking forgiveness and listing all of the things he has done wrong. At first, Marty thinks the letter is being written to Rachel. Then, he realizes the letter is being written to someone he has never met, like the Russian space dog.

Analysis

No one knows what the future holds continues as the main theme in this section. A strange new phase and change is brought about in the lives of both Ellie and Marty by



the romance the two share together, leading to a night of sex –and regrets. Marty, having fallen in love with Ellie, violates the sanctity of his own marriage and violates his own moral compass which has kept him away from engaging in affairs. Ellie, upon discovering that Marty knows the truth about her and the forgery, cannot help but wonder if the sexual encounter was his way of getting even with her (though as the reader already knows, and Ellie later learns, this is not the case at all). The truth, after all, is not as it first appears to be. This, couple with the idea that life is full of changes and phases only serves to cause Ellie heartache and fear for the future. This is what ultimately propels her out of New York, and later on to London and Sydney.

The evolving story of Marty and Ellie appears to be ending in 1958 –but beginning again in 2000. Just as Marty and Ellie separate their lives in 1958, the two rejoin in 2000. Marty's appearance at one of Ellie's lectures throws her off completely –despite the fact she has already prepared two letters of resignation should they become necessary. The career that Ellie has made for herself –and the prestige she has rightfully earned –now hang in the balance by Ellie's own past. A former period and phase of her life stands poised to upend her current period and phase in life –all through the presence of Marty. But as Ellie will come to realize soon enough, things are not always as they first appear to be. Kindness is on the horizon for Ellie, but she does not know it. As the reader notes, Dominic Smith continues to weave his story by leaping back and forth through time. The pieces of the puzzle surrounding the story of Sara's artwork is slowly being filled in –and nearing completion.

Back in the 1630s, Sara continues to find kindness unexpectedly from Groen and Griet. Through conversations with Griet, Sara finds the inspiration for her painting which will become "Winter With a Child's Funeral Procession." Tomas calls it the most beautiful and saddest painting he has ever seen. The reader should note that Sara pours out more of her own grief into the painting, for she feels the very things which Griet feels over losing loved ones. The funeral procession scene is symbolic of Sara honoring, paying respect to, and burying the dead that have haunted Griet's life. In many ways, the funeral becomes symbolic of Sara putting to rest the ghosts of her own past as she transitions between one phase of her life and another. The autumn is Sara's previous life of debt and abandonment; the winter is transition; and the coming spring will be a new era for Sara.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Marty sleep with Ellie? What response do both Marty and Ellie have to this encounter? Why?

Discussion Question 2

How does the sexual encounter between Marty and Ellie compare to their next encounter four decades later in Sydney? Why are both encounters strange to Ellie?



Discussion Question 3

Why has Sara prepared two letters of resignation? If you were given such a letter of resignation by Sara, would you accept her resignation or be prepared to defend keeping her employed? Why?

Vocabulary

incantation, juxtaposition, morose, blasphemer, ethical, coalesced, raffish, crenellated, transgressions, proletariat, atonement



Part Two: Sydney, August 2000 - Heemstede, Winter 1649/Summer 2000

Summary

Part Two, continued

Sydney, August 2000 – Marty rents a tuxedo for the opening of the show. When Ellie sees him at the opening, she realizes he is not there to hurt her. Max introduces them, unaware of their past. When Max disappears into the crowd, Marty tells Ellie that he did not come to ruin her life. Ellie is still overcome to see him. Marty says that regret is something which keeps one alive. He explains that he is in Sydney to apologize for what happened forty years before. The two head off on their own, where Ellie helps apply bandages to Marty's feet because his designer Italian shoes have cut into his skin. Marty explains everything, including how he found Ellie to begin with thanks to Red Hammond. Marty explains he intended to hand Ellie over to the authorities, but that he fell in love with her instead. He explains he ultimately confessed to his wife, but her forgiveness and therapy both saved the marriage. She then brings him to see the museum's room of fakes, forgeries, and copies. There, she shows him her copy of "At the Edge of a Wood," saying it arrived just before Marty did with the original. Marty remembers meeting with Gabriel to purchase the original, not wanting to get the police involved for Ellie's sake.

Marty and Ellie make peace. She explains she is traveling over to Holland to learn more about Sara de Vos. She agrees to keep Marty updated by actual, physical letters rather than e-mail. Marty asks Ellie about how his painting was originally stolen, but she does not know. Marty explains his PI always suspected the catering company that did the Aid Society dinner, but there was never any hard evidence to this effect. Ellie then shows Marty the newly discovered de Vos. Ellie escorts Marty back to his hotel room. Ellie says forgiveness is not possible, but everything is as it should be. They shake hands, and they go their own ways.

