

"A riveting ride into the world of stolen art . . . filled with love, loss, passion, ambition, and resilience."

—Lisa Barr, author of *Woman on Fire*

The Lost Masterpiece

A Novel

B. A. Shapiro

New York Times bestselling author of

The Art Forger



Reading Group Discussion Guide

*This reading group guide for **The Lost Masterpiece** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author B.A. Shapiro. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

The *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Art Forger* delivers another riveting art history thriller.

In an utterly compelling novel about an enigmatic painting, B. A. Shapiro tells a story filled with thrilling plot twists, taking us deep inside a circle of famous painters in late-nineteenth-century Paris, centering on the anguished Impressionist artist Berthe Morisot—the one woman in their midst who never got her due—and the story of Morisot’s great-great-great-great granddaughter, Tamara Rubin, who has inherited Édouard Manet’s *Party on the Seine*, a painting that completely upends her life. When Tamara inherits *Party*, she discovers a long-hidden family history replete with unanswered questions: How had it been stolen by the Nazis? How had the painting managed to survive three disasters that destroyed every other artwork around it? And most of all, why had she never known about her ancestor, Berthe Morisot? As the painting begins to metamorphose into darker and more terrifying versions of itself, Tamara’s ordinary life—until now untouched by art—is thrown into turmoil. What wounds and resentments plagued Morisot, and to what lengths will her spirit go for revenge?

The Lost Masterpiece is a story of love, adultery, betrayal, family secrets, and the grueling birth of Impressionism, taking the reader on a whirlwind adventure from the streets of Paris in the late 1800s and the studio Berthe Morisot shared with Manet, Degas, and Renoir at a time when it was improper for women to paint seriously to the present day. Shapiro brings Berthe’s world to life, tracing her work through generations of descendants and introducing us to a painter as brilliant and original as her male counterparts.

Across 150 years of triumphs, struggles, passions, animosities, and malevolence, Shapiro does what she always does so brilliantly: shows us how art can enliven our senses and enlarge our world.

Questions for Discussion

1. Berthe and Tamara are both independent minded, strong-willed women. Did you see commonalities in their choices as the story progressed? How were they different?
2. In this novel, Berthe Morisot and Édouard Manet have a passionate affair. Do you think their infidelity was justified? Why or why not?
3. How familiar were you with art history before picking up this book? What did *The Lost Masterpiece* teach you about art history that you didn't know previously?
4. How did you react to Tamara's relationship with Wyatt? Do you think they are good together? Did your perception of them change throughout the book?
5. What did you think of Suzanne and Eugène? Do you sympathize with them? Do you like or dislike them as characters?
6. Impressionism was not popular at first, many critics calling the brushstrokes sloppy and incomplete. Why do you think this is? Did this surprise you, given how popular Impressionism is today?
7. While some events of the book are fictionalized, it's true that the Nazis stole art, among other property, from Jewish families. How did reading about these events affect your perception of ownership and art?
8. Berthe's career was hindered because she was a woman. Male artists like Manet and Degas have been enshrined in art history, while it seems that Berthe Morisot is left behind. Do you see any parallels in other situations at that time? Parallels to today?
9. Some of the artists in the book were able to paint because they come from wealthy families. How has wealth influenced art across history and various cultures? How can you tell?
10. This book touches upon the importance of lineage. How does the book depict the tragic destruction of lineage by the Holocaust and the fracturing of Jewish families?
11. What would you have done if you were in Tamara's position? Would you have kept the painting, sold it, or given in to Damien's demands? Why?
12. How did you think the story was going to end? Did the ending surprise you?

A Conversation with the Author

1. **Q. This book is so rich with Impressionist history. Tell us a little about your research process.**

A: I actually have a PhD in a completely unrelated field, and one thing you learn in graduate school is how to research. But researching a novel is much better than doing so for an academic audience. With a novel, you just have to find as much information as you're interested in—and then make the rest up. So that's what I do. I scour libraries, museums, books and lots of online sources.

2. **Q. Did Berthe Morisot and Edouard Manet really have an affair? How did you decide what to fictionalize and what to leave true?**

A: This is an open question. They were definitely in love, but historians disagree on whether it was an actual affair or just one of the heart. Obviously, an actual affair makes for a much juicier story, so that's what I did.

