



# The Savage Garden

*Mark Mills*

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## **The Savage Garden** Mark Mills

The story of two murders, four hundred years apart - and the ties that bind them together.

From the author of the acclaimed national bestseller *Amagansett* comes an even more remarkable novel set in the Tuscan hills: the story of two murders, four hundred years apart-and the ties that bind them together.

Adam Banting, a somewhat aimless young scholar at Cambridge University, is called to his professor's office one afternoon and assigned a special summer project: to write a scholarly monograph about a famous garden built in the 1500s. Dedicated to the memory of Signor Docci's dead wife, the garden is a mysterious world of statues, grottoes, meandering rills, and classical inscriptions. But during his three-week sojourn at the villa, Adam comes to suspect that clues to a murder are buried in the strange iconography of the garden: the long-dead Signor Docci most likely killed his wife and filled her memorial garden with pointers as to both the method and the motive of his crime.

As the mystery of the garden unfolds, Adam finds himself drawn into a parallel intrigue. Through his evolving relationship with the lady of the house - the ailing, seventy-something Signora Docci - he finds clues to yet another possible murder, this one much more recent. The signora's eldest son was shot by Nazi officers on the third floor of the villa, and her husband, now dead, insisted that the area be sealed and preserved forever. Like the garden, the third-floor rooms are frozen in time. Delving into his subject, Adam begins to suspect that his summer project might be a setup. Is he really just the naive student, stumbling upon clues, or is Signora Docci using him to discover for herself the true meaning of the villa's murderous past?

## **The Savage Garden Details**

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# From Reader Review *The Savage Garden* for online ebook

## Heather says

Andrew Strickland is a somewhat unfocused art history student at Cambridge University. His work is rather lackadaisical, drawing heavily on his source material without coming to many original conclusions. He prefers to spend his days drinking with friends and has given little thought to his thesis. After all, it's not due for a year.

Everything changes when Andrew's mentor, Professor Leonard, assigns him to a special summer project. The owner of a famous memorial garden in Tuscany has requested that Professor Leonard find someone to write a scholarly monograph exploring the symbolism in the garden. Andrew accepts the assignment, hoping he's on the track of a good thesis.

The Docci garden, dedicated to the memory of a fifteenth century nobleman's young wife, is peaceful, secluded and filled with classical symbols. Previous scholars have drawn parallels between the garden's statuary and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

As Andrew delves into the garden's meandering paths and shadowy grotto, however, he comes to suspect that the hidden meaning is much more sinister. Could it be that the garden serves as much more than a memorial to a tragically deceased young woman? Is it possible that the carefully chosen references and precisely placed ornaments describe the method and motive of her murder? Do the clues in the garden point to the identity of her murderer?

Signora Docci is the matriarch of the Docci family. She resides in the family villa, built shortly before the death of the nobleman's wife. She is the keeper of the family history, leading Andrew gently towards the truth and doling out information in tantalizingly small morsels.

Andrew's investigation into centuries-old events unearths a much fresher murder hidden in the shadows of the Docci villa. Signora Docci's eldest son, Emilio, was murdered by Nazis on the third floor of the villa during the final days of German occupation. The rooms, sealed off by Signore Docci, are frozen in time. They forever provide a precise snapshot of the rooms as they were the evening of Emilio's murder.

After Signore Docci's death, Signora Docci abided by his wishes, keeping the rooms under lock and key. Like the garden, the untouched rooms contain clues – clues that might lead an inquisitive mind to wonder who really killed Emilio, and why.

In *The Savage Garden*, Mark Mills has created a fascinating and conflicted world. The beauty of the garden, the villa and the Tuscan countryside belies the brutality that lies just beneath the surface. Blood spilled, whether it was 400 years ago or in recent memory, will have its voice.

Mills masterfully reveals each piece of the puzzle, drawing his readers along at an almost leisurely pace. The story reads like a lazy summer afternoon – each new clue is discovered in its own time. Yet the murders add an urgent undercurrent to the narrative, pulling the readers forward until all is understood.

I enjoyed this novel. It was a change of pace from the suspense fiction I read so often. *The Savage Garden* forced me to slow down. The beautiful descriptions, intriguing mystery and references to classical literature demanded that this story be savored rather than devoured. Mills' vivid descriptions brought his people and places to life, allowing me to completely lose myself in his story each time I opened the book.

