



The Last Painting of Sara de Vos, by Dominic Smith
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, July 2016

Dominic Smith's novel, *The Last Painting of Sara de Vos*, effortlessly moves across three time periods to weave together a fast-paced tale. It has intrigue, mystery, betrayed love—elements of an engrossing summer read.

At the center of the story is an enigmatic 17th century Dutch painting, "At the Edge of a Wood." The painting, the last known work of the first woman painter admitted to the Amsterdam Guild, depicts a young girl, looking down at a group of skaters on a frozen river. The rest of Sara de Vos's masterpieces apparently have been lost through the ages.

The narrative begins in 1957, at the Park Avenue triplex of Marty de Groot. A wealthy Manhattan attorney, Marty is a descendent of the painting's original Dutch owner. He and his wife Rachel have a strained marriage, due in part to their infertility. Marty treasures the painting, which has hung in their bedroom for years.

Rachel often invites offbeat guests to liven up their Upper East Side charity-event dinner parties. However, one evening's elegant soiree ended with a fracas. Later, looking closely at his beloved painting's frame, Marty discovers that the rare work of art has been switched with a forgery. His search for the forger leads him to disillusioned art grad student, Elie Shipley.

The author skillfully moves the story back to Holland in the mid-1600s with well researched historical detail. Sara and her husband Berant, both Guild painters, are devastated by the loss of their daughter during the plague. To combat her grief, Sara immerses herself in creating "At the Edge of a Wood," leaving clues within the haunting scene.

The story moves up to 2000 in Sydney, reuniting Marty, now an elderly man, with Elie, who has become a celebrated Dutch masters art historian and museum curator. Two copies of "At the Edge of a Wood," it seems, have emerged. And two reputations are now at stake.

Dominic Smith cleverly ties up the twisted tale's loose ends, with one exception. But the novel is so carefully crafted otherwise that it's easy to overlook that one flaw.