Heemstede, Winter 1649/Summer 2000 – Sara is now married to Tomas. They live in a cottage behind Groen's house. Sara remains friends with Griet until Griet dies. Sara now tutors local children in painting, but hasn't completed a painting in years. She is happy, but she misses painting –which itself has been swallowed up by daily routines and a lack of true inspiration. On a clear winter night, she and Tomas go ice skating on the frozen river. Sara races ahead, and falls through the ice. Tomas barely manages to rescue her. Still, she begins to die of fever. She asks Tomas for a canvas to paint her final picture. Ellie travels to Heemstede with Hendrik. Ellie thinks about how she has received news that an anonymous American buyer has purchased their copy of "At the Edge of a Wood."



Ellie realizes Marty has taken care of her: she will no longer have to worry about her forgery. Ellie and Hendrik meet with the widow Mrs. Edith Zeller, in whose collection “Winter with a Child’s Funeral Procession” was found. Zeller explains all the family’s paintings came to her from some distant uncle on her father’s side of the family, while her father bought others. Zeller directs them to the old ruins of Groenstede, where the painting was made. There, Ellie burns her forgery. Ellie then goes to look through Zeller’s painting collection. There, she discovers the final painting of Sara de Vos, a self-portrait of her at an easel along with incomplete paintings, dated 1649. Ellie notices Sara’s lips are opened as if she is about to talk.

Analysis

No one knows what the future holds. When Ellie is confronted by Marty in Sydney in 2000, she does not know what the immediate future holds for her. The last thing she expects, however, is kindness. And Marty is utterly kind toward Ellie, making peace with her regarding the past –and even apologizing for the one night stand he had with her, which he never intended to be a one night stand. As the reader learns, Marty and Ellie had fallen in love with each other. The time and the situation, however, were simply not right. As it is also revealed, kindness is displayed by Rachel –who lovingly and amazingly forgives Marty, and goes on to remain married to him despite everything he has done. Not only does Marty refuse to go after Ellie for the forgery, but he actually purchases it so that Ellie can destroy it –a cleansing of the past symbolized by the cleansing nature of the fire which Ellie uses to burn her forgery.

Because of Marty’s kindness and Ellie’s own honesty, Ellie goes on to continue to study Sara de Vos –and discovers her final painting. The reader should note that Sara’s final painting is a self-portrait of an uncompleted life (signified by the unfinished paintings Sara places in her portrait) and that she still obviously has much more to say. This is signified by her open mouth, which appears to Ellie as though it makes Sara seem ready to talk. Ellie, the reader will remember, has previously said that open mouths in women in Dutch paintings signify sexual availability. Now, Ellie is having a change of heart on this concept. Perhaps what first appeared to be the truth regarding open mouths is not the truth at all. Perhaps, instead, the truth is that the girls and women featured in these paintings were merely waiting for someone willing to listen to them tell their stories.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe Marty goes through such great lengths to protect Ellie in 2000?

Discussion Question 2

Why is Ellie so taken aback when she meets with Marty for the first time after forty years? How does Ellie respond? What reason does Marty give for his trip to Sydney? Why does this matter so much to him?



Discussion Question 3

What does the discovery of Sara de Vos's self-portrait force Ellie to rethink regarding accepted norms for Dutch paintings? Why?

Vocabulary

inveterate, footslog, austere, bequeathed, ailing, momentous



Characters

Marty

Martijn “Marty” De Groot is a patent lawyer, husband of Rachel, and the heir of the de Groot family fortune. Marty is a kind, moral, and decent man who does his best to always do the right thing. Despite harboring suspicions that the de Vos painting he owns is cursed, he is still quite upset when it is stolen during a benefit for orphans.

Marty hires Red Hammond to find the thief, who in turn tracks down Ellie Shipley. Rather than going after Ellie, Marty decides to get to know her first because she does not appear to be an underhanded person. Marty falls in love with Ellie. However, after sleeping with her, he is overcome by moral guilt. He flees. He later confesses his sins to Rachel, his wife. The two remain married.

Four decades later, Marty travels to Sydney with the original painting long after it is returned to him by Gabriel to make peace with Ellie. Marty also buys the copy of the painting in order to protect Ellie. In turn, Ellie promises to keep him updated on her ongoing research into Sara de Vos.

