

THE BOTTICELLI SECRET

by Marina Fiorato

About the Author

- A Conversation with Marina Fiorato

Behind the Novel

- “Botticelli and the Art
of Reading a Painting”
An Original Essay by the Author

Keep on Reading

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

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A Conversation with Marina Fiorato

What inspired you to write *The Botticelli Secret*?

The painting, first and last. It's been my favorite picture ever since I saw it in the Uffizi as a teenager. The scale, the color of it, and the intensity of detail really captured my attention, then and ever since. I've always found the figure of Flora particularly captivating; I find her expression deliciously intriguing. She really steps out of the frame. I've always wondered what she is thinking—and this book is my answer to that question.

What does *La Primavera* mean to you? What about it do you wish to reveal to your readers?

I read an article in the *Times* about an Italian academic named Enrico Guidoni who had come up with a new theory about *La Primavera*, and the meaning of each of the figures. There have been so many interpretations of the painting over the years, but this one struck me as being completely convincing. So it formed the spine of the novel. It's meaningful because I think it completely encapsulates that period of the Renaissance in almost every aspect—fashion, belief systems, patronage, symbolism, even botany. As to what I'd like to reveal to my readers the answer is simple: Italy!

You have already written about Renaissance Italy in your previous novel, *The Glassblower of Murano*. How, if at all, was the process of writing *The Botticelli Secret* different for you? Also, in crafting your story about Botticelli, did you stick solely to the facts? Or did you take any artistic liberties?

Writing *Botticelli* was a very different experience from writing *Glassblower*. For one thing, it's all written in first-person, from the point of view of Luciana, the model for Botticelli's Flora. Also, this novel is wholly set in the past, where as *Glassblower* had a split timeline between past and present. One of the major differences was the humor: Luciana is such a flawed, earthy character; the contrast between her demeanor and language and the more buttoned-up, erudite Brother Guido was a rich

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seam of comedy. Luciana's language is certainly more colorful than any I've ever used before—I miss her already!

Because this book is so dependent on its premise, I was much less strict with the facts than I've been with other works. I tried not to be overtly anachronistic—there are no digital watches!—but for *Botticelli* it was more important to stay true to the ethos and feel of the period than to be too picky about dates and details. So some people are in cities they may not have been in, or I've imagined events that may not have happened at all. I've always maintained that historical novels should not be taken as hard fact, but more of a jumping-off point for readers to research the period if what they read sparks their interest in history. I'd be delighted if that happens with my readers.

About the Author



THE PONTE VECCHIO

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Why do you enjoy writing historical fiction?

Why do you think readers are so drawn to historical novels?

L.P. Hartley wrote: “The past is another country, they do things differently there.” I think this is exactly right and it’s at the root of our fascination with historical novels. I find everything about the Renaissance period utterly absorbing; the people dressed differently, spoke differently, ate different things, and had different belief systems. When I open a historical novel I’m taking a trip to a different land, and, as with all journeys abroad, I’m as interested in how much we are similar as in how much we differ. People are people, after all; wherever, or whenever, they live.

Have you ever known a Luciana in your own life? Did you base her character (or others in this novel) on people you know? Please take us through the process of how characters come to life in your imagination—and on the page.

No, I don’t know anyone like her, but I wish I did! I love her so much. She’s a creature of contrasts—ignorant but not stupid, greedy but not grasping, selfish but loving, base but beautiful. The challenge was to try to make the reader like her despite, or perhaps because of, her faults. The key to Luciana’s character is that although she has an internal monologue, that’s also what comes straight out of her mouth. When she does flatter, or posture, it’s immediately undercut by the fact that we know exactly what she’s thinking. It makes her very human. I created Guido by trying to imagine a character who was the opposite to Luciana: he is educated, cultured, reticent, and speaks very wordily and with great propriety—no curse words for him! The novel is built on the tensions between their two personalities. Essentially, they have exactly the same core values. I have not really based any of the characters on people I know, but I’ve tried to make them neither completely villainous nor completely virtuous.



Of all of the cities featured in *The Botticelli Secret*, which is your favorite?

One of the things I'd really like to get across the incredible diversity of all these cities, but that they all have so much to offer. In fact, one of the main messages of the novel is that Italy always was, is now, and ever shall be intensely regional. So in the spirit of that I'd have to confess to a soft spot for Venice, the city of my fathers, with Florence as a close second. If I'm to be allowed two answers, I'd say Venice in the winter, Florence in the summer!

*About the
Author*



MARINA AND HER DAUGHTER, RUBY



“Botticelli and the Art of Reading a Painting”

by Marina Fiorato

“We like to think that we can look back on the past and find it simplistic, or even primitive.”

It’s tempting to think that we’re getting more and more sophisticated as we forge our way through the twenty-first century. We like to think that we can look back on the past and find it simplistic, or even primitive. But despite, or perhaps because of, all of our technologies, the images that fill our world today are actually reasonably simple. Photography must take some responsibility for the erosion of meaning within image—essentially the photograph captures a moment of life and, unless digital trickery is at play, there are no layers of meaning. It is just a literal snapshot of a scene.

