



## Mortal Love

By Elizabeth Hand  
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### Introduction

A woman who calls herself Isolde dies in a fire in an insane asylum in Frankfurt, Germany in the 1870s. Years later, Radbourne Comstock, an American painter, meets Evienne Upstone on a trip to England. She is an alluring beauty who inspired many members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, at times to the point of insanity. In the 1980s on a remote island off the coast of Maine, Comstock's grandson finds the paintings his grandfather made with the mysterious Upstone as his muse. Merely seeing the work unhinges the young artist to the point of hospitalization. In present-day London, an American journalist researching the legend of Tristan and Iseult, meets a powerful woman who almost ruins his life. Alive or dead, mortal or immortal, good or evil, this enigmatic figure completely changes the lives of three men over the course of more than a century.

**Mortal Love** explores the danger and seduction of artistic inspiration; it centers on three very different but parallel tales of men who all encounter a mesmerizing woman == a woman whose mysterious power invigorates their creativity while also propelling them toward madness and death.

### Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been haunted by an obsession? Have you ever been a muse or had a muse yourself?
2. The connection between mental illness and artistic creation has a long history. Discuss the "artistic temperament." Do you think artists rely, to a certain extent, on extreme emotional states? Is it possible to make great art and have a "normal" life?
3. What did Daniel Rowlands see in Larkin Meade? What was his initial response to her?
4. Did you find yourself wanting the involvement with Larkin to end or continue? Did you find yourself, like Daniel, Radbourne Comstock, and Valentine Comstock, drawn in by that which was dark and dangerous?
5. When the fire erupts at Sarsinmoor it seems as though Learmont is more concerned with the art work surviving than Upstone or Candell. Was the asylum simply a way for the doctor to get work out of Candell and others?
6. In the present-day London story, the art collector Russell Learmont is CEO of a pharmaceutical company. Discuss Hand's choice to have an art collector head a company that treats the madness often associated with artistic creation.
7. What would have happened to Valentine Comstock had he not treated his manic-depression?
8. The color green is the thematic palette of *Mortal Love*, and it shows up early when Candell and Swinburne discover a stone wall radiating green light. "It was as though someone had given him a lens that could miraculously illuminate the sea. Within a green world, prismatic things flickered and flew and spun: rubescent, azure, luminous yellow, the pulsing indigo of a heart's hidden valves." Discuss the use of the color in the book.
9. What is Hand trying to convey by continually reminding readers of the power of color in *Mortal Love*?

### About the author

Elizabeth Hand studied playwriting and cultural anthropology at Catholic University. Her first novel, **Winterlong**, was published in 1990 and her contemporary fantasy, **Waking the Moon**, has become a cult classic. **Mortal Love** is her seventh novel. She and her two children live on the coast of Maine.