Ellie

Eleanor “Ellie” Shipley, a native of Australia, begins the novel as a Columbia grad student in her midtwenties. Denied standing and recognition in the art world in England because of her gender, Ellie travels to New York where she works in art restoration before being contacted by Gabriel to forge “At the Edge of a Wood.” Ellie unknowingly meets the real owner of the painting, Marty, believing him to be a man named Jake Alpert. The two fall in love and have sex. Afterwards, Ellie learns the truth.

Ellie returns to England where she marries, begins a career in academia, divorces, and moves to Sydney. In Sydney, she is hired at Sydney University. A few years later, she begins to help put together a show featuring Dutch women painters, which puts her back in touch with Marty. Ellie is horrified he may destroy her career by exposing her forgery, but is relieved to make peace with him instead. Marty even goes beyond this, buying the copy of the painting and allowing Ellie to destroy it in order to protect her. Ellie then goes on to continue studying Sara de Vos, discovering a third unknown painting by her in the process.

Sara de Vos

Sara de Vos is a seventeenth century Dutch painter, and the first admitted to the art Guild of Saint Luke. Sara is the wife of Barent and the mother of Kathrijn. Trained in still-lives, Sara goes on to paint a handful of landscapes following the death of her daughter and after she is abandoned by her debtor husband. Sara goes to work in the arts for



Cornelis Groen, her husband's debt holder, who ensures she is not a servant to pay the debt off, but an artist to be commissioned to pay the debt off.

Two landscape paintings emerge from the time after Kathrijn's death and working for Groen: *At the Edge of a Wood* and *Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession*. Both works are inspired by death, and a desire to honor the dead on Sara's part after everything she has lost. Eventually, she remarries a man named Tomas, and the two continue to live and work for Groen. Many years later, while skating on the ice, Sara falls through, and develops a mortal fever. Before she dies, she paints her final picture –a self-portrait, in which she is surrounded by unfinished paintings and in which Sara's mouth is opened as though she is prepared to speak.

Kathrijn

Kathrijn de Vos is the seven year-old daughter of Sara and Barent. She is the light of their lives, and they are thrilled to have her. When Kathrijn contracts a fever and dies, her death devastates her parents. It also leads to her father going into debt and her mother painting the landscape scene *At the Edge of a Wood*.

Rachel

Rachel De Groot is the loyal, loving wife of Marty. Rachel is unfailingly kind and gentle, as well as intelligent and supportive. Rachel is devastated to learn about Marty's affair, but comes to forgive him and to work through the rest of the marriage until her death many years later.

Gretchen

Gretchen is the secretary of Marty. Beautiful and intelligent, Gretchen nearly has an affair with Marty, but neither of the two actually commit to it. Their moral compasses and their professional relationship deter them from committing to each other in an affair.

Max Culkins

Max Culkins is the director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Brilliant, orderly, and serious, Max oversees arrangements for the exhibit of Dutch women painters of which Ellie will be helping to organize. At the opening night, Max introduces Ellie to Marty, unaware that the two already know each other.

Red Hammond

Red Hammond is an overweight private investigator who lives on a houseboat in Edgewater, New Jersey. He is hired by Marty to find his stolen painting and the people



responsible for the theft. Red, a forthright but not brilliant character of a man manages to track down Ellie, information which he hands over to Marty. Though Red is never able to find hard evidence, he believes the catering company hired by Marty was responsible for the actual theft.

Gabriel

Gabriel Lodge is a British art dealer living and working in New York. Gabriel runs a gallery, but works behind the scenes in the black market, especially in dealing forgeries. Gabriel is the contact man who arranges the operation which steals Marty's painting and has Ellie forge it. Gabriel later collects the reward for the painting by returning it to Marty.

Griet

Griet, known locally around Groenstede as the "madwoman," is a widowed mother who has lost all of her children over the years to death. She is the only resident who remains in the ruins of the former town, and is visited by Sara when Sara comes to make sketches for her painting. Griet and Sara befriend one another quickly, sensing in the other the feelings of loss, isolation, and loneliness. Griet thus becomes the inspiration for Sara's painting "Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession."