During the Renaissance, things were vastly different. I first learned this lesson in a history class at school. We were studying Andrea Firenze’s *Triumph of the Church* and the Church’s use of art as propaganda. The fresco is a glorious and awe-inspiring piece, complete with a Christ in judgment, the gates of heaven, and a complete rendering of the Duomo in Florence. But what caught my teenage attention was a pack of dogs at the bottom of the painting. “Cute dogs,” I said to my teacher. “Not just that, she told me, “look closer.” I did. There were a number of black-and-white dogs fighting with fewer brown ones. The black-and-white dogs seemed to be winning; they were on top of the brown ones, biting them or rolling them in the dirt. “*Domini canes,*” my teacher said. “*Hounds of God.* You’ll notice that the black-and-white ones are overpowering the brown ones. They represent the Dominican monks, who had black-and-white habits, suppressing the Franciscan monks, who wore brown. The two orders often contested on points of theology.”



That did it. From that day forward, I was hooked. I began looking for hidden meaning in every painting I saw. When I first stood in front of *La Primavera*, I was fascinated. I became one in a long line of people to set eyes on that great panel and mutter to themselves, It must all mean something. What are all those flowers, those jewels? What are the trees? Why is Venus raising her hand? Why are flowers dropping from Chloris's mouth? What is Zephyrus's intention? Why does Mercury stir the clouds? And, most intriguing, why does Flora smile? For the next twenty years, I started to look, not just see; and began, in part, to understand that everything—*everything*—has a meaning.

The new millennium—which began with the horrors of 9/11—was a time for looking back, for looking forward, for looking for meaning. Those of faith and those with no faith at all were trying to figure out who they were and where they were going. So too were the citizens of Florence in Botticelli's era. They were heading toward the end of a century; they were fresh out of a war of ideology. Like us, they were dealing with civil unrest and shocking public violence. The Pazzi conspiracy saw Florence's first family brutally attacked in God's house, the Duomo. In the wake of all this turmoil, Botticelli painted his greatest masterpiece for the Medici family.

The head of the family, Lorenzo, surrounded himself with poets and thinkers like Marsilio Ficino and Angelo Poliziano—men willing to embrace Humanism, a philosophical movement that embraced Classical inspiration. Although Humanism wasn't necessarily at odds with Christianity, it's tempting to impose a pagan interpretation on *La Primavera*. The scholar Charles Dempsey, for instance, points convincingly to the pagan symbolism of the *La Primavera*, with particular reference to Venus, the goddess of April for whom the festival of Calendimaggio is still celebrated in Tuscany. Others, drawn irresistibly to that breathtaking, bewildering car-

Behind the Novel

pet of flowers in the painting, have taken to botanical interpretation. Scholar Mirella Levi D'Ancona has done painstaking work classifying every plant in the panel and identifying its significance, drawing some fascinating links to astrology and alchemy (and other so-called "heretical" sciences). And then there's Enrico Guidoni, with his startling notion that political empire building during the time was the inspiration for the painting.

All of these theories, or none of them, could be true. Unfortunately, we'll never know. A few short years after creating his secular masterpieces, Botticelli turned his back on his work and embraced God under the influence of fanatical preacher Girolamo Savonarola. In fact, it's possible that Botticelli was instrumental, or at least complicit, in the destruction of some of his own works in the infamous Bonfire of the Vanities. Botticelli had found another idol, and was seemingly, at the end of his life, deaf to the siren call of the golden world of the Medici.

Opinions or messages within the painting could in themselves, then, be transient. Taking this into account, perhaps *La Primavera* is a fleeting moment in time captured forever, a unity of briefly held beliefs detailed minutely in multiple symbols—as much a snapshot as a photograph.

This whole book is a speculation, an answer to that question I asked myself twenty years ago: Why *does* Flora smile?

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Marina's Favorite Historical Novels

Shield of Three Lions
and
Banners of Gold
Pamela Kaufman

Shield of Three Lions is a wonderful novel featuring, in my opinion, one of the most engaging heroines in historical literature. Alix of Wanthwaite loses her estate in the north of England and goes to petition the King for its return. The only problem is that Richard I is engaged with the Third Crusade. Alix follows the Lionheart all the way to Jerusalem disguised as his male page; what follows is a fantastically rich adventure—comedic, gripping, and romantic by turns. It's so well written that the sounds and smells and pageantry of the Crusades leap out of the page.

The follow-up to *Shield of Three Lions*, *Banners of Gold* sees Alix of Wanthwaite installed as Richard's mistress. Set amongst the courts and castles of medieval France, there's a fascinating power struggle between Alix and the King's redoubtable mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine. This story also features the wonderful Jewish character Bonel, who introduces questions of faith and tolerance into this medieval world.

Katherine
Anya Seton

This book is based on the factual relationship between Katherine Swynford and John of Gaunt. Anya Seton builds a complete picture of medieval England, from the pomp of court to the ignominy of the Black Death and the civil unrest of the Peasant's Revolt. At the center of it all is a beautifully drawn heroine who struggles constantly with the conflict of the desires of her heart and the fate of her soul.

