

The Historian

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The Historian

by

Elizabeth Kostova(New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005)

Note: Those who have not read this novel might want to avoid reading the summary and questions, since they necessarily reveal plot elements that the reader may prefer to encounter as surprises.

Author:

Elizabeth Kostova was born in New London, Connecticut, in 1964, and began writing stories and poems as a child. During her youth, her father, a professor, took his family to Eastern Europe on a fellowship. These travels were colored for Kostova by her father's tales of Dracula, based largely on the various Dracula films. Her youthful travels and her father's tales became the seed that would grow into *The Historian*.

Kostova spent ten years writing *The Historian*, during which time she worked as a magazine editor and a teacher. Eventually, she pursued a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Michigan, where she won the Hopwood Award for Novel-in-Progress. In interviews, she credits the MFA program with providing her with a community of writers who could provide feedback that was essential to finishing the book.

Kostova met her husband Georgi while traveling in Bulgaria in 1989, shortly after the Iron Curtain fell. His knowledge of Eastern European countries was invaluable to her as she wrote her novel, as she had never visited several of the settings in the book.

Kostova is also the co-author (with artist Anthony Lord) of *1927: The Good-Natured Chronicle of a Journey*, which is a combination art book and historical travel guide. She began work on a new novel, also about history, shortly after finding a publisher for *The Historian*.

Summary:

The novel has three main narrators: The first is an unnamed woman. In the present, she is a history professor, but her narrative focuses on a year of her life when she was sixteen and living in Amsterdam with her widowed father, an American diplomat. Browsing in her father's library, she finds a mysterious ancient book, full of blank pages, with a woodcut of a menacing dragon in the middle, and the word *Drakulya* emblazoned on the page. Along with the book is a packet of letters from a professor named Bartolomeo Rossi, addressed to "My dear and unfortunate successor."

When she asks her father Paul about the book and letters, he begins a mysterious tale of how, as a young graduate student in history, he discovered the book in the university library, and began to conduct research into the history of Vlad the Impaler, a real-life Romanian nobleman who became known as Dracula. His

account, told to her partly in person and partly through letters, makes up the second narrative strand of the story.

The third narrative strand is contained in the letters of Bartolomeo Rossi, Paul's thesis advisor of long ago. His letters detail his discovery of a similar ancient book with a dragon woodcut, and his investigations into the mythical and historical Dracula.

All three narrators are menaced by supernatural forces as they try to unravel the mysteries of the Dracula legend. Rossi first discovers the book in the early 1930s. Although Dracula lies outside his area of historical research, he travels to Istanbul to search the archives of the Ottoman Empire for information on Vlad the Impaler, who was a hated enemy of the sultans. While there, he discovers an intriguing map that appears to pinpoint the location of Dracula's tomb, but a sinister man claiming to be a government official appears and confiscates his materials. Frightened, Rossi returns to his hotel, only to find that his room has been searched and his other research materials stolen, but he draws a copy of the map from memory, and decides to make a detour to Romania.

In Romania, Rossi's search for the tomb is fruitless, but in a nearby village, he meets and falls in love with a young woman who appears to be a descendant of Vlad the Impaler. Rossi leaves, but promises to return and marry her after completing some research in Greece. However, in Greece, a mysterious stranger (Dracula or one of his servants) buys him a drink called "amnesia," which erases Rossi's memories of his Romanian trip, so that all he remembers is his trip to Istanbul. His Romanian lover becomes pregnant and sends him a letter, to which he replies that he has never traveled to Romania, and she must be mistaken.

Rossi abandons his research after this point, and it is taken up again in the 1950s by Paul, the narrator's father, who is one of Rossi's graduate students. Upon his discovery of the dragon book, Rossi gives Paul his letters detailing his discoveries. Written at the height of his fear of vampires, they are intended to be a record of his findings, and are addressed to "my dear and unfortunate successor." Rossi's fears are justified; he disappears mysteriously after his meeting with Paul.