Symbols and Symbolism

At the Edge of a Wood

At the Edge of a Wood is a 1636 oil painting by Sara de Vos. The painting serves as an allegory for life and death as well as being between two places. The painting, inspired by Sara's personal witnessing of a similar scene, features her daughter at the edge of a wood, looking down toward a frozen river where others are ice skating. The girl is caught between two places –between life and death –just as Sara feels caught between the life she knew when her daughter was alive and the life she knows now that her daughter is dead. The painting is purchased by Pieter de Groot at an auction not long after Sara is abandoned by her husband. Having been passed down for three centuries in the de Groot family, Marty de Groot inherits it. In the late 1950s in New York, the painting was stolen from Marty. Years later, it is verified as the original painting. X-Ray scans reveal Sara had originally drawn in a woman near the child, but she painted over the woman.

Forgery of At the Edge of a Wood

The forged copy of At the Edge of a Wood, painted by Ellie, symbolizes anger. Ellie is commissioned to paint the forgery by Gabriel. Since she has been rejected by the respected art world because she is a woman, she is angry when she paints the forgery. The forged painting also symbolizes deception, as Ellie is here copying a master painting rather than creating her own artwork. When the painting is X-rayed, it is recognized as a forgery because it does not have the under drawing of the woman that Sara de Vos painted over on the original.

Fever

A fever is an omen of death in the story because everyone who contracts a fever in the novel dies. This is true of Sara and her daughter Kathrijn, both of whom contract fevers and die within a few days of contracting them. Sara uses her remaining time after falling ill to paint her final picture, a self-portrait of her unfinished life.

Dutch Women Painters in the Golden Age

Dutch Women Painters in the Golden Age is a book of art history by Ellie. The book symbolizes both her expertise and her established reputation in the global art community. The book, which discusses both the art and lives of Dutch women painters in the 17th Century, is about to be published in a new edition while Ellie is at the height of her career.



Dutch Women Painters exhibit

The Dutch Women Painters exhibit at the Art Gallery of New South Wales is being organized by Max Culkins and Ellie Shipley. It symbolizes the return of the past. The exhibit will bring together the works of a number of Dutch women artists, including Sara de Vos. This puts Ellie on a collision course with her past, as both her old forgery and the original of “At the Edge of a Wood” arrive for display.

Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession

Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession is a 1637 oil painting by Sara de Vos. This painting symbolizes empathy and respect for the dead. The painting, which features a funeral scene and a child's casket in winter, is Sara's way of giving Griet's children a proper burial and of honoring them. It is also a way for Sara to further illustrate her continued grief over Kathrijn's death.

Child's Coffin

A child's coffin symbolizes the irony of having died at the beginning of life. A child's coffin is featured in Sara de Vos's painting, Winter with a Child's Funeral Procession. The child's coffin represents the dead children of Griet, who died far too early in their lives. To Griet, the most sinister thing in the world is a child's coffin because it represents losing one's life before one has had the chance to live it.

Marty's Analogy of a Wrecking Ball

Marty's wrecking ball analogy is symbolic of the past coming back to haunt someone. Marty travels to Sydney to bring along his de Vos painting for the Dutch Women Painters Show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. When he goes to sit in on one of Ellie's lectures, he considers that he is a wrecking ball from the past, threatening to overturn Ellie's current life. Although Marty considers himself a wrecking ball, he has no desire to wreck Ellie's life.

Letters of Resignation

Two letters of resignation symbolize the acceptance of wrongdoing and guilt and the determination to atone for the wrong. When Ellie becomes aware that Marty will be bringing the authentic de Vos to the Dutch Women Painters Show, she believes she will expose her and the forgery. She writes these letters to have them on hand should she need to use them. However, she never has to deliver them, as Marty underscores the point that he is not there to ruin her life.

A Self-portrait of Sara de Vos

A self-portrait of Sara de Vos featuring unfinished paintings symbolizes Sara's unfinished life. It also challenges the art world's established position on open mouths in girls and women in Dutch paintings. Painted in the final days of Sara's life, the painting is passed down through the Groen family until it becomes the property of the widow Zeller. It is rediscovered in an attic in the year 2000. Unlike the art world's position which posits that an open mouth on a girl or a woman implies sexual availability, Sara comes to consider that the open mouth Sara has painted on herself means she is ready to speak. The painting itself is the last painting of Sara de Vos, as stated in the title of the novel.



Settings

New York

New York, formerly the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam and now both a city and a state in the United States of America, serves as one of three primary settings for the novel. Described as ambient gray with a bustling world of life, New York is where both Marty and Ellie live and work. It is in New York that Marty's painting "At the Edge of a Wood" is stolen, and it is in New York that Marty meets and falls in love with Ellie. It is from New York that Ellie leaves to escape potential judgment for her forgery, and it is in New York that Marty goes on to repair his marriage with Rachel.

