



Reading Group Gold

The Marchesa

A Novel

by Simonetta Agnello Hornby

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Marchesa* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Marchesa*.



ISBN: 978-0-312-42747-4 | 2008

About the Book

Simonetta Agnello Hornby's *The Marchesa* tells the story of Costanza and her family the Safamitas, a Sicilian family of enormous means and ancient noble lineage. Costanza was an unwanted child. Her mother Caterina had badly wanted a boy, and she rejects the red-headed girl with disgust. Her husband, the baron Domenico Safamita is aware of the likely paternity of the child, but nevertheless loves her as if he were his own. When Costanza's brothers become estranged from their father, all his hopes for the family are pinned on the dutiful and loyal Costanza, who is given the bulk of the vast Safamita fortune. She travels to Palermo, where she meets the marchese Pietro, with whom she falls in love at first sight. Pietro, a wastrel and an orphan, is convinced to marry the rich Costanza in spite of his aversion to her physically, and it is only after years of living together without physical intimacy, that Pietro suddenly develops a passionate love for his wife. Costanza discovers for the first time what it is like to be loved. But the upheavals in the Safamita house do not cease, and circumstances surrounding the couple upset the equilibrium of their happy marriage, and again Costanza is thrown into a crisis where she must discover who she really is, and must learn what it means to truly love herself.

The Marchesa is a rich, intricate drama about liberation and obligation; a story about the bonds of family, and age-old legacies that must be broken; and, above all, it is a carefully rendered portrait of a time and a place, one that offers much to discuss.

Praise for *The Marchesa*

"Charming and engaging, this novel will please readers of family sagas as well as fans of Hornby's first



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book.” —*Booklist*

“In this wonderful follow-up to her acclaimed novel *The Almond Picker*, Hornby again delves into the lives of an Italian family. . . . An engrossing tale of one young woman’s perspective on a dramatic time in Italian history. Highly recommended.” —*Library Journal*

“A voluptuously enjoyable historical novel . . . [its] luscious imagery, emphasis on family mythology and constantly conflicting passions all make for an entertaining read.” —*The Guardian* (UK)

About the Author

Simonetta Agnello Hornby was born in Palermo and studied law in England, where she now lives. She is also the author of *The Almond Picker*.

Discussion Questions

1. Caterina immediately rejects the baby when she finds out it is a girl. Her rejection of Costanza is complete, and except for only brief flashes of affection, she is unable to feel anything but revulsion for her daughter. Why is a male child so vital for Caterina, yet not as important for Domenico? How does Caterina’s situation compare with those of other modern day cultures where male children are preferred?
2. History is very important to the Safamitas and other members of the nobility. On p. 34-5, relatives of the Safamitas make underhanded comments about the disgraceful behavior of the House of Safamita during the Inquisition, almost as if it were something transpiring in the present. Why is history so important for the nobility? Is there a way in which they rely on history for their privileges? Do we have such an attitude in contemporary America? Why or why not?
3. Each chapter starts off with an epigram, a quote and a brief description of the ensuing action in each chapter. What did you think of these? Did they make each chapter seem more suspenseful? What would the story have been like without them? Why do you think Hornby chose to tell her story in this manner?
4. Costanza has felt the lack of love from her mother all her life, and as she started to wonder about romantic love, she asked people around her what they believed love was. On p. 91, Costanza concludes that the love between her parents was stronger than the love between her cousin and his wife who had just gotten married. Why do you think she concluded this? Do you think she is right? Could the bond between her parents really be described as love? Or is it something else? Does Costanza understand love?
5. Throughout the book, we see the action portrayed from the perspective of the Safamitas, but we also see what happens through the eyes of the servants, such as Amalia in her stories about Costanza to her niece Pinuzza, and the gossip among the staff. In what way do the servants perceive events differently from the



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aristocrats? Why do you think Hornby chose to tell the story through the eyes of both groups? How would the story have been different if it were only told from the perspective of the servants, or only from that of the Safamitas?

6. On p.137-8, Maria Teccapiglia, an old family maid, tells Costanza the story of the disappearing island of Ferdinanda, which was discovered on the day of her mother Caterina's birth. The island was claimed in turn by multiple countries until finally it was reclaimed by the sea and thus no one was able to conquer it. Maria concludes that Caterina was like this island of Ferdinanda. Why do you think she makes this comparison? Is this a flattering comparison?

7. When Costanza finally consents to her father's wishes to find a husband, she goes to Palermo, and feels confused and bored by the social life there and cannot take any interest in the eligible bachelors who are presented to her. But on p.190, she meets Pietro for the first time and instantly falls in love with him, even though we find out later that he did not feel the same way about her, and even found her unappealing. Why do you think Costanza fell in love with Pietro so quickly and so intensely? Was this due to her lack of experience? Or do you think that she saw something in him that others didn't see?

8. How are the business affairs of the Safamitas affected by the Tignuso's and the rise of the mafia? What is the function of the Tignuso's as field overseers such that their power began to grow? Do you think that the Tignuso's were loyal to the Safamitas? How does the mafia as it is understood in Sicily during this time period differ from the mafia in contemporary society?

9. Costanza's father told her that she was the only "child of love." What did he mean by that, ultimately? Why were Stefano and Giacomo not children of love? Why do you think that Domenico loved Costanza the most because she was a child of love? Why did this cause Caterina to detest Costanza? Is it because Caterina felt that the circumstances that brought Costanza into the world were a sin, or is it because she felt she failed in her duty to her husband?

10. Why does Pietro suddenly fall in love with Costanza? Is it because in mistaking her for a maid, he is suddenly able to see her as an object of sexual desire? Or is it because Costanza had been able to truly put her father's advice into effect, and had learned to love herself?

11. Was Costanza right to take such an interest in Pietro's illegitimate child? Could she have handled it differently in a manner which still would have had the best interests of everyone in mind? Do you think her reasons for keeping Rura and Antonio around were selfish? Or were they noble? Was Costanza right to conclude that Rura was not depraved, but was just a human being in difficult circumstances, victimized by her lot in life? What would you have done in Costanza's position?

12. Was Costanza right not to forgive her husband when she thought she had seen him with another woman? Should she have been more trusting of Pietro? Was her inability to listen to him a matter of pride, or was she trying to protect herself? How was Costanza's reaction to this different from the way Stefano and Domenico dealt with each other when Stefano wanted to marry the blacksmith's daughter?

13. How do you think that Pietro died so suddenly? Do you think there was foul play, or was it simply



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natural causes? Would there be any reason to suspect Rura, or the mafiosi? Do you think Pietro still hoped for a reconciliation with Costanza when he died? Did Costanza feel a sense of responsibility for his death? Did she die from guilt?

14. How do you think that the Safamita's were portrayed in the novel? Did they seem glamorous? Or did the life of the aristocracy appear to be more trouble than it was worth? Was the story of Costanza's life ultimately a tragedy?