

READERS GUIDE TO *KILLING FOR KLIMT*

1. The Viennese artist Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) is considered Austria's greatest painter of Art Nouveau. His elegant society portraits were created for the upper crust of the city's nouveau riche and were in constant demand. And yet his enigmatic, nontraditional allegories *Philosophy*, *Medicine*, and *Jurisprudence*, painted for the University of Vienna's Great Hall ceiling, were attacked in the press as "pornography" and "perverted excess." Their aura of pessimism and the nakedness of their floating protagonists/victims incensed the University professors and the public alike. So much so that Klimt bought them back from the state. Were viewers of the panels right to be outraged? Was there a message in the allegories that signaled a new age? Did the growing conceit of Social Darwinism play a role? In May of 1945 all three paintings were set on fire by retreating Nazi forces. Or were they?

2. The opening paragraphs of *Killing for Klimt* introduce the book's main protagonist, Megan Crespi, still agile and engaged at seventy-seven. She is a professor of art history *emerita* and a world expert on Viennese art and music, especially Gustav Klimt and Gustav Mahler. Megan and her best friend, Claire Chandler, come upon the corpse of one of their neighbors as they arrive at the latter's summer house outside Santa Fe. Could the neighbor, who conscientiously waters the geraniums every week when Claire is away, have slipped and suffered a fatal fall? Or had the woman been

murdered? Could the killing have been intended for Claire, the house owner, or perhaps even for Megan?

3. The scene changes to Megan's recent visit to Vienna, where she hears the deathbed ramblings of Klimt's grandnephew concerning a "secret and shameful" panel—the Secretum. It had been stolen from the artist's basement just one night after his death. Is Megan right to think the panel might have been the fourth University ceiling painting, *Theology*, initially begun by Klimt's colleague, but completed by him? Do we know yet what it represented? Could it have been a portrait? Perhaps a nude portrait? Or an allegory? Will this be important to the plot?

4. We meet Jeremy Herring, the American art dealer who ever since the end of World War II has lived in Vienna conducting extremely shady business deals. His major client is an equally immoral character, the billionaire Günther Winter. He is a fanatical fan of the painter Friedrich Hundertwasser. But he is also a secret collector of Klimt, works by whom he has in his bunker-like annex to the Alpenglow hotel he owns in Girdwood, Alaska. Is Winter right to keep his passion for Klimt a secret? What are his business dealings with Jeremy Herring? We learn that Winter and Crespi became acquainted on a cruise to Antarctica which they both happened to take two years earlier. And they like each other. Can their friendship endure the barrage of riveting new discoveries in the Klimt world? Do they become competitors? Is it possible that Winter will become a threat

to Megan?

5. Winter has invited Megan and Claire to visit him at his Alaska hotel. When they take the aerial tram to the top of Mount Alyeska a terrible accident occurs on the viewing platform where a man bumps into Megan and catapults over the railing. Was this an accident?

6. There has been a break-in and vandalism at New York's famous Moderne Galerie Museum for German and Austrian Art. The priceless (well, \$135 m!) portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer has been attacked. Do we have any suspicions concerning who the vandal might have been? Why is Megan brought in on the case and can she be of help? What is the meaning of the mysterious *Kurrentschrift* note left at the crime scene: "Want to trade your Klimt whore for the Secretum?" Do the museum director, Renata Teuer, and the museum cofounder, Lyonel Retter, have any light to shed on the subject? How do they proceed? What is their response to the *Kurrentschrift* note? Will they or won't they consider trading the Adele portrait for an unknown Secretum? Why is Megan being followed?

7. Several chapters find Megan at the Swiss home of the reclusive Danish collector Asta Holm-Ditlevsen. Does she have Klimt's reworking of *Theology*? How do the two women get along? What do they have in common? Might their friendship be dangerous for both? Why do they travel to Helsinki together? And who is Monica Straus, the enigmatic

woman who enters their lives in the café at the Ateneum Museum? What has she done to earn their gratitude and friendship? Are they right to trust her?

8. Megan flies to Paris to visit her dear friend, the Gustav Mahler expert, Henri-Claude de La Granger, where she is suddenly bitten by his dog. What happens when Megan is rushed to a nearby medical clinic? What are her symptoms? Do they suggest something other than a dog bite? How serious is Megan's condition? Should her suspicions be raised at this point in her Klimt pursuit? Has she been perhaps too naïve concerning the surprising things that have recently happened to her?

9. Many of the book's characters have German names. A few are French names, one is Italian. Is there a humorous Dickensian theme evidenced in these foreign monikers?

10. The gay couple Jacques LePingre and Jean-Jean Jolie are introduced into the story line as having something of interest pertaining to Klimt to show Megan. Is she shown everything by them? Does LePingre's effort to sell Klimt drawings in person to Dr. Klug of the Nebehay Antiquariat in Vienna backfire? In what portentous way?

11. Music plays a key role throughout the narrative, from classical to folk. Why is this so? How does it advance the plot? Who are the characters to whom music is so important? Why do the words of one Viennese Heurigen

song have special significance?

12. The city of Leipzig is the key destination for one of the book's villains, Thad Herring, son of Jeremy Herring. Why is he sent there by his father and is his mission accomplished? How would this benefit Jeremy?

13. One of the recurring motifs in *Killing for Klimt* is Nazi confiscation and dispersion of art held by Jewish owners during and after World War II. How did Klimt's *Theology* panel allude to contemporary Jewish history in his own day and age?

14. Toward the end of the book Vienna's huge Central Cemetery is the setting for one particularly ghoulish scene. In what surprising section of the cemetery does it take place? Who is the perpetrator and who are the victims? Do they deserve what happens to them?

15. *Killing for Klimt's* final scenes take place in Girdwood, Alaska, at Winter's Alpenglow hotel annex. Why has he commanded Megan, Renata, and Lyonel to join him there? Why do they agree? When they are taken down to his annex cellar what is the amazing sight that greets their eyes? How does the character of Winter disintegrate before them? Is Peter Ucicky really the grandson of Klimt? What constitutes the denouement of the narrative? Is it a surprising and satisfying conclusion?