Using Rossi's notes and some additional research, Paul sets out to find Rossi. He is joined by Helen, Rossi's Romanian daughter, who is now an anthropologist anxious to confront the father she believes abandoned her mother. Their travels take them first to Istanbul, then to Hungary and Bulgaria, in the belief that when they find Dracula's tomb, they will also find Rossi. Eventually, they do indeed find the tomb, and are forced to kill Rossi, who has been turned into a vampire by Dracula. They are, however, unable to kill Dracula himself, and barely escape with their lives, and Rossi's notes. According to his written account, he was kidnapped because Dracula wanted a historian to catalog the enormous collection of manuscripts he has accumulated over the centuries.

Paul and Helen, who have fallen in love, decide to give up their quest to find and kill Dracula, and try to move on with their lives. They marry, and in a few years Helen gives birth to a daughter (the narrator). While they are happy at first, Helen is more and more troubled by the vampire's legacy. During their adventures, she received two vampire bites from Dracula's servants (according to legend, three will turn her into a vampire). She suffers from depression, eventually seeming to commit suicide by jumping off a cliff. She survives the fall, however, and decides that she must allow her husband to think her dead, and pursue Dracula until she succeeds in killing him.

The narrator and her father go on believing that Helen is dead, and for several years Paul does not pursue his vampire research. However, when the narrator finds the book and letters, he tells her the history of his pursuit of Dracula, and of her mother's death. Before he has told her the entire story, however, he disappears. Pursuing evidence that Helen is still alive, he travels to a French monastery where Dracula may be buried, and where he reputedly reappears every sixteen years on the day of the half-moon in May, "to pay tribute to his origins and to renew the influences that have allowed him to live in death" (p. 173).

The narrator, suspecting her father's destination, follows him there, accompanied by a young man named Stephen Barley, whom she met at Oxford while visiting there with her father. At the monastery, the narrator, her father, and Helen confront Dracula for the last time.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the

text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

Who is the historian of the title?

There are several historians in the book. Rossi is a history professor, and Paul is a graduate student in history. The narrator implies in the "Note to the Reader" that she is also a historian at Oxford University in her adult life (pp. ix-x). There are also several characters who, although pursuing non-history areas of scholarship, conduct historical research in the course of their work. Helen is an anthropologist researching the history of the Dracula legend, and Turgut Bora is a Turkish Shakespearean scholar, who also has an interest in both history and vampires.

However, the book's title is singular, not plural. One character is being singled out as more of a historian than the others. At first it appears to be the narrator. The story can be read as her introduction to the discipline of historical research, where she eventually makes her career. However, near the end of the book it becomes clear that the true historian of the title is Dracula himself.

After his abduction, Rossi awakes in an underground tomb (p. 567), where Dracula has accumulated a vast library of manuscripts, both ancient and modern, on topics such as religion, war, torture, politics, and, naturally, vampires. He wishes Rossi to catalog this vast collection. At one point, he explains to Rossi how he began, while living, to pursue the quest to become undead: "*Merchants brought me strange and wonderful books from many places . . . From these I learned about the ancient occult. As I knew I could not attain a heavenly paradise [due to Vlad the Impaler's record in life as a murderer and torturer] . . . I became an historian in order to preserve my own history forever*" (p. 576).

What does the novel say about the study of history and its relevance to the present?

The study of humanities subjects such as history often comes under attack from people who believe these areas of study do not have any practical application, and are therefore frivolous pursuits by people whose time could be better spent on practical things like science or engineering. While this book is, on the surface, an adventure story with gothic and supernatural elements, it is also an in-depth examination of the ways in which history shapes the present, and a justification of the importance of history as a discipline.

First, history enlarges our view of the big picture by making us realize that we, living in the modern world, are not terribly distinct from those who came before us. Paul and Helen realize this in an archive in Istanbul, when Turgut translates for them a fifteenth-century letter from a pasha (local bureaucrat) in occupied Romania to the sultan in Istanbul. The pasha complains about how expensive the fight against Vlad Dracul (Dracula's father) is, and how very sorry and miserable he himself is. At this point, it strikes Paul that "[t]his corner of history was as real as the tiled floor under our feet or the wooden tabletop under our fingers. The people to whom it had happened had actually lived and breathed and felt and thought and then died, as we did — as we would" (p. 214).

