



## The Stolen Lady

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### Introduction

From the acclaimed author of *The Night Portrait* comes a stunning historical novel about two women, separated by five hundred years, who each hide Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*—with unintended consequences.

#### France, 1939

At the dawn of World War II, Anne Guichard, a young archivist employed at the Louvre, arrives home to find her brother missing. While she works to discover his whereabouts, refugees begin flooding into Paris and German artillery fire rattles the city. Once they reach the city, the Nazis will stop at nothing to get their hands on the Louvre's art collection. Anne is quickly sent to the Castle of Chambord, where the Louvre's most precious artworks—including the *Mona Lisa*—are being transferred to ensure their safety. With the Germans hard on their heels, Anne frantically moves the *Mona Lisa* and other treasures again and again in an elaborate game of hide and seek. As the threat to the masterpieces and her life grows closer, Anne also begins to learn the truth about her brother and the role he plays in this dangerous game.

#### Florence, 1479

House servant Bellina Sardi's future seems fixed when she accompanies her newly married mistress, Lisa Gherardini, to her home across the Arno. Lisa's husband, a prosperous silk merchant, is aligned with the powerful Medici, his home filled with

luxuries and treasures. But soon, Bellina finds herself bewitched by a charismatic monk who has urged Florentines to rise up against the Medici and to empty their homes of the riches and jewels her new employer prizes. When Master Leonardo da Vinci is commissioned to paint a portrait of Lisa, Bellina finds herself tasked with hiding an impossible secret.

When art and war collide, Leonardo da Vinci, his beautiful subject Lisa, and the portrait find themselves in the crosshairs of history.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of the Mona Lisa stands at the center of this story. Before reading *The Stolen Lady*, what preconceptions did you have about this portrait? How has your appreciation of this painting changed since reading this story? What do you think is special about this portrait, and why do you think it's so famous?
  2. Anne begins with the belief that she's "just a typist," but she ends the story by playing a critical role in the fate of the Louvre's works of art. At what point does Anne make a shift toward a more active role in saving the Louvre's works of art? What other choices do you think she might have had? What choice do you think you would make in a similar situation?
  3. Throughout the novel, Bellina walks a thin line between protecting her mistress and putting the family at risk. How do you think Bellina navigated the narrow set of choices a servant woman might have had in Renaissance Florence? How might things have turned out differently for her if her indiscretions had been discovered?
  4. Bellina wrestles with how luxurious material goods might be considered sinful or a force for good. Can you think of other examples in our contemporary society where people must weigh a similar question?
  5. How have Bellina's, Lisa's, and Anne's upbringings prepared them—or not—for the trials and tribulations they face in this story?
  6. Leonardo da Vinci spent much of his professional life striving to be a great inventor and engineer, while history remembers him first and foremost as a painter. Why do you think this is? Do you think he would be surprised to learn that his Mona Lisa is the most famous painting in the world?
  7. Why do you think Bellina decides to hide Lisa's portrait? What does she risk? Would you have done the same? Why or why not?
  8. How do the themes of hiding and secrets weave throughout the story? What are each of the main characters—Anne, Bellina, Leonardo, and Lisa—hiding from others? What are they hiding from themselves?
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9. How much freedom do Bellina and Anne have to make choices about their own futures? What are the constraints on their choices, and how do they navigate these barriers given the circumstances of the times in which they lived?

10. What parallels did you draw between characters in Renaissance Florence and those in World War II France?

11. In the Renaissance story line, the French are the invaders, while in the World War II story line, the French themselves are invaded. In the midst of war and political turmoil, what is the role of art? How does art retain its value when so many human lives are on the line?

12. In this story, what is “stolen” and who is the thief?

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