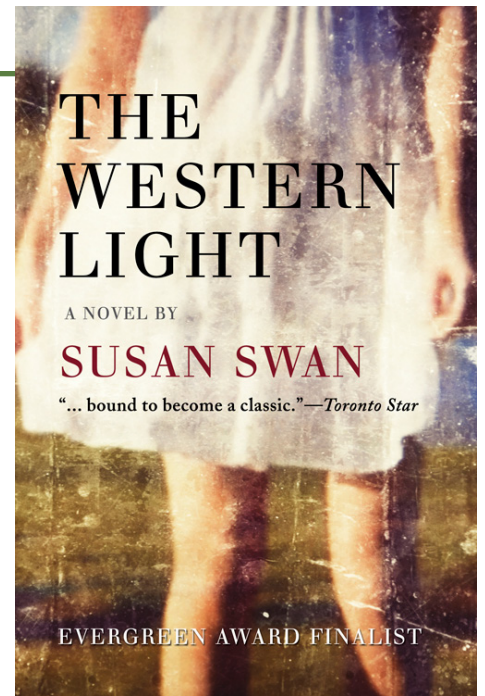


READER'S GUIDE

The Western Light by Susan Swan

INTRODUCING *The Western Light*

Mouse's world is constrained by the people in her life, whose attention to her is lacking in different ways. Enter Gentleman John Pilkie, the former NHL star who's transferred to the mental hospital in Madoc's Landing, where he is to serve out his life-sentence for the murder of his wife and daughter. John becomes a point of fascination for young Mary, who looks to him for the attention she does not receive from her father. He, in turn, is kind to her – but the kindness is misunderstood. When Mary figures out that the attention she receives from the Hockey Killer is different in kind and intent from the attention her Aunt Little Louie receives, her world collapses.



IMPORTANT THEMES

History and Self-Mythologizing

The characters are obsessed with history, be it the town's fixation on John Pilke's history, or Mary's fascination with her great-grandfather. The story of the Vidal oil fortune and Pilke's wife's death are told and re-told, changing each time. In his protestations of innocence, and in comparing himself to Jesus, Pilke mythologizes his past in order to change his present. The story of the appendix, too, is retold and embroidered to explain Morley's connection to John and his mother. The many names Mary takes on—Mouse, M.B., Annabel Lee—are all evidence that she too is trying to alter her story to change her circumstance, be it by trying to prove John's feelings for her, distancing herself from her childhood, or asserting her own "mousy" status.

Femininity and Female Desire

Mary desires attention from two men in her life. From her father, Mary looks for attention and affection from a parent, while from John she looks for the same attention and affection, but from a potential lover. Mary's fixation on her period and the stirring of her sexuality make her look with new eyes upon herself and the models of femininity and female desire around her. Big Louie stands as a representation of the über feminine, with her curves, her feminine accoutrements, and her own troubled love life. Sal's feelings for Morely, meanwhile, showcase how a woman without conspicuous femininity (closer to the way Mouse sees herself) attracts a man. In Little Louie's relationships with her married ex-boyfriend and John Pilke, Mouse can observe desire run amuck.

Truth

Truth in *The Western Light* is complicated by the many versions of reality Mary is presented with. Her book of "true facts" emphasizes the lack of coherence in the stories around her, exemplified by the stories about her great-grandfather and the rumours about John Pilke. Pilke's own insistence on a retrial and the argument that his concussions impacted his behavior problematize the "truth" established at his trial. Little Louie's story is changed by her editor to model this established truth; her editor and newspapers in general shape and control the narrative they espouse as true to the public. Even in Mary's mind, the truth is unclear as her own doubts and questions about truth become debates with Hindrance, a version of herself.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the significance of the Western Light?
2. Why does Sal call Mary “Lady Jane”?
3. Who do you think is the “true” John Pilke?
4. Why does Mary repeatedly reference the space project and the animals sent into space? What does it signify to her and to the text as a whole?
5. Is there a prevailing model of womanhood that Mary can or should follow in the novel?
6. Throughout the novel, we hear different interpretations of why Morley is so devoted to his patients. What do you think is the real reason and why?
7. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being convicted for a crime versus being found not criminally responsible due to mental illness? Given the choice, which would you rather?



ABOUT SUSAN

Susan Swan’s critically acclaimed fiction has been published in twenty countries and her impact on the Canadian literary and political scene has been far-reaching. Swan’s previous novel, *What Casanova Told Me*, was a finalist for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. Swan’s other novels include *The Wives of Bath* (which was made into the feature film *Lost and Delirious*), *The Biggest Modern Woman in the World* (Finalist for the Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Governor General’s Literary Award for Fiction), *The Last of the Golden Girls*, and the short story collection *Stupid Boys are Good to Relax With*. Susan lives in Toronto.