As a student, Paul also comes to the realization that, unlike the relatively cheerful and stable period of Dutch merchant history that forms the topic of his thesis, "history . . . could be something entirely different, a splash of blood whose agony didn't fade overnight, or over centuries" (p. 50). This is a theme that echoes throughout the book. The narrator, in her introduction, says that "not everyone who reaches back into history can survive it. And it is not only reaching back that endangers us; sometimes history itself reaches inexorably forward for us with its shadowy claw" (p. ix).

The past continues to hold sway over the present, sometimes in a sinister manner, as shown in several incidents in the novel. Helen herself is descended from Dracula, and while her family has forgotten their origins, they still hold to the custom of tattooing one family member from each generation with a small dragon (p. 358). Helen is recognized in an Istanbul restaurant by a Gypsy, who yells at her, "Get out of here, Romanian daughter of wolves. You and your friend bring the curse of the vampire to our city" (p. 192).

The historic conflict between Christians and Muslims in Eastern Europe, dominated for so long by the Ottoman Empire, also resonates today. This is alluded to when Helen complains bitterly about the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453, calling it "one of the greatest tragedies in history" (p. 187). Turgut defends the invaders, noting that Sultan Mehmed had offered the city the option of peaceful surrender, and treated the city's Christians liberally after the conquest (pp. 268-269). The strong emotions raised by these ancient events suggest that they continue to shape the present (readers interested in the history of the Ottoman conquest, and its continuing impact on modern Turkey and Europe, can consult *Infidels*, listed below under Further Reading).

Finally, Dracula himself, the book's ultimate historian, realizes that to succeed in the present, he must study the past. His library is a vast collection of books on politics, religion, military matters, and other topics, and they date from antiquity to the 1950s (which is when Rossi found himself imprisoned by Dracula). Under politics, he has collected everything from Machiavelli to a memo from Stalin (p. 582). On the subject of torture, there are documents from medieval prisons, but also information on the experiments of the Nazis (p. 584). Dracula has collected so widely not because he has a sentimental taste for historical documents, but because the study of historical documents will help him in the present. He tells Rossi, "*The past is very useful, but only for what it can teach us about the present*" (p. 573).

What is the role of religion in the story?

Religion plays a rather ambiguous role in the story. Interestingly, none of the main characters pursuing Dracula (Rossi, Paul, or Helen) is religious. Rossi tells Paul that in his opinion, crucifixes and other religious implements are not much use against vampires: "I'm sure you carry your own goodness, moral sense, whatever you want to call it, with you . . . I wouldn't go around with garlic in my pocket, no . . . I'm a rationalist, I suppose, and I'll stick to that" (p. 34).

Yet Paul and Helen decide to arm themselves with the traditional remedies. They meet to talk in a church, which offers some protection against the vampire librarian who has pursued them from the university (pp. 141-148). They also buy some crucifixes at the church (p. 149). These appear to be effective: when the vampire librarian attacks Helen in the library, he is frightened by her crucifix. Paul wonders at the time, "Was this Hollywood, superstition, or history?" (p. 152).

It is not only Christian symbols that are effective against vampires. When Mr. Erozan, the Turkish librarian, is attacked by a vampire, Helen pulls out a crucifix to hold to his wound, but Turgut stops her. "We have our own superstitions here," he says, and takes out a set of Muslim prayer beads (p. 265).

Perhaps the potency of religious symbols is due to the simple fact that the vampires believe in their strength. Dracula himself appears to have been a devout Christian in life. He was a generous patron of the monastery near his castle in Romania. According to the archeologist Georgescu, Vlad the Impaler "*was a pious and murderer. He built many churches and monasteries, to be sure that plenty of people were praying for his salvation*" (p. 379). He also converts briefly to Catholicism, and then back to the Orthodox faith of his birth (p. 639). Indeed, Dracula, in conversing with his confessor "has asked the abbot several times in confession whether . . . every sinner will be admitted to paradise if he truly repents" (p. 639). Apparently the answer was unsatisfactory, because Dracula tells Rossi, "*I knew I could not attain a heavenly paradise*" (p. 576).

The other possibility is simply that religious symbols act to focus the "moral sense" that Rossi believes most people carry around with them, even if the bearer is not particularly religious.

