



What Was She Thinking?: Notes on a Scandal: A Novel

By Zoë Heller

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A lonely schoolteacher reveals more than she intends when she records the story of her best friend's affair with a pupil in this sly, insightful novel

Schoolteacher Barbara Covett has led a solitary existence; aside from her cat, Portia, she has few friends and no intimates. When Sheba Hart joins St. George's as the new art teacher, Barbara senses the possibility of a new friendship. It begins with lunches and continues with regular invitations to meals with Sheba's seemingly close-knit family. But as Barbara and Sheba's relationship develops, another does as well: Sheba has begun a passionate affair with an underage male student. When it comes to light and Sheba falls prey to the inevitable media circus, Barbara decides to write an account in her friend's defense—an account that reveals not only Sheba's secrets but her own.

What Was She Thinking? is a story of repression and passion, envy and complacency, friendship and loneliness. A complex psychological portrait framed as a wicked satire, it is by turns funny, poignant, and sinister. With it, Zoë Heller surpasses the promise of her critically acclaimed first novel, *Everything You Know*.

Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize

What Was She Thinking? is the basis of the 2006 film, *Notes on a Scandal*, starring Judi Dench and Kate Blanchett.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Heller's 2003 novel earned tremendous acclaim, including a spot on the shortlist for the prestigious Man Booker Prize. The audio release coincides with the 2007 film adaptation, *Notes on a Scandal*, starring Cate Blanchett and Judi Dench. Sheba Hart—a beautiful and charming bohemian high school art teacher in her early 40s—places her family, career and social status in grave jeopardy through a sexual relationship with 15-year-old Steven Connolly. Sheba's dowdy colleague and confidant Barbara Covett recounts the story from a deliciously twisted perspective steeped in obsession and jealousy. Veteran narrator Nadia May brings nuance to Barbara's voice. The layered structure of the tale itself—a lonely spinster relating the details of a steamy intergenerational love affair secondhand—presents a challenge for the audio format, but one that May meets with finesse. Listeners wanting to cut to the chase and escape into a garden-variety sexual thriller may grow impatient, but those with an appreciation for character-driven drama will not be disappointed. Simultaneous release with the Picador paperback (Reviews, May 26, 2003).

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Barbara Covett, a sixtyish history teacher, is the kind of unmarried-woman-with-cat whose female friends sooner or later decide she is "too intense." Thus when a beautiful new pottery teacher, Sheba Hart—a "wispy novice with a tinkly accent and see-through skirts"—chooses Barbara as a confidante, she is deeply, even rather sinisterly, gratified. Sheba's secret is explosive: married with two kids, she is having an affair with a fifteen-year-old student. The novel, Heller's second, is Barbara's supposedly objective "history" of the affair and its eventual discovery, written furtively while she and her friend are holed up in a borrowed house, waiting for Sheba's court date. Barbara has appointed herself Sheba's "unofficial guardian," protecting her from the salivating tabloids. Equally adroit at satire and at psychological suspense, Heller charts the course of a predatory friendship and demonstrates the lengths to which some people go for human company.

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From [Booklist](#)

Heller's insightful, piercing second novel (her first was *Everything You Know* [2000]) is narrated by Barbara Covett, a lonely older woman who purports to tell the story of her friend's downfall. When Sheba Hart arrives to be the new art teacher at the school where Barbara teaches history, solitary Barbara is immediately taken with her. Though her initial attempt to befriend Sheba is thwarted when Sheba becomes friends with another teacher, eventually Sheba begins to converse with Barbara. Soon, she invites Barbara over to her house to have meals with her family. Barbara is shocked to learn that Sheba is being pursued by a 15-year-old student and scandalized to find that Sheba has given in to his romantic overtures. But for solitary Barbara, her friend's scandalous life^B is a window to a more exciting one, and vicariously she laps up the bits and pieces Sheba shares, imagining or surmising the rest. The novel builds to a stunning ending that ultimately reveals Barbara's true character as much as it shows the depths to which Sheba has fallen. Both a penetrating character study and a sharp examination of voyeurism, Heller's novel is utterly brilliant. *Kristine Huntley*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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