Upstate New York

Upstate New York is where Marty brings Ellie on a weekend under the guise of antiquing when in reality, he plans to confront her with the truth about the forgery. Instead of antiquing, the weekend results in a sexual encounter between Marty and Ellie which leaves them both reeling from guilt and apprehension. Both leave upstate separately, and do not see one another again for four decades.

Amsterdam

Amsterdam is the capital city of Holland (the Netherlands) and is where Sara and her family live and work in the 1630s. Following the death of her husband and her husband abandoning her, Sara goes to work for Cornelis Groen in his estate. It is to Amsterdam three centuries later that Ellie travels to study the life and work of Sara. It is also from Amsterdam that she travels to Heemstede and the ruins of Groenstede.

Groenstede and Heemstede

Groenstede and nearby Heemstede are two fishing villages located some distance from Amsterdam. Groenstede, founded by and named for Cornelis Groen's father, succumbs to the plague and is destroyed by wary locals. It comes to be inhabited only by Griet, and is later visited by Sara in her attempts to sketch the place out for her painting for Groen. Centuries later, Ellie travels to Heemstede, and then to Groenstede in pursuit of information about Sara de Vos's life.

Sydney

Sydney is the capital city of Australia, and it is the hometown of Ellie. Sydney is the city to which Ellie returns after living abroad. There, she takes on a professorship at the Sydney University where her career truly flourishes. Sydney becomes the host city for

the Art Gallery of New South Wales's show on female Dutch painters in the year 2000, and is the city to which Marty travels to bring along his authentic version of "At the Edge of a Wood." There in Sydney, he and Ellie make peace regarding the past.



Themes and Motifs

No one knows what the future holds.

No one knows what the future holds, argues Dominic Smith in his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*. The future is full of unexpected twists and turns which can completely upset and change a life. Sometimes this is for the better, while other times, it is for the worst. The characters of the novel experience no shortage of such unexpected occurrences.

When readers first meet Sara de Vos, she has a happy and content life. She is a ground breaker, being the first woman artist admitted to the Guild of Saint Luke. She is happily married and has a loving daughter. However, Sara never suspects that an outing to paint a beached whale will result in the fever that kills her daughter.

As Sara struggles with her husband to find stable ground emotionally and financially, she never expects the near future will result in her husband abandoning her. Likewise, Sara never expects that paying off her debt by selling her painting *At the Edge of a Wood* will lead to the events of the novel in centuries to come.

Additionally, Sara does not expect working off her husband's debt to Cornelis Groen will involve not servitude, but artistry. Sara comes to remarry, and to enjoy a happy and stable life in the future –something which she does not expect. While ice skating one night, Sara never expects to fall through the ice, contract a fever, and die only a few days later after completing her final painting.

In 1958, Marty is generally happy with his life. He has a loyal wife; he is doing well at work; and, he has a strong moral compass that helps prevent him from straying with other women. Marty never expects that his family heirloom painting will be stolen, or that the ensuing investigation will cause him to fall in love with the young woman who actually forged the painting. Marty does not expect that the future finds him committing adultery, or that his wife will forgive him and remain married to him after his infidelity.

Ellie, likewise, never thought the future would mean painting a forgery, falling in love with the authentic painting's owner, or having to flee New York.

Four decades later, Ellie never expects that Marty will walk back into her life with the authentic painting when she attends the Dutch Women Painters Show at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Ellie expects that the future for her will be bleak, as Marty will surely out her as a forger. Instead, Marty makes peace with her and helps to protect her. This is something Ellie never expected the future would hold for her, not even in her wildest dreams. This changes Ellie's life for the better.



Life is full of phases and changes.

Life is full of phases and changes, argues Dominic Smith in his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*. In conjunction with the thematic idea that no one knows what the future will hold, life is full of phases and changes. These phases and changes delineate a human life, and become essential to that same life.

When readers first meet each of the main characters, each of them are at a certain phase in their life. Sara is happily married, is a mother, and is a phenomenal artist. She is in a very happy and encourage phase of her life. Though unable to have children, Marty is somewhat happy with his life: he has a loving wife and has just been made a partner at work. He is content with things as they are at this phase in his life. Ellie herself, however, is unhappy: she is a neglected twenty-something art grad student who aspires for something bigger and better. At a period of anger in her life for having been rejected by the art world, she commits to the forgery.