Some critics have suggested that the author's non-engagement with meaningful religion is a flaw in the book. A reviewer on the History News Network (<http://hnn.us/blogs/entries/13970.html>) complains, "There are no believers among the main characters, but a sprinkling of devout Greek Orthodox and Muslim minor characters (with the occasional monk getting a look-in). And yet, nobody has any problem lugging around crucifixes or wooden beads to ward off vampires. Here we are, in a world featuring ambulatory undead afraid of religious symbols, and yet, everyone's non-religiosity survives intact." Considering that the book is set at a crossroads between Christian Europe and the Muslim East, this lack of religion is certainly curious.

How does the sixteen-year-old narrator mature over the course of the story?

By her own admission, the narrator was very sheltered for a teenager growing up in the 1970s: "It seems peculiar to me now that I should have been so obedient well into my teens, while the rest of my generation was experimenting with drugs and protesting the imperialist war in Vietnam, but I had been raised in a world so sheltered that it makes my adult life in academia look positively adventurous" (p. 3). She is sheltered, she says, because her father, having to perform the role of two parents, is overprotective.

The narrator is also unusually obedient for a teenager. After finding the dragon book and the letters, she nags her father to take her with him on his next trip, and does not tell him of her discovery. "It was the first time I had kept a secret from him and the first time I had ever insisted on anything," she notes (p. 5).

As the story progresses, she learns to defy her father on many levels. Without his knowledge, she visits the university library to pursue her research on vampires. At various points, she presses him to continue with his account of Dracula, though he is sometimes reluctant. She is learning to assert herself to someone she has always obeyed.

By the end of the story, the girl who used to obey her father unquestioningly has snooped through his private belongings for clues to his whereabouts, has deceived her governess/housekeeper, and has caught a train to France in pursuit of her father. She has also kept her wits about her while facing down Dracula himself in her train compartment (pp. 234-35).

She also gains experience of the opposite sex. At the beginning of the book, she says, "Boys mystified me, although I dreamed vaguely of men" (p. 4). Later in the story, she travels to France in pursuit of her father with Stephen Barley, an attractive Oxford student who has been asked to keep an eye on her. While they don't enter into a sexual relationship, there is a romantic scene in a hotel bedroom (pp. 431-432).

Is Dracula right when he tells Rossi, "*History has taught us that the nature of man is evil, sublimely so. Good is not perfectible, but evil is*" (p. 586)?

The twentieth century alone offers ample support for this assertion. One reason the Holocaust looms so large in the world's consciousness is that nobody can imagine anything more evil. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a movement for the good of humankind that has the same magnitude as the Holocaust's shadow of evil. Smaller examples of evil around the world (ethnic cleansing, willful destruction of the environment, politically motivated killings) demonstrate that it is often easier to go along with evil than to stand up for good. For every Mother Theresa, there seems to be no end of Hitlers and Stalins.

Yet even perfect evil seldom delivers the results its perpetrators desire. Dracula tells Rossi that his imprisonment as a youth among the Turks was the beginning of his foray into cruelty and evil, "*when I vowed to make history, not to be its victim*" (p. 584). Yet he, more than any of the other characters, is a victim of history. He has lived through centuries of history, and seems unable to let it go. He refers to 1453 (the year Constantinople fell to the Turks) as "*the worst date in history.*" When Rossi points out that there are many other contenders for history's worst episode, Dracula reacts angrily: "*I saw his eyes blaze up, red in their depth like a wolf's, and full of hatred*" (p. 574). He is indeed history's victim, unable to view world history objectively, outside of the frame of reference he held in life.

Perfect evil also tends to have a fatal flaw: it generally contains the seeds of its own destruction. Dracula, confident that he has perfected his evil over the centuries, has distributed copies of the dragon books that lure the other characters into investigating his history, in the hope of finding a historian who is brilliant and ambitious enough to be tasked with cataloguing his collection of books. Yet the various people who take up this quest combine to destroy him in the end. What Rossi describes as "your own goodness, moral sense" (p. 34) triumphs in the end over the lure of evil. Historically, the pattern of evil being its own undoing can be seen in the number of dictators who are overthrown in their turn. Evil, it seems, is only perfectible for a short time before things start to fall apart.