I can't think of a better way to spend a long, hot summer afternoon!

(Review published in the Burlington Times-News, 7/22/2007)

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## Rachel Burton says

Another book about a house with a dark past -- and another reference to Jane Eyre!

Set in Tuscany in 1958, Adam - an art history undergrad - goes off to stay at a villa to study the sculpture in the gardens for his thesis. As he uncovers the message of the gardens, and subsequently a crime committed 400 years ago, he also begins to uncover a similar crime much closer to home.

Whilst the plot is a little far fetched, this is beautifully written and the descriptions of the Tuscan landscapes, and the gardens of the Villa especially, suck you in. There is also a lot of ancient Greek mythology and references to Ovid's Metamorphosis and Dante's Inferno so I was right at home. The beauty of the writing allows for suspension of disbelief.

My only complaint would be that there is something very modern about the writing so that the reader keeps forgetting, certainly until obviously reminded, that it is 1958, not 2007.

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### **Ana Rodrigues says**

O melhor do livro é ser passado em Itália.  
Achei um bocado cansativo de ler, prendeu-me pouco.

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### **Annet says**

Entertaining read, though not always challenging enough for me and here and there a bit predictable and even a bit boring at times for me. All in all, an enjoyable pretty good read. 3 stars.

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### **TwoDrinks says**

Note to self: you didn't like this book. It is tedious for several reasons. Firstly, I'm not in to Greek or Roman mythology and sadly this is central to the story. Secondly, it's set in 1958 but you keep forgetting because this isn't tied in to the tale enough. Thirdly, what are the three sex scenes about? They seem to be written in a different voice by a different author. Fourthly, the writer is really mean about giving the reader clues to help you piece together the crime (or maybe I missed this because I was almost in a Greco-Roman mythology coma at this point). Fifthly, You could do with reading Dante's 'Inferno' and Machiavelli's 'Prince' to enjoy all the references. I found this a bit pompous (yes, Mark, you went to Cambridge and these are probably the books you read there. YAWN.). Sixthly, the story keeps taking unexpected turns which, because there are few clues in the plot, make you feel duped; as though the plot wasn't well thought out before the author started writing.

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### **Sophie says**

I read this for a book group and hated it. There are so many plot holes and unfinished elements. You get the feeling that the writer read the Da Vinci Code and thought he too could write a thriller based on his knowledge of art history. The result is far from thrilling though; the characters are not believable (particularly

the female ones), the plot is highly contrived and even more unbelievable than the characters and the ending is rushed. On the plus side, the descriptions of the garden and of Tuscany in general are vivid and detailed; they are the book's only saving grace.

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### **Rebecca says**

Too dull to keep reading. It's kind of hard to get excited about a mystery featuring Art History majors obsessing over the arm positions of statues and what they might mean. Maybe there was more to the book but I couldn't find any of it in the first 80 pages.

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### **Jodie says**

While reading this book I was torn between digging up my old art history books, brushing up on my classics, and running off to a villa in Italy, hopefully one with an amazing sculpture garden. The plot unfolded beautifully and with bits and pieces of the classics and art intertwined with descriptions of this amazing garden. An art history lesson tucked into a mystery. Now if I could just find that villa in Italy....

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### **Aredhel says**

At a glance this book is an interesting blend of art, history and mystery. However as you begin reading it, it turns out to be a total disappointment.

First of all, there are shabby dialogues...gosh! I just can't believe, that those phrases, that the main characters employed in their daily life, can be called dialogues at all. For ex,

*"It's different."*

*"What?"*

*"The sound."*

*"How?"*

*"I don't know."*

This is, undoubtedly, a real "masterpiece"! And suchlike dialogues are everywhere!

Then there is the main character, Adam. He had been staying at Villa Docci for just a week but had already become so nosy and sometimes even impolite, that I just wanted to stifle him! One moment that killed me on the spot was when after dinner he asked the hostess' granddaughter to stay at Villa, because it was late and there was enough room for all of them. I just wanted to yell at him: "Stop playing a host! That's not your house!"

Ok, I understand, that his immoderate curiosity was, well, "planned from above", but it looked really artificial and annoying.

And, of course, there are mysteries. Two murders. At first you are really intrigued, but when you reach the middle of the book everything becomes clear and you can just stop there, because nothing really happens later on.

By and large, the premise was really good, but its implementation was poorly done.