The death of Kathrijn, and the abandonment by Barent, place Sara into a new phase in her life. Now holding all the debt, largely shunned by the Guild, and heartbroken, Sara enters a time of uncertainty. Only after making peace with the Guild, having an auction, and going to work for Groen does her life regain any semblance of stability. The theft of the painting from Marty's apartment plunges him into a period of uncertainty and confusion in which he strays from his wife by sleeping with Ellie. This period of uncertainty for Marty ends only when he confesses his sins to his wife and gains her forgiveness.

Four decades pass. Ellie lives her life looking over her shoulder for the specter of the past in the forms of either Marty, the authentic painting, or her forgery. Now at a phase in her life where she is well-respected and lauded by the global art establishment, Ellie worries everything could be upended. Her fears seem to be justified when Marty arrives, but Marty assures her he does not wish to harm her in any way. Instead, the two make peace, and a new period of peace and relief comes over Ellie. With Marty's protection and kindness, Ellie is able to fully reorient her mind toward her studies and her research into Sara de Vos.

Sara de Vos and Ellie Shipley are professional trailblazers for women.

Sara de Vos and Ellie Shipley are professional trailblazers for women, argues Dominic Smith in his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*. Both Sara and Ellie live in times in which the professional world is dominated by men. Both women do incredible things with their lives which make them unique leaders for their time.

In the time of Sara, women are largely confined to domestic activities. That Sara should work as a painter in addition to tending to her family and her home is impressive. Sara also serves to be a trailblazer in the sense that she is the first woman ever admitted to



the Guild of Saint Luke. The door that Sara opens allows two successive women to be admitted to the Guild as well.

When Ellie attempts to enter the world of art, art history, and academia, she is rebuffed in England as not being good enough. This is easily understood as her being a woman in a male-dominated profession. In America, in New York, Ellie has an easier time of things even though the field is still almost exclusively dominated by men. Ellie's mentor, Meredith Hornsby, is very well-respected in the field and a trailblazer in her own right. She demonstrates that women in art and art academics are possible –but knows her position is tenuous. Because of this, she has high expectations of Ellie so as not to compromise the hard-earned position women are beginning to enjoy in the field.

Ellie works hard to prove herself in the world of art and academics. Over the years, she becomes an authority on women painters in the Dutch Golden Age, publishing the seminal volume on the subject and becoming a well-sought after professor. Ellie thus leads the way for other women who wish to study obscure subjects –and make their names in the process. By the time Marty returns in Ellie's life, Ellie worries that everything she has worked so hard for could be undone –but Marty makes peace with Ellie instead, not only in remorse for the past, but because he knows how important Ellie's work has been for women.

The truth is not always what first appears to be so

The truth is not always what first appears to be so, argues Dominic Smith in his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*. First appearances can often be correct, but this is not always so –especially in Smith's novel. First appearances, in all forms from people to objects to situations, serve to create deeper understanding, and deeper truths when they are finally understood apart from first appearances.

At first glance, Sara's painting *At the Edge of a Wood* seems to be straightforward: a girl, standing on the edge of a woodline, looks down on a frozen river where other kids are ice skating. However, the truth of the painting is much sadder. Sara's daughter is the little girl who appears in the painting, and the painting itself –according to Sara –is an allegory for life and death, and the idea of being stuck between two places. These are things which modern viewers have no idea of.

Marty is understandably angry and upset when the painting is stolen from his apartment during an Aid Society dinner, of all times. Marty hires a private investigator to track down the painting and the culprits. Marty expects the forger to look like a criminal, but is stunned to find that the forger is a twenty-something year old girl who does not look sinister at all. Instead of turning her over to the police, Marty falls in love with her.

Four decades later, everything appears as if it will come undone for Ellie. Her forgery and the authentic painting turn up at the art show she is organizing. Things get even worse when Marty arrives. Ellie believes he will out her. She has prepared two letters tendering her resignation should things go against her. The truth of Marty's arrival,



however, is to make peace with her and to protect her from the ghosts of the past – something he does very well. Ellie is greatly relieved and thankful for this.

Human kindness is an important aspect of life.

Human kindness is an important aspect of life, argues Dominic Smith in his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*. Human kindness can show up in the most unexpected places and have the most important consequences. Human kindness, Smith argues, is therefore necessary to the human condition.