*Keep on
Reading*

The Name of the Rose

Umberto Eco

An intriguing mystery set within an incredibly detailed rendering of the monastic world. Brother William of Baskerville and his novice Adso could be the prototype for the modern “detective and sidekick” pairing, but this is much, much more than a murder mystery. This is not the easiest book to read, admittedly; but the wonderfully rich story investigates heresy, faith, and the medieval ideology in satisfying detail, and I found it provided an invaluable insight into the monastic rule.

A Traveller in Time

Alison Uttley

One of the original “timeslip” novels, this is ostensibly a book for children but has lots to offer the adult reader.

Penelope slips back in time and finds herself at the ancient farmhouse of the Babington family just at the period when Anthony Babington plans to free the imprisoned Mary Queen of Scots. An engaging read, this book features a wonderful description of an Elizabethan Christmas.

My Lady's Crusade

Annette Motley

Back to the Crusades again—one of my favorite periods of history. Perhaps I’ll visit it one day too! This time our heroine, Eden of Hawkhurst, travels to the Holy Land in search of her husband who has gone to fight for the Lionheart. This fascinating take on the Crusades is the only version I’ve read in which a significant portion is seen from the point of view of the infidel. Eden spends quite a lot of the novel in Damascus living in the house of a Saracen Emir, so it’s a much more balanced picture than usual. There’s a wonderfully romantic strand, too, as Eden finds herself in a love-hate relationship with a saturnine knight named Tristan de Jarnac.



Lady of Hay
Barbara Erskine

This is a fascinating read, a story split between modern-day and twelfth-century Britain during which King John was busy subjugating the Welsh barons. It's based on the true story of Matilda de Braose, the eponymous Lady of Hay, who is torn, both emotionally and politically, between a brutal husband, a courtly lover, and her mercurial King. What makes this book so interesting is that the device of time travel is achieved through the medium of hypnotic regression. So as well as being a satisfying read as a straight-up historical novel, it also asks questions about whether we have lived before, as it emerges that many of the modern characters knew each other in the past as well as the present.

The Leper of St. Giles
Ellis Peters

This is my favorite Brother Cadfael mystery. Although it is technically in the crime genre, I mention this book because it deals with the condition of leprosy in the Middle Ages and the treatment of, and attitudes toward, its sufferers. Brother Cadfael himself is, as always, an engaging and sympathetic character—the natural successor to Eco's William of Baskerville—and in this well-told tale he attempts to reunite a pair of divided lovers while befriending a mysterious leper who is not quite what he seems.

*Keep on
Reading*



Reading Group Questions

1. Few works of art are as celebrated as Sandro Botticelli's *La Primavera*. Keeping in mind that *The Botticelli Secret* is a fictional account of the story behind the famous painting, how did reading the book teach you about—or change your impression of—its subject? Has anyone in the group ever seen the painting in person?
2. What do you think of Luciana? Do you like her more, or less, for her brash conduct? Is a person's moral code something that's written in stone, or is it a result of varying circumstances? Do you think your code of conduct would change if *you* were poor and hungry?
3. Duplicity is an important theme throughout the book. How is Guido plagued by a feeling of duplicity? In which other characters do we see (or not see) duplicity? Can there be both positive and negative effects of a duplicitous nature?
4. Despite their differences, why do you think Luciana and Guido are drawn to each other?
5. Guido, as a man of the cloth, believes in God, whereas Luciana, as a woman of the streets, believes only in herself. Throughout the story, both beliefs are called into question. Do you think it's more important to have faith in God, or faith in yourself? Are the two mutually exclusive?



THE MONASTERY AT SANTA CROCE



6. Discuss the nine cities of Renaissance Italy as “characters” in the book. How is each portrayed? And what role does each play in shaping Luciana and Guido?
7. Do you believe that a picture is worth a thousand words? Can a work of art—a painting, or a book—ever truly capture a person’s essence? Did Botticelli’s portrait of Luciana, even as she sat as an archetype, capture hers?
8. The action in this novel is built around several secrets which Luciana and Guido unearth. Discuss the element of mystery in these pages. What types of narrative devices did the author use to keep the reader guessing?
9. *The Botticelli Secret* is about strength and frailty, truth and beauty, art and artifice. It is also about the ties that bind us to family—in all its glory and pain. How important is the notion of family to Luciana? Which relationships, regardless of the standard definition of “family,” seem the most real to you in the book?
10. In the story, Sandro Botticelli is an artist but he’s also a member of a powerful inner circle. What does *The Botticelli Secret* suggest about the role and function of art in the Renaissance era? Was it more or less political than it is today?
11. What do you imagine happens after the end of the novel? What do you think Luciana and Guido’s life will be like now that they are free to be together, and Luciana knows her real identity? What truths do you think she’ll learn about herself?

*Keep on
Reading*

For more special features, photographs, and “secret trivia” about this book, please visit the author’s Web site at www.marinafiorato.com.