Even if one agrees that evil is more easily perfectible than good, the novel still presents good as the preferable choice. Rossi knows that if he does not agree to become undead and work for Dracula, Dracula will force him to do so. Yet he still refuses. Yet in his choice, he sees potential for good. He writes in his account that his objective is "*to die with as much of myself intact as I can, in the hope that it may later be some small restraint on the terrible deeds I will do once I am undead*" (p. 587). While it is easier to fall into evil, it is more desirable to try to do good. An evil decision would lead to a loss of identity, but in a good action lies the hope of preserving the core of Rossi's essential self.

The "Note to the Reader" that precedes Part I is dated January 2008. Why?

Given that Kostova chose not to name her character, she needed a way to ensure that the Note to the Reader was correctly interpreted as being written by the character, rather than by the author herself (given that the character was unnamed, she could not put her name at the end of the note).

Also, works of fiction in this vein are sometimes misinterpreted by readers as being true. Kostova's book has been compared by some reviewers to *The Da Vinci Code*, a recent historical mystery that has generated much debate over which parts are true and which are false. The *Celestine Prophecy*, which was published in the early 1990s, was believed by some readers to be a true story (as can be seen by doing a web search on the book's title and the word "true"). Robert James Waller came under fire for implying that *The Bridges of Madison County* was a true story (*National Geographic* even published a notice asking people to stop writing to request copies of the non-existent issue in which the character's photos supposedly appeared [<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/9607/0096.html#kincaid>]).

By dating the foreword a few years later than the book's publication, the author is emphasizing to readers that her work is fiction, and protecting herself from charges of trying to generate sales by implying that her book is a true story.

How do various characters deal with being abandoned?

Several of the characters experience abandonment. Helen is abandoned by Rossi, who has been made to forget his involvement with her mother. Her method of coping is to focus on revenge; she is determined to outdo her father in an area of scholarship where he has apparently failed to make headway, and then to confront him with his failure and her own success. She says to Paul, "Why should he not have published anything out of this very unusual research? . . . Because he is saving it up for a grand finale What a shame it will be for him when someone else publishes the definitive work on the subject first" (p. 129).

In her vengefulness, Helen resembles her ancestor, Vlad the Impaler. He too was abandoned by his father, given as a hostage to the Ottoman Turks, to ensure that his father would no longer make war on them. Although he does not describe his experiences living with the Turks, they were apparently traumatic enough to make him seek revenge later on. He tells Rossi, "*I learned everything I could about them, so that I might surpass them all I have triumphed and they are gone*" (p. 584).

This is in contrast to how Helen's mother deals with her abandonment by Rossi. Though it obviously saddens her, she continues to cherish her love for him, and does not turn to thoughts of revenge. Helen's mother gives Paul the letters that Rossi wrote to his friend Hedges, and accidentally left in Romania. When Helen asks why her mother has never shown her the letters, her mother replies that it is because Helen hated Rossi, and she wanted to give the letters to someone who loved him (p. 368).

Paul and his daughter are abandoned by Helen when she allows Paul to believe she is dead, and continues her pursuit of Dracula alone. Paul's response is to try to make a stable life for himself and his daughter. When he eventually learns that Helen is still alive, he sets out to find her — not to seek revenge, but to help her destroy Dracula, and then to take her back into his family. The narrator, despite having no memories of her mother, is happy to have her back. There is none of the resentment that Helen felt at Rossi's abandonment.

What did you think of the ending?

The book ends with an epilogue from the now middle-aged narrator, describing an incident that befell her a few years previously. While visiting Philadelphia for a conference, she visits a small museum known for its Dracula collection, including Bram Stoker's notes for his book. She spends some time in the library there, and as she's leaving she is stopped by a librarian, who returns to her a notebook she left behind, and another book. The narrator opens the other book, and discovers that all the pages are blank, with the exception of a dragon woodcut in the center.

Considering that this book in many ways has defied the conventions of the horror genre, readers may be disappointed in this ending. The narrator has already witnessed the disintegration of Dracula's body into dust after Helen shoots him with a silver bullet (p. 624). The resurfacing of his book will seem to some readers like the stuff of trite horror movies. In addition, it seems to undermine the book's earlier suggestion that good people can, if united, stand up to evil and defeat it.