Sara experiences much heartache and tragedy in her life. The death of her daughter, her husband abandoning her, and the assumption of all the family's debts mean that Sara will be hard-pressed to survive. Sara goes on to make peace with the Guild and to pay down some of her debt with an auction, but must still make up her husband's debt to Cornelis Groen. Groen, who is himself a kind and understanding man, does not wish to punish Sara. Instead, he essentially hires her to paint for him, making sure she is well-kept and lives well. This begins a friendship that will last the rest of their lives, and ensure Sara's survival.

Marty never expects the kindness he receives from Ellie when the two begin seeing one another in the 1950s. He believes initially that Ellie may be more along the lines of a typical crook, but is surprised to learn she is not. Her kindness is part of what makes him fall in love with her. Marty likewise never expects the kindness he receives from Rachel when he confesses his sins to her. She forgives him, and the two go to therapy for years in order to preserve their marriage for the rest of their lives.

When Marty turns up in Sydney just before the show at which both the authentic painting and the forgery appear, Ellie fears the worst. She believes that Marty will out her as the forger and undo her career. Instead, he makes peace with her. He also goes to extraordinary lengths of purchasing the copy painting and giving it to Ellie to destroy. Ellie never expects this kindness. She knows that she can now let go of the past and focus on the present.



Styles

Point of View

Dominic Smith tells his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* from the third-person, omniscient point of view of an unknown narrator. The narrator is outside of time, often speaking about the future even though present events are only just unfolding. Sometimes, the narrator leaves the present time to speak only about events in the future as they will occur, such as in the chapter “Amsterdam/Berckhey, Spring 1656,” which begins in the present but ends in future tense.

The narrator also moves the novel from one century to the next, back and forth, weaving through time and creating a narrative that is seamless despite the change in times and settings. Because the narrator speaks of each of the three main characters in turn, the narrator and the reader know everything going on while the characters themselves do not.

Language and Meaning

Dominic Smith tells his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* in language that is poetic, educated, and in the present tense. Because the novel’s three different time periods are being told concurrently, Smith uses the present tense language as an effective means of moving the reader back and forth through time, making whatever time the reader is currently reading about seem like the present by using the present tense of words.

The poetic language used in the novel helps to describe a situation, a scene, a circumstance, a setting, or events that mimic the effect a painting itself will have on a viewer.

The educated aspect of the language –words like juxtaposition, crenellated, and footslog –are reflective of the strong education that Ellie and Marty had. The use of artistic terms such as impasto and craquelure –are evidence of the art knowledge of Sara, Ellie, and Marty.

Structure

Dominic Smith divides his novel *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* into two primary parts, Part One and Part Two, with each part being further subdivided into unnumbered, titled chapters. Each chapter title tells the place and time of its setting. The first part of the novel traces events through the discovery of the second de Vos painting. The second part deals with life after the forgery and events leading up to the creation of the second authentic de Vos painting.



The chapters alternate between the 1630s, 1950s, and the year 2000 as the narrator leapfrogs back and forth through time to tell the story. The clear use of setting as title chapters allows the reader to immediately reorient to the next phase of the plot. The weaving together of the past, the present, and the future while telling the events as if they were all taking place in the present creates a seamless narrative that unifies three related but distinct plots into one that revolves around the de Vos painting, *At the Edge of a Wood*.



Quotes

Sara will watch as the only child God has granted her withers and retreats.

-- Narrator (Amsterdam/Berckhey, Spring 1656)

Importance: As Sara heads out with her husband and daughter to paint the scene of a beached whale, her daughter will be infected with illness by a local farm boy. The fever will kill Kathrijn a few nights later. Because of this, Sarah is devastated and cannot bring herself to paint much. This will change by the winter.

Something about the light, about the girl emerging alone from the wood, rouses her to the canvas. Painting a still life suddenly seems unimaginable.

-- Narrator (Amsterdam/Berckhey, Spring 1656)

Importance: Devastated by the death of her daughter, Sara is unable to paint much. However, inspiration strikes her when she sees a young girl emerge from the woods overlooking a frozen river. This becomes the foundation of Sara's painting "At the Edge of a Wood." The painting itself will come to serve as the centerpiece of the novel.

I wanted to share the good news. I tracked down the current owner of At the Edge of a Wood through some old colleagues at the Met. I telephoned early this morning and asked for the loan directly. Just like that, as if I were asking for a cab fare.