3. **Q: What did the writing process for this book look like for you? How long was the writing process? What does your writing routine look like?**

A: It usually takes me between three to four years to write a novel. This includes extensive research, character sketches, plot charts, scattergrams, tension charts and multi-colored file cards—just to mention a few of my obsessive pre-writing activities. When I finally do start writing, it usually takes up to a year to finish the first draft—if I'm lucky. Then another two or so to rewrite it. This involves up to eight full drafts, and when it's finally finished, I'd guess every page has been revised at least twenty times. Crazy, huh?

4. **Q: What inspired you to write *The Lost Masterpiece*?**

A: I discovered Berthe Morisot when I was doing research for *The Art Forger*. There's nothing I like better than a feisty woman battling her way through misogyny. And Berthe was an amazing artist and had an amazing story. It only took me ten years to finally get the chance to write about her. I threw in a ghost and let it rip.

5. **Q: Is *Party on the Seine* based on a real painting?**

A: Yes and no. It's definitely based on what the Impressionists were working on at the time, as well as the kind of painting Berthe wanted to be able to create, but couldn't because she was a woman. It does bear a strong resemblance to Renoir's *The Boating Party*.

6. **Q: Your books are always so rich with detail when it comes to the art world. What are some of your favorite museums and artists?**

A: My favorite museum is the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia, which I wrote about in *The Collector's Apprentice*. Both its collection—primarily Impressionist and post-Impressionist—and its colorful history are amazing. And it holds the work of some of my favorite artists: Cezanne, Matisse, Renoir and of course, Berthe. The Gardner Museum, which I wrote about in *The Art Forger*, is another with a wild backstory and a creator with an equally wild personality.

7. **Q: Do you draw or paint yourself? What are your favorite non-writing creative activities?**

A: When I was a kid, I wanted to be an artist, but unfortunately it became obvious quite early on that this wasn't where my talents lay. Then I wanted to be a dancer, also no talent, and then an actress, which, despite the fact that my mother's nickname for me was Sarah Heartburn, didn't pan out either. So all I had left was writing for a creative outlet. And it's the only one I have other than reading and visiting museums—and I'm not sure those even count.

8. **Q: Which character do you identify with most? Are any of the characters based on your own experiences?**

A: Tamara is the one I identify with the most, as I'm not an eighteenth-century artist, but the feistiness of all the female characters is something that resonates with me. I suppose I should admit that breaking rules and taking risks is also something I identify with.

9. **Q: What do you hope readers take away from *The Lost Masterpiece*?**

A: I hope this novel has a wide audience that will take various ideas to heart. There's, of course, the difficulty of women in a man's society, but also the power of persistence—and yes, taking risks and rule-breaking. Another is the tendency for new art forms—actually anything new—to be dismissed and ridiculed when they first come to light, and how these, after time and doggedness, can come to be accepted. And although I have no answers, the idea that there may be more on heaven and earth than we suspect.

10. **Q: Without giving anything away, did you know how the book was going to end when you started writing it?**

A: I always have an idea for how the book will end when I begin it. I've now written fifteen novels—ten of them published—and only one has ended up as I initially planned. *The Lost Masterpiece* was not that one.

Enhance Your Book Club

Here are some fun ideas and activities you can do with your bookish friends at your next *The Lost Masterpiece* book club meeting:

1. Host your book club meeting at a local museum. Take photos with *The Lost Masterpiece* and post them on social media, tagging B.A. Shapiro [@ba_shapiro](#).
2. Host a paint and sip. Gather your art materials and create art inspired by the great impressionists Berthe Morisot and Edouard Manet. If you want to film your bookish artwork, don't forget to post on social media, tagging B.A. Shapiro [@ba_shapiro](#).
3. Make a playlist for each book's character. Or assign a character to each book club member, and present your playlist to one another at your next book club meeting.
4. Discuss with your book club: How would you adapt this book into a movie? Who would you cast in the leading roles?
5. Go on a museum tour with your group to see some of Berthe's paintings.
 - Metropolitan Museum of Art (*New York*)
 - The Museum of Fine Arts (*Boston*)
 - National Gallery of Art (*D.C.*)
 - Art Institute of Chicago
 - Barnes Museum (*Philadelphia*)
 - And if your group is adventurous:
 - » Musée d'Orsay (*Paris*)
 - » Petit Palais (*Paris*)
 - » Museum Marmottan Monet (*Paris*)
 - » Musée des Beaux-Arts (*Paris*)
 - » National Galley (*London*)
 - » Tate Britain (*London*)