

Reading Group Gold

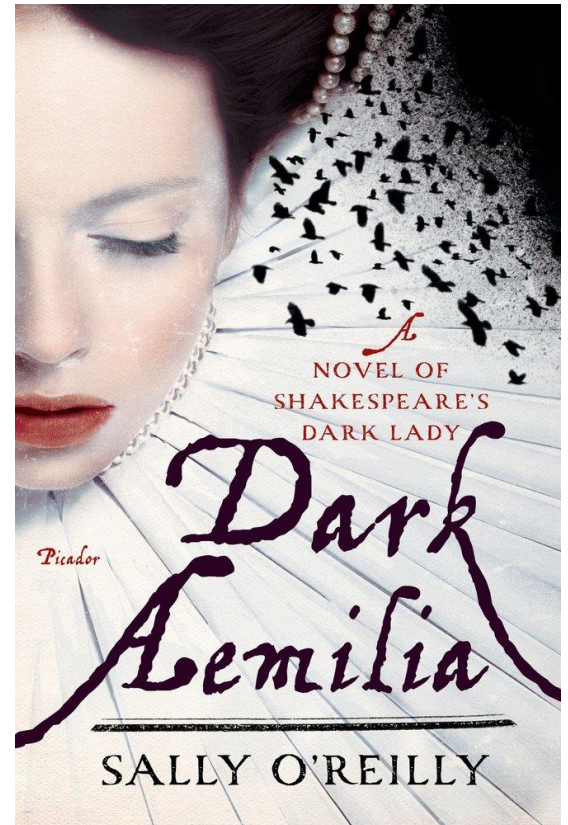
Dark Aemilia

by Sally O'Reilly

Dark Aemilia is the story of a real woman who overcame adversity to become the first female poet to be published professionally in England. The action takes place in the uncertain period at the end of the reign of Elizabeth I and the beginning of Stuart rule. London is violent and fraught with danger, but also a magnet for anyone who wants to succeed and pursue their dreams.

Aemilia falls in love with William Shakespeare, the greatest playwright of all time, but she also has ambitions for her own work. And when her son Henry is born, her love for him makes her all the more determined to impose her will on a world that sees women as the servants and sexual playthings of men. But who are the three sinister women that she meets at Bartholomew Fair, the greatest fair in England, and why do they want to harm her?

Dark Aemilia dramatizes the conflicts between love and ambition and the ways in which women have had to fight for the right to express their feelings in art, and in life.



Dark Aemilia Discussion Questions:

1. Aemilia fights for her right to be taken seriously as a writer, and she challenges authority at the very highest level. She is also contemptuous of some of the men she meets. Would you call her a feminist?
2. Aemilia has four lovers in this story. How much say does she have in this? And do you think there are choices that she makes that are unwise, or immoral?
3. Aemilia is clearly an ambitious woman, and this drives some of her actions. Do you think she goes too far? How do her actions relate to the story of Macbeth? Which of the characters in the story “overreach,” as Faust and Macbeth do? What other references to the play *Macbeth* are there in the novel?
4. Female friendship is important in the novel. But it is not treated in a simplistic way. What do we learn about the relationships between women at the time? And what does the conflict between Aemilia and Anne Flood tell us about the society they are living in?
5. Is the witchcraft and magic in the book “real,” or is Aemilia imagining things? Is it necessary to make an absolute judgement about this? Is it likely that someone living in Early Modern England would believe in the occult?
6. There is some mature content in this story. Why has this been included, and does it relate to the experience of sexual obsession conveyed Shakespeare’s sonnets? How is the contrast between sexual love and maternal love explored?

7. Do women artists in the modern world face any of the problems that confront Aemilia? What kind of issues might these be, and have you come across any specific examples? (This might apply to the arts, but also to society in general.)
8. Is it plausible that a woman in the seventeenth century would have been so determined to save the life of her son? Did people feel differently about parenthood, given that they had more children and that infant mortality was so widespread?
9. How important is setting to the novel — the contrast between light and darkness, for example? How is the contrast between Whitehall Palace and the world of ordinary Londoners conveyed? Does this differ from other books about the period?
10. Anne Flood is very proud of her appearance and often dresses inappropriately. Elizabeth I seems to be imprisoned by her own clothes. What is the symbolic function of clothes and appearance in this novel? How does this relate to the world of the stage?
11. Joan is a “penitent witch” seeking to make amends for past wrongdoing. By the time her life ends, has she done enough to redeem her soul? Does her penitence relate to Aemilia’s story, and if so, in what way?
12. All the characters in the novel are Christians. So why do some of them meddle with demon-summoning and other black arts? How does Joan’s magic relate to the “higher magic” of Simon Forman?
13. Aemilia is in a unique position, having being educated by in the household of Lady Susan Bertie and at Court. How does this affect her point of view? How does this set her apart from other women?
14. Aemilia either dreams or remembers seeing Lilith’s eye through the keyhole of the door to Bedlam. What do you think this means?
15. Could Will and Aemilia have lived together as man and wife if circumstances had been different? Would their marriage have worked?
16. How does this story relate to the debate about whether or not William Shakespeare is the author of the plays that were published in his name?

About the Author

Sally O'Reilly has received numerous citations for her fiction, which has been shortlisted for the Ian St James Short Story Prize and the Cosmopolitan Short Story Award. A former *Cosmopolitan* New Journalist of the Year, her work has appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, the *Evening Standard*, and the *New Scientist*. She teaches creative writing at the Open University and the University of Portsmouth in England. *Dark Aemilia* is her U.S. debut.



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