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The Last Painting Of Sara De Vos: A Novel



Synopsis

A masterful new story charts the circuitous course of the sole surviving work of a female Dutch painter. This is what we long for: the profound pleasure of being swept into vivid new worlds, worlds peopled by characters so intriguing and real that we can't shake them, even long after the audio's done. In his award-winning earlier novels, Dominic Smith demonstrated a gift for coaxing the past to life. Now, in *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*, he deftly bridges the historical and the contemporary, tracking a collision course between a rare landscape by a female Dutch painter of the golden age, an inheritor of the work in 1950s Manhattan, and a celebrated art historian who painted a forgery of it in her youth. In 1631, Sara de Vos is admitted as a master painter to the Guild of St. Luke's in Holland, the first woman to be so recognized. Three hundred years later, only one work attributed to de Vos is known to remain - a haunting winter scene, *At the Edge of a Wood*, which hangs over the bed of a wealthy descendant of the original owner. An Australian grad student, Ellie Shipley, struggling to stay afloat in New York, agrees to paint a forgery of the landscape, a decision that will haunt her. Because now, half a century later, she's curating an exhibit of female Dutch painters, and both versions threaten to arrive. As the three threads intersect, *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos* mesmerizes while it grapples with the demands of the artistic life, showing how the deceptions of the past can forge the present. This audiobook includes a reading group guide read by the author.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This excellent novel took me somewhat by surprise. I was expecting to be interested in this tale of the art world, theft and possible forgery, Netherlands and the art of the 17th century, but instead I

was captivated. This is such a fascinating story, taking place in 3 distinct time eras: 17th century Netherlands, 1950s New York City and Sydney, Australia of 2000. What might potentially become dangerously confused in less sure hands, is here intriguing and pulls the reader on through the pages and years. The author is assured in taking us through these times and peoples' lives; learning their secrets, their inspirations, their pain and hope and love and loss. And it centers ultimately on painting and the painting of Sara de Vos, the first woman admitted to the Guild of St. Luke's in Holland. We see her difficult life, as well as the difficult early life of grad student Ellie Shipley, freelancing as an art restorer to make money while working on her dissertation in New York City, thousands of miles from her place of birth in Australia. Along the way, Smith treats the reader to a minor course in the creation and restoration of classic art as well as some gorgeous descriptions of art theory through Shipley's later lectures on Dutch artists such as Vermeer. But there is the matter of the forgery! Why was it made? Who for? Where is it? And what repercussions will this copy made in the early 1950s have in present day Australia? In an exquisite moment, one of the primary characters, Ellie, is giving a lecture on qualities of light in art and uses Vermeer's *Woman Holding a Balance* to explain what she sees, what the artist has used and created. I think this book will affect the way I look at art in the future, how I think when I'm in a museum or a gallery.

Very few authors write a novel set in two or three places, characters, and times well. It's difficult to give each part its own distinctive voice without shortchanging the other parts. And that's especially true when the author switches back and forth between time and place and character. However, author Dominick Smith has done a superb job of juggling in his new novel, *"The Last Painting of Sara de Vos"*. The novel, set in New York City in 1957, Amsterdam/Haarlem in 1636, and Sydney/New York in 2000. The varying "faces" and places and times all circle around a painting created by a female Dutch artist named Sara de Vos whose works have been lost to time and non-recognition. Since most art was created by men, the most important art was credited to men. In Smith's book, a modern art historian - Eleanor Shipley - was studying Dutch women's art and was writing a thesis on Judith Leyster, an acknowledged artist of the 1600's. Shipley was living in New York in the mid-1950's and studying at Columbia University. She was also dabbling in artistic restoration to older paintings. She somehow gets mixed up with a man who wanted her to exactly copy a painting by Sara de Vos. The painting she is copying belongs to a Dutch/American lawyer who lives on the Upper East side and whose family has owned the painting for 300 years. The story line set in 1636 concerns the woman artist Sara de Vos, who has lost her only beloved child to illness. Her husband has deserted her and in her attempt to assuage her pain, she begins to paint a

scene of a village, with a young girl viewing the village life from a hill. It is this painting, "At the Edge of a Wood", that belongs to Martin de Groot.

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