Further Reading:

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897)

Stoker's gothic depiction of the Dracula legend is referred to several times in Kostova's novel. As the original portrait of vampires in literature, it's a must-read for vampire fans.

Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003)

Several reviews have compared *The Historian* to Dan Brown's historical thriller involving the life of Christ and the history of the early church.

Comelia Funke, *Inkheart* (2003)

Although this is a children's book, it is a highly literary one that bears some striking similarities to *The Historian*. The main character, twelve-year-old Meggie, lost her mother at an early age, and has been raised by her father, a literary man. A supernatural element enters the story when Meggie learns that her mother is not truly dead — she vanished when Meggie's father read aloud from a book called *Inkheart*. An evil character known as Capricorn was released from the book, and Meggie's mother vanished into it. The father-daughter relationship, the pursuit of a supernatural character, and the search for the missing mother are all reminiscent of *The Historian*, and the tone of the writing is mature enough to appeal to adults.

Andrew Wheatcroft, ***Infidels: The Conflict between Christendom and Islam***, 638-2002 (2003)

For readers wanting to know more of the real-life history behind Kostova's story, this non-fiction history of the relationship between the Christian and Muslim worlds contains a very good section on the Ottoman Empire, including the conquest of Constantinople and Ottoman domination of Eastern Europe. Vlad the Impaler gets a brief mention.

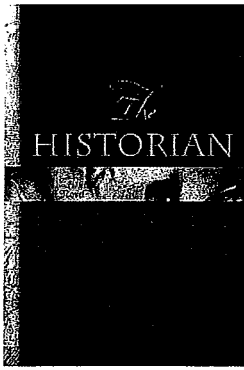
John Crowley, ***Lord Byron's Novel: The Evening Land*** (2005)

In 1816, Lord Byron and some friends gathered at his villa. The company included Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife Mary. To amuse the company, Mary suggested they make up ghost stories. Her own story was the seed for her novel *Frankenstein*. Byron supposedly gave up on his ghost story, but Crowley takes as his starting point the idea that Byron wrote the book, and that his mathematician daughter Ada later translated it into a code to keep her mother, Byron's vengeful ex-wife, from finding and destroying it. The plot of Byron's novel revolves around a young boy, the bastard son of an English lord and an Albanian Muslim woman, whose life is filled with high adventure and gothic misfortune. The lost novel is discovered in the present day by a female researcher doing work on women scientists, including Ada Byron.

February, 2006

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Heather Ganshorn, who has a BA in journalism and a Master's in library and information studies. She has worked as an editor, a freelance writer, and an academic librarian. She is currently the video librarian at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Calgary.

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The Historian (Kostova, Elizabeth) (2005)

Elizabeth Kostova (Author)

 Award Winner

When Paul's teenage daughter stumbles upon a mysterious book with a cryptic message in his library, Paul tells her he first found it himself over 20 years before, after Bartolomew Rossi, his mentor at Oxford University, told Paul that he believed that the historical Count Dracula (who gave rise to the vampire legend) was still alive. Bartolomew disappeared shortly after this revelation, and Paul enlisted Bartolomew's daughter, anthropologist Helen Rossi, to help find him. As the story cuts back and forth in time between Bartolomew's investigations of Dracula in the 1930s, Paul's investigations of the disappearance in the 1950s, and the contemporary 1970s of the novel, events dovetail, parallel, and resonate eerily to suggest the truth of the vampire's existence. First novel.

MAIN CHARACTERS : Paul, Diplomat (of a teenage girl), Bartholomew Rossi,

Professor (Paul's mentor), Helen Rossi, Scholar (of Drakulya legend)

GENRE : Horror stories, Mystery fiction

SUB GENRE : Vampire Story

SETTING(S) : London, England, Istanbul, Turkey, Amsterdam, Netherlands, Asia, Benelux, Europe, Great Britain, Southwestern Asia, United Kingdom, Western Europe

SUBJECT : Horror, Legends, Mystery fiction, Detective fiction, Occultism, Vampires

TIME PERIOD : 20th century AD, 1930s (Decade) AD, 1950s (Decade) AD, 1970s (Decade) AD

Elizabeth Kostova

Birth Date: 1964
Place of Birth: United States,Connecticut,New London
Nationality: American
Occupation: Novelist

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Awards:

Hopwood Award for novel-in-progress, University of Michigan, 2003, Quill Award for Debut Author of the Year, 2005, and Book Sense Award for Best Adult Fiction, 2005, all for *The Historian*.