-- Max Culkins (Sydney, July 2000)

Importance: Now a professor in Sydney with a strong academic repertoire, Ellie is stunned to learn that an upcoming art show is being loaned the painting "At the Edge of a Wood." Ellie is stunned by this for several reasons, including her forgery and the idea that Marty De Groot must now be dead, else he would have never loaned out the painting. Ellie is stunned again to find out this is not the case: Marty is very much still alive and will be bringing the painting to New South Wales Art Gallery himself.

I have invited ruin back into my life.

-- Ellie Shipley (Sydney, July 2000)

Importance: When Ellie learns that Marty will be bringing the painting she forged to New South Wales for an exhibit, she is stunned. Having had to clean up her life following a divorce, Ellie now realizes the past is returning to haunt her. The return of the painting means the return of ruination. If the painting is discovered to be a forgery, and she is discovered to be the forger, her entire career –indeed, her life –will have been ruined.

I don't think that's advice I can follow. I'm convinced that Sara de Vos was the most important female painter of her age.

-- Ellie Shipley (Brooklyn, August 1958)

Importance: After her forgery, Ellie decides to focus her dissertation on Sara. Ellie's



mentor and advisor, professor Meredith Hornsby, cautions against focusing on an obscure painter in a profession dominated by men. Ellie disagrees, believing Sara to be the most important female painter of her time. As such, Ellie will pursue her studies of Sara de Vos.

The other thing is that I have this sneaking suspicion that my life has only gotten better since the painting was stolen. I feel stronger somehow.

-- Marty De Groot (Manhattan, September 1958)

Importance: Marty updates his friends on the investigation into finding his painting. Everything has been traced to Ellie Shipley. However, Marty is not ready to hand over the information to the police. Instead, he considers finding out who she actually is. Marty explains this is because the painting not being in his life seems to have somehow improved his life, as if the painting is cursed and has hung over his family for centuries.

The forger was too exacting, too superficial. Only the real artist has the false beginning.

-- Helen Birch (Sydney, August 2000)

Importance: Helen completes her testing of the three paintings attributed to de Vos. She confirms the newly discovered de Vos is real, but points out that one of the two copies of "At the Edge of a Wood" is fake based on a false start. In the original painting, the artist intended to put in a woman watching the little girl watching the skaters, but never painting her in, painting over her instead. The forger did not know this without an X-Ray, and so could not have added in the figure in the same way.

Here comes Marty de Groot, the wrecking ball of the past.

-- Narrator (Sydney, August 2000)

Importance: When Marty personally delivers his painting to Sydney for the Art Gallery show of Dutch masters, he decides to attend one of Ellie's lectures. As he crosses the campus toward the lecture hall, he considers that his reappearance in Ellie's life will be like that of a symbolic wrecking ball, representing the past.

Nothing in the world is more sinister than a child's coffin.

-- Narrator (Heemstede, Summer 1637)

Importance: Sara paints a picture of the funeral Griet's children never got to have. This is done out of honor and respect. The painting features the coffin of a child, which Sara knows must be done—but which she finds heartbreaking not only for her own loss, but for Griet's as well. A child's coffin is such a sinister thing because it is irony manifested. At the start of life, a person has died.

Please take great care of yourself. I consider you an extraordinary person who happened my way.

-- Marty (Sydney, August 2000)

Importance: When Marty shows up in Sydney, Ellie imagines it is because he intends



to out her as a forger and to wreck her career based on her criminal actions of the past. Instead, Marty comes to make peace and seek forgiveness. This floors Ellie. Not only is peace made, but Marty goes above and beyond to protect her by buying the forged painting and giving it to her to destroy.

As it burns, she wonders if she will ever paint something of her own again.

-- Narrator (Heemstede, Winter 1649/Summer 2000)

Importance: With the forged painting in hand, Ellie heads to the village of Groenstede where she burns the painting along the river. Every trace of her past that has haunted her now disappears in smoke. The burning by fire is a symbolic cleansing of Ellie's life. Ellie is now free to move forward on whatever path she chooses. With the forgery gone, she wonders if she will be able to paint an original again.

She is twenty again and just starting out, turning to take us in as we come through the door, her lips parted as if she's about to speak.

-- Narrator (Heemstede, Winter 1649/Summer 2000)

Importance: Here, the narrator describes the last painting of Sara de Vos, a self-portrait of an unfinished life indicated by the incomplete paintings around her. The painting forces Ellie to rethink her assumptions about the Dutch Golden Age in which open mouths on females were supposed to be sexually suggestive. Now, Ellie considers that an open mouth has nothing to do with sex, but everything to do with wanting to tell one's life story.