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## **Cphe says**

This had the potential to deliver a riveting mystery but fell short for me. The synopsis on Amazon is comprehensive so no point in rehashing the plot although the main character is Adam Strickland not Adam Banting as shown in the synopsis. There are two mystery components on offer which I normally enjoy but the mystery involving Flora and her husband were not well developed. Loved the setting of Tuscany but this paled in comparison to *The Whaleboat House* in terms of mystery and characterisation.

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## **John says**

A literary mystery that had me completely absorbed.

It's 1958 and Cambridge art-history postgrad Adam Strickland, recently dumped by his girlfriend, is persuaded by his tutor that the topic of his thesis should be a memorial garden in the grounds of an Italian villa. Once arrived, Adam discovers the garden is strangely haunting -- that it's by no means just a random repository of sculptures, that everything in it has a meaning and contributes to the telling of a story . . . to, in fact, the confession of a centuries-ago murder. But there's more. There has also been, as Adam deduces, a more recent murder in the villa, one whose perpetrator has used the chaos of the war's end to cover up his tracks.

I found the former mystery by far the more entrancing. In order to solve it, Adam must rely upon his knowledge of Dante and Machiavelli . . . and also upon the contributions of his flaky brother, Harry. At times I got to partial solutions before Adam and Harry; far more often they beat me to it. In other words, the book offered me a great game of deduction. It's also one of the few novels where the map at the front -- in this instance of the garden -- is actually useful, because the garden's geography is also part of the mystery's solution.

Having worked out the riddle of the garden, Adam proceeds to sniff out the truth about the latterday killing. Here he's helped by Harry again and by the villa's ancient doyenne, Francesca, and her hot designer granddaughter Antonella. Adam rather swiftly falls in love with Antonella and she apparently likewise with him; but is it possible that she's manipulating his emotions in order to mislead him about the truth of the family's more recent secret?

As I say, I was captivated by the older mystery, less so by the newer one -- in fact, although I was by no means bored by the latter, I wasn't 100% sure why Mills had included it. Even so, he managed to pull together the two different elements skilfully enough that it was only later that I began to have my doubts.

The book has a couple of really quite raunchy scenes that may upset the prim. The first of these is surprisingly real, in that the participants seem to be gloriously improvising, while the latter is rather staged, as if imagined for a screenplay.

Overall, very much the kind (well, one of the kinds) of book that I like, with an intellectual mystery at its core and some very human characters interacting with each other as that mystery unfolds; it has, too, a smack

of John Fowles's *The Magus*. This is a novel that demands you don't leave your brain at the door.

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### **Cecilia says**

This book uses the magic and allure of Tuscany to its advantage by setting a taut mystery within one of the region's gardens. Mills does a great job of setting the stage for his mystery...which is much more psychological than action. Mills' main character, Adam Strickland, is a Cambridge grad student who is given what appears to be the assignment of a lifetime. While in the gardens of Tuscany which he is to write about, he uncovers a mystery several centuries past. This mystery of long ago leads him to a more recent, equally as brutal crime.

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### **Ana Fernandes says**

Entre as 3,5?? e as 4??

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### **Hayes says**

3.5 stars, more or less, but gets an extra half star for mentioning things I love (in no particular order):

ancient villas in Tuscany  
good wine  
*la fiorentina* (T-Bone steak, Tuscan style)  
The Boboli Gardens  
Siena  
the Dorothy L. Sayers translation of *The Divine Comedy*  
The Bomarzo Gardens  
natural hot springs

I would have been just as happy without the sex, but that's just me.

A decent mystery, nice story telling. Motivations and plot a little thin at the end, but not so as you'd notice overly much.

A nice read which brought back a lot of memories about why I fell in love with Italy.

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### **Blair says**

A quick, easy and absorbing read with a mildly compelling plot and an interesting cast of characters. I wasn't too impressed with the quality of the writing, though; one of the reviews quoted on the jacket makes the rather outlandish claim that it's of Booker nominee standard, but there's noticeable repetition of several

phrases, the sex scenes are frankly terrible, and the dialogue is littered with slang that I don't think would have even existed in 1950s Britain, let alone been understood by a remote community of Italians speaking (conveniently perfect) English as a second language. Still, the book has a satisfying conclusion which ties up all the loose ends of the plot, and it was an enjoyable way to pass a couple of dull evenings.

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