Personal Information:

Born December 26, 1964, in New London, CT; married; husband's name Georgi (a computer scientist and scholar). **Education:** Yale University (graduated); University of Michigan, M.F.A., 2004.

Career Information:

Writer, novelist, and educator. Has worked recording folk music in Bulgaria, as a business writing teacher, and as a freelance magazine writer. Taught English as a second language, composition, and creative writing in Philadelphia, PA. Elizabeth Kostova Foundation, founder, 2007.

Writings:

- *The Historian* (novel), Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2005.
- *The Swan Thieves* (novel), Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2010.

The Historian have been translated into twenty- eight languages.

Media Adaptions:

The Historian was optioned for film by Sony Pictures and has been adopted for audiocassette.

Sidelights:

The idea at the center of Elizabeth Kostova's lengthy debut novel, *The Historian*, is that the legendary, dreaded Count Dracula still walks among mortals. The Dracula of Kostova's world, however, does not resemble the urbane but deadly charmer characterized by Bela Lugosi in film, nor does he share the wanton violence and feral characteristics of more recent vampires. Instead, Kostova's Dracula is himself a historian: He is an archivist, a dusty academic, a scholar more at home with crumbling books and historical documents than waiflike victims and flapping bats. *The Historian* "is a tale of such fiendish complication that while writing it, Kostova kept a chart on her wall tracing the narratives," noted Malcolm Jones in *Newsweek*. "But it is a testament to her skill that, as you're reading, the book never feels complicated," Jones added. This Dracula has nothing to do with the version put forth by Stoker; Kostova's character is based on Vlad Tepes, also known as Vlad the Impaler, the sadistic prince of Wallachia who refined slow torture to its pinnacle using the blunt point of a stake in the ground.

The novel and its labyrinthine plot, occult conspiracies, and international academic mysteries have garnered comparisons to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, but Kostova started the novel eight years before Brown's book was published. The idea for *The Historian* occurred to Kostova more than a decade ago, while she was hiking through the Appalachian mountains with her husband. What if a father was telling stories about

Dracula to his daughter, she thought, and what if Dracula himself was there to listen in on them?

The story begins when the novel's unnamed narrator, who is sixteen years old in 1972, finds an unusual book and a mysterious packet of letters in her father Paul's library in Amsterdam. The book is blank, except for an ominous center spread depicting a dragon holding a banner emblazoned with the word "Drakulya." The letters, alarming in themselves, are dated 1930 and addressed to "My dear and unfortunate successor." Initially hesitant to provide any information, Paul eventually relates a complicated tale of encounters with ancient evil. The book, Paul tells his daughter, mysteriously appeared on his desk when he was a graduate student and inspired him to undertake some research on the historical Dracula—a word that, in Romanian, means "dragon." When Paul mentions the book to his professor, Bartholomew Rossi, he learns that Rossi also received a copy of the unusual tome. Rossi's research, however, convinced him that the historical Dracula was still alive. A few days later, Rossi disappeared from his blood-spattered office, and despite the unreality of the situation, Paul was convinced that his mentor was in the hands of Dracula and in deadly danger. Searching for the man, Paul encountered Helen Rossi, who said she was the professor's unknown daughter, but who bore the first name of the narrator's mother. Helen joined Paul on his unsuccessful search. A few days after telling his daughter this story, Paul also disappears, allegedly called away on business, but leaving a note imploring his daughter to start carrying garlic in her pockets and wearing a crucifix.

Kostova weaves together a sophisticated interconnected storyline that spans the 1930s, 1950s, and 1970s, as the narrator searches for her father, Paul searches for Rossi, and Rossi makes his own investigation into relationships between the mysterious book, its recipients, and the uncanny truth about Tepes. Some reviewers have been critical of the novel's slow pace. "The characters wander from dusty old archive to archive, their pockets stuffed full of garlic, perusing crumbling volumes, analyzing creepy Balkan folk songs, and debriefing sage Eastern European elders who hoard ancestral secrets," commented Jennifer Reese in *Entertainment Weekly*. "Eventually, even the most patient reader may begin to tire of all this talking and touring."

