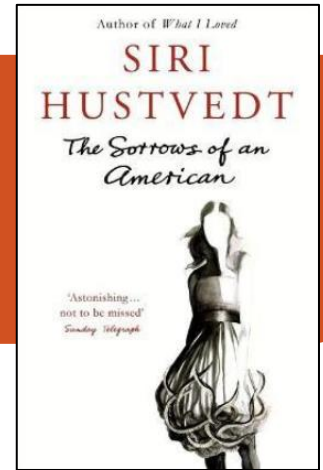




# The Sorrows of An American

## Siri Hustvedt



### Author Background

Siri Hustvedt was born in Northfield, Minnesota, USA in 1955. She is a novelist and scholar and has a PhD in English literature.

Hustvedt has authored a book of poems, seven novels, seven works of nonfiction and numerous essays. She has published papers in various academic and scientific journals and is the recipient of many awards.

*The Blazing World* was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2014 and won the 2015 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Fiction.

Hustvedt is married to writer, Paul Auster and they live in Brooklyn, New York.

### Book Summary

When Erik Davidsen and his sister, Inga, find a cryptic letter from an unknown woman among their late father's papers, they believe he may be implicated in a mysterious death.

Siri Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American* tells the story of the Davidsen family as Erik and Inga unbandage its wounds in the year following their father's funeral. Erik sets about reading his father's memoir hoping to discover the man he never fully understood.

Erik is a psychiatrist dangerously vulnerable to his patients and Inga is a writer whose late husband, a famous novelist, seems to have concealed a secret life. Erik falls in love with his Jamaican-born tenant, Miranda, and gets pulled into the quagmire of events surrounding her, Inga and himself.

Interwoven with each new mystery in Erik and Inga's lives are discoveries about Lars Davidsen's youth - poverty, the War, the Depression - that bring new implications to his relationship with his children.

## Discussion Questions

- ❖ The first line of the novel is “My sister called it the year of secrets.” Later, Inga says, “Secrets can define people.” The novel’s plot is generated by several secrets, which are followed by revelations or confessions. How do secrets, confessions, and the human voice function in the book?
- ❖ Siri Hustvedt has said that her novel is about the past in the present, the ghosts that haunt families from one generation to the next. How does Erik’s immigrant past and Miranda’s relationship to her Jamaican history summon ghosts that remain with them?
- ❖ Reading Lars Davidsen’s diaries, Erik tries to understand how forms of suffering are passed from one generation to the next. What qualities do you think Erik carries from his father and grandfather?
- ❖ Erik’s grandfather and father, his niece Sonia, and some of his patients suffer from trauma (what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder). What meaning does this illness have in the book?
- ❖ What do Erik and Inga finally discover on the trip to meet Lisa? How do the damaged dolls the two women make echo larger themes in the novel?
- ❖ Discuss the very last section of the novel. What has happened to Erik? How do these last pages illustrate the idea that the past is in the present?

## References

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