



The Fig Eater: A Novel

By Jody Shields

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When a young woman's body is discovered in the summer of 1910 Vienna, the Inspector's wife is certain the figs found in her stomach during the autopsy are the clue to the identity of the murderer--for there are no fresh figs in Vienna at this time of year.

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The Fig Eater: A Novel By Jody Shields Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Penzler Pick, May 2000: It is 1910 Vienna, and a woman's body has been found in the Volksgarten. She is Dora-Freud's famous patient. The Inspector (whose name we never learn) is painstakingly trying to put together the circumstances of her death with the help of the principles outlined in the 1901 book *System der Kriminalistik*, the first tome to attempt a psychological approach to understanding crime. The Inspector's wife, Erszébet, meanwhile, is drawn to this murder for reasons she doesn't understand and decides to investigate using her own methodology, derived from the Gypsy folklore she grew up with in Hungary.

What separates *The Fig Eater* from ordinary mystery fiction is the look it offers at detective work in the early 20th century, as the methods used moved from folklore and ignorance to the scientific. Photography of the era often resulted in the loss of fingers. Forensic methods so familiar to us now were unheard of, and the use of psychological profiling to capture killers was a young science unknown by most of the general populace.

Shields introduces the reader to Dora's family and acquaintances, giving depth to the characters only briefly discussed in Freud's case study of Dora. She takes liberties with the historical record (this is, after all, a novel) but creates a plausible scenario of what might have happened while depicting a brooding turn-of-the-century Vienna replete with gorgeous details of food, fashion, botany, and manners. The film rights have been optioned by Miramax, and if the author had her way, she says, it would star Liam Neeson and Judi Dench. --Otto Penzler

From Publishers Weekly

Fashion writer Shields (All That Glitters; A Stylish History) achieves atmospheric suspense in her compelling first novel, set in 1910 in Freud's Vienna. It opens on the discovery of the grisly murder of a young woman, Dora (whose name recalls Freud's famous patient), found strangled in a disreputable part of town. Two separate investigations are launched, only one official. The unnamed Inspector, with his assistant, Franz, begins with the physical evidence at the scene, and later watches for telltale signals from his initial crop of suspects: Dora's mother and father, her lover and his wife. He interprets their reactions by means of his growing familiarity with psychoanalysis, a pioneering work of which is excerpted throughout the novel. Meanwhile, his wife, Erszébet, an amateur painter and Hungarian mystic, begins her own clandestine inquiries with the help of a young English governess, Wally. Their first substantial piece of evidence is the undigested fig removed from Dora's stomach. They become convinced that this is the key to solving the case, as figs cannot grow in Vienna's cold winters and are apparently not imported fresh from warmer climes. Erszébet also believes that Gypsy spells and superstitions might divine knowledge about the crime, while the Inspector searches more or less by the book. These two very different styles of inquiry lead to discoveries that keep the competing sleuths neck-and-neck until the final pages. Though the plot is intricate and the mystery promising, Shields's language can be uneven. Often lushly descriptive, at times the prose is restrained to the point of detachment, somewhat distancing the reader from the characters. A sprinkling of Hungarian legend and Gypsy lore adds another layer of color to Shields's evocation of the era, while literary references, contemporary art, medical theories, occult practices, botanical information and the engaging details of Viennese life build a picture of a city in the throes of turbulent intellectual and social change. 5-city author tour; U.K. rights sold to Doubleday/Black Swan; film rights sold to Miramax. (Mar.)

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From Library Journal

In 1910 Vienna, a police inspector and his Hungarian wife pursue independent investigations of the

mysterious murder of a young woman, whose "last meal" consisted of a single fig. Using scientific and forensic techniques actually detailed from a period handbook of criminology, the inspector mines clues from all available sources. Unbeknownst to him, his wife, Erszabet, of gypsy origins, brings to bear otherworldly techniques to achieve the same end. Along the way, Shields, a former editor and author of fashion books (All That Glitters; Hats: A Stylish History and Collector's Guide) demonstrates substantial talent in the literary mystery milieu. While delivering a unique and engrossing story, Shields imparts a wealth of Eastern European gypsy folklore as well as seductive period detail on photography, arcane medical procedures, and prevailing sexual psychology. This is a masterpiece for all suspense collections.

---*Margaret A. Smith, Grace A. Dow Memorial Lib., Midland, MI*

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Users Review

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Kristina Keene:

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