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## The Swan Thieves by Elizabeth Kostova

Joanna Briscoe wishes Elizabeth Kostova would bring back the vampires

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Joanna Briscoe  
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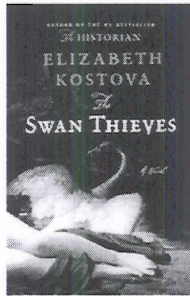
### The Swan Thieves

by Elizabeth Kostova

576pp,

Little, Brown,

£16.99



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As reader-gripping devices go, there's nothing like a really good quest. Fictional missions involving arcane codes, old books, missing antiquities or the odd vampire have entranced the public for some years with edge-of-the-seat plots and supernatural surprises nestling among the relics.

Given the pulse-racing nature of Elizabeth Kostova's debut bestseller, *The Historian*, in which Vlad the Impaler was unearthed among archives and mountainous regions, one could be forgiven for expecting another page-turning romp through the paranormal. But 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. This is something of a disappointment. Give us the hair-raising twists of pick'n'mix mysticism any day.

*The Swan Thieves* examines the link between madness and creativity, territory more effectively covered in recent years by Patrick McGrath. Before we start on the multitude of artists, we are treated to a lengthy biography and professional assessment of psychiatrist Dr Andrew Marlow of Washington DC. A bit of an artist himself on the side, one day he is sent the more accomplished, charismatic and infinitely more loopy painter Robert Oliver as an in-patient.

Oliver has just threatened to attack a painting, wielding his knife near a depiction of Leda and the swan, but has not actually slashed it. This is a shame for the plot, and can conveniently stand as a metaphor for this novel: *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. Perhaps, after selling 3m copies of *The Historian*, Kostova may be just too successful to edit. The result is like wading through a superior sort of treacle.

Once resident in Marlow's psychiatric centre, Oliver turns mute, so it is left to the doctor to find the keys to the great one's psyche by setting off on his own sleuthing tour round the country to interview the artist's significant others. First off is Kate, the ex-wife. Then it's a colleague. Then it's Oliver's girlfriend and some far-flung artist contacts, necessitating a spot of foreign travel. However, as is hinted and then revealed with spurts of obfuscation, the real significant other in Oliver's life is a dead person.

Nineteenth-century letters and much meandering among obscure French artists thread through the novel as testament to his obsession. We're supposed to see the parallels between these painters' lives, but believe me, it takes some time.

The women in Oliver's life soon discover his slovenly habits, his breathtaking unreliability and his endless paintings of an unknown woman in 19th-century clothes. This image reappears throughout the novel as Oliver obsessively paints her in different guises, while clutching his bunch of crumbling letters at all times. In the meantime, Kate Oliver, the appealing ex-wife, takes over the narrative, but by the time we know her entire backstory – along with every doorway ever entered and vista ever viewed – a weary sense of plot fatigue takes over. There is also the essential problem that Dr Marlow's search, which pins the novel together, is not believable as a premise and therefore forms a slightly bogus structure. He displays a stalker's zeal in his pursuit of biographical detail, when surely his busy career as senior shrink with painting hobby on the side would consume most waking hours.

As a portrait of a monster with a heavenly gift, the novel is interesting. But it is simply far too long, and rarely achieves real emotional authenticity. Kostova has followed a well-written, superbly paced adventure with a more self-consciously "literary" novel whose prose is not deathless. While the socking supernatural quest behind *The Historian* gave it the momentum of fear and mystery, this more traditional and groaningly long-winded search is paradoxically less convincing, and appears to put literary aspiration above storytelling. Bring back the vampires, the demon plotting, the chilling revelations. Readers expecting the delights of *The Historian*, beware.

Joanna Briscoe's novel *Sleep with Me* is published by Bloomsbury.

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