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# *The Singing of Swans*

A NOVEL

Mary Saracino

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## *Book Group Guide*

### *Summary*

*The Singing of Swans* takes protagonist Madelene Ross on a multi-century journey back and forth through time to reclaim her soul and her very contemporary American life. Along the way she encounters healers who fly through rooftops, herbalists who paint flaming images of Black Madonnas, an ancient priestess who helps rescue a Goddess statue from the clutches of an evil 70 BCE governor of Sicily, and an environmentally compromised lake in need of restoration. Elements of magical realism dovetail with historical lore as this compelling tale of redemption unfolds.

### *Advance Praise*

“Women who fly through the night skies, priestesses who receive initiations, and girls who do vision quests in ancient sacred caves—all this wonderful pagan lore Mary Saracino juxtaposes against an all-too-modern heroine’s chaotic awakening to the deeper purpose of her life. This well-researched page-turner is packed with herbal knowledge, her-story lessons, and a genuine understanding of ancient and contemporary women’s spirituality. Rich and powerful—I hope it will become a movie!”

—Vicki Noble

*Shakti Woman: Feeling Our Fire, Healing Our World  
& The Double Goddess: Women Sharing Power*

“*The Singing of Swans* is a remarkable novel calling—even compelling—us to connect with our own ancestral roots, to seek our own inner wisdom, and to reclaim our own inner voices!”

—Margaret Starbird

*The Woman with the Alabaster Jar  
& Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile*

“*The Singing of Swans* is more than a novel. It combines an immense amount of learning, a great novelist’s ability to weave the present, the past, the far past, and the future into a spell-binding story...and to transmute all this into an offer of life to all of us trapped in contemporary deadening cultures.”

—Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum,

*Dark mother: African origins and godmothers*

“The Roman poet Ovid sang of the beautiful Sicilian lake where Persephone descended to the underworld—a lake now dying from overdevelopment. No siren’s song could be more commanding than this novel centered on that magical lake. Generations of women of the *streghe* tradition—call them pagans, call them witches—join their voices in this tightly-wrought magical chorus.”

—Patricia Monaghan

*The Goddess Path & The Red-Haired Girl from the Bog*

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## *Author Biography*

**Mary Saracino** lives in Denver, Colorado. She is a novelist, memoir writer, poet, and independent scholar of the Sacred Feminine. Mary's first novel, *No Matter What*, was a 1994 Minnesota Book Award Fiction finalist. Her second novel, *Finding Grace*, won the Colorado Authors' League 1999 Top Hand Award in the Adult Fiction/Mainstream Literary category. Her memoir, *Voices of the Softbellied Warrior*, was published in 2001 by Spinsters Ink. Mary's work has been published in a variety of literary and cultural journals, both online and print, as well as in the anthologies *She is Everywhere*, *The Milk of Almonds*, *Don't Tell Mama*, and *Hey Paesan!*

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## *Topics to Consider*

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Madalene isn't close with her immediate family members. Discuss why Madalene feels cut off from her father, her sister, and her brother. How has this alienation shaped Madalene's life?

When Madalene learns the mystery of her grandfather Carl's name change, her view of her family and its history begins to change. What role does her aunt Marie play in Madalene's decision to go to Sicily?

What is Madalene's relationship to her career? Why did she choose the career path she is on?

What behaviors and attitudes does Madalene exhibit that reveal the nature of her relationships with her co-workers? How does this mirror the way she relates to the world in general?

What role does Lake Pergusa play in the novel?

The two lake-related chapters are written in first-person point-of-view while the remainder of the novel is in third person point-of-view. What is the significance of this shift in viewpoint?

Julia and Iside are both strong supporters for restoring Lake Pergusa to its original splendor. What does Madalene learn from their advocacy?

What is the meaning of the novel's title, "The Singing of Swans," with regard to Lake Pergusa?

Rosalina's story is told in reverse chronological order. What is the significance of this?

Mother-daughter relationships play an important role in the novel. How does Madalene's relationship with her mother differ from Ziza's relationship with Carmela? From Ibla's relationship with Fiora?

When Madalene was 10 years old, she lost her mother to breast cancer. How did this loss affect her? In what ways does her transformation heal that loss?

The Divine Feminine & women's spirituality are central themes in the novel. Discuss the historical ways that women's spiritual traditions were silenced. In what ways do they continue to be silenced in contemporary culture?

How do the ancient lives of Rosalina, Ziza and Ibla affect Madalene's contemporary life? What important messages do each of these characters bring to Madalene?

Altered states of reality and magical realism are woven into the fabric of this novel—from Madalene's dreams to Ziza's Benandante night rider battles. In what other ways does the novel invite readers to question the concept of solid, linear reality?

The *Benandanti* and the *Malandanti* wage battles over the prosperity of their community and its people. What role does the struggle between the forces of good and evil play in the novel?

Ibla's tongue is severed, yet she continues to proclaim what is in her heart. How do each of the novel's other main characters find ways to speak their truths despite great challenges?

Fiora and Ibla inspire the members of their villages to unite against the oppression of the *padrone*, Signore Martelli. In what other ways are the themes of justice and equality illustrated in the novel?

The homeless woman with the red beret remains an enigma until the end of the novel. What is her connection to Julia? How does the old woman help transform Madalene's life?

The homeless woman repeatedly asks Madalene, "Gotta match?" What is the underlying meaning of this question?

The name of the homeless woman is identified at the novel's end. What is her spiritual and familial relationship to Madalene, Ziza, Rosalina, Ibla and Fiora?

What role does Madalene's great-grandfather, Vincenzo, play in her transformation?

Past and present are interwoven in this story. In what ways does this continuum act as a spiral rather than a straight line? Why is that important?

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