Numerous other critics, however, found considerably more to like about Kostova's novel. "The writing is excellent, and the pace is brisk, although it sags a bit in the middle," noted Patricia Altner in *Library Journal*. "Blending history and myth, Kostova has fashioned a version so fresh that when a stake is finally driven through a heart, it inspires the tragic shock of something happening for the very first time," Jones remarked. *Salon.com* reviewer Laura Miller commented on the book's settings and atmosphere, stating that "Kostova has a genius for evoking places without making you wade through paragraphs of description."

Kostova has "done something quite extraordinary," concluded June Sawyers in a review for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "She has refashioned the vampire myth into a compelling contemporary novel, a late-night page-turner that will be sure to make you lose some precious hours of sleep. It is a sprawling piece of work, the kind of novel that supposedly doesn't get published anymore."

In *The Swan Thieves*, Kostova "forsakes vampires for artists—artists beset by talent and torment, all destructive lifestyles and a whiff of linseed, who implode their way through more than 500 pages," commented London *Guardian* reviewer Joanna Briscoe. After attempting to damage a painting of Leda and the Swan at the National Gallery of Art, noted contemporary painter Robert Oliver is arrested and committed to a private mental hospital near Washington, DC. Oliver's psychiatrist is Andrew Marlow, himself an amateur painter. After uttering a few words—mostly to give Marlow permission to interview anyone that has known him—Oliver falls silent, refusing to talk to Marlow or anyone else in the facility.

As time passes, Oliver continues to draw, rendering illustrations of the same mysterious woman over and over. He refuses to identify her and will not tell Marlow if his drawings are of a real person or someone from his imagination. However, Marlow recognizes that the drawings and paintings of the nineteenth-century woman are likely to have significant meaning for his patient. Marlow also discovers that Oliver possesses a packet of very old letters, dated from 1878 and written in French. As Oliver reads these letters over and over, Marlow finds that they are correspondence between young Beatrice

Vignot, an art student and wife of a bureaucrat, and her husband's much-older uncle, Olivier Vignot. The letters reveal a possible romantic connection between Beatrice and Olivier, though he was forty years her senior.

Slowly, Marlow begins to piece together clues about Oliver, his erratic behavior at the art museum, and his apparent obsession with a long-dead woman. He travels to interview several people from Oliver's past, including the man's ex-wife Kate and Mary Bertison, the women Oliver lived with after his divorce. Marlow's search for answers takes him to destinations in the United States, Mexico, and finally France, where pieces of the puzzle originated and where they finally begin to fall in place.

Several commentators remarked on the length of *The Swan Thieves*, and while some enjoyed the slow and deliberate pace of the book, others found it to be too long. "I liked Kostova's leisurely pace (unafraid to digress, she spends more than 10 quietly stunning pages on a visit Marlow pays to his aging father) and lush, slang-free writing, which suit both her subject and her thoughtful characters," commented Kathy Weissmann in her review for the *Bookreporter.com* Web site. In contrast, Briscoe remarked, "*The Swan Thieves* is a perfectly decent work that needs a machete taken to it. It could be cut by a third. Better still, a half." Some reviewers also did not think the novel compared well to Kostova's highly popular *The Historian*. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, however, remarked, "*The Swan Thieves* succeeds both in its echoes of *The Historian* and as it maps new territory for this canny and successful writer."

Toronto *Globe and Mail* reviewer Kate Taylor called *The Swan Thieves* "highly readable; if Marlow is too bloodless to make his own burgeoning romance of much interest, Oliver's and Beatrice's tales are compelling, while Kostova provides magnificently convincing descriptions of the utterly fictional paintings the two artists have created." While noting that some of the characters' decisions are not reasonable or logical, a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor stated, "lush prose and abundant drama will render logic beside the point for most readers." Kostova's "luxurious artistic detail and richly drawn characters will pull in readers," observed *Library Journal* reviewer Leigh Wright. Joanne Wilkinson, in a *Booklist* review, named the novel an "extravagantly romantic novel about love, madness, and art."