One Summer Day in Rome

Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for One Summer Day in Rome. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading One Summer Day in Rome, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Discuss this description of Rome, from the prologue: “Rome so swirls with stories of saints and sinners, martyrs and monsters, lovers and fighters, that she compels you towards her, like gravity. If you linger long enough amongst her piazzas and monuments, you will find yourself simultaneously lost and found, swept away by her grand cavalcade of history, captivated by her crumbling beauty. Built of grandiose and preposterous dreams, Roma lays bare the delusion that reality is shaped by realists. No one leaves her unaltered. Part of you always loves her.” Have you been to Rome? What did you think of the novel’s portrait of the city? How does the novel “lay bare the delusion that reality is shaped by realists”?

2. The narration is full of historical anecdotes about Rome. What do these asides add? What is their relation to the more intimate love stories?

3. Each chapter begins with an epigraph. What is the cumulative effect of all of the quotations? Did you have a favorite?

4. The narrator describes himself as a “Quantum Mechanic” and a “Genius of Love.” What does his role in the characters’ stories suggest about the novel’s view of love? How important is fate in the characters’ relationships?

5. The characters in this novel are deeply flawed, and they often treat one another badly. Did you find them likeable? Do you think it’s important for characters to be likeable?

6. Discuss this passage, from Alice’s first chapter: “She could hear New York… although she felt reasonably certain that the city was in fact actually there, she had often suspected that another city, very close but obscured by some deficit in her perception, also existed. In that Other World, she could not be judged
or derided for being clever or dull because the rules...did not apply. In that place, there simply were no rules. How she longed to go there sometimes.” How does Alice’s relationship to rules change over the course of the novel?

7. When Alec tells Meg he thinks moving to Rome might make them happier, she replies: “That’s just some vacation fantasy...People the world over go somewhere exotic or exciting or relaxing and think, ‘Oh if I just stay here, everything will be different.’ Trouble is, wherever you go, there you are. And sooner or later you’re leading the same old dreary life. Only now you’re in Rome, not California.” Do you agree? How important is place in determining one’s happiness?

8. Meg tells Alec, “That’s how we operate as adults in the world without killing each other. We pretend!” What is each of the characters pretending at the start of the novel? How does that change as their stories progress?

9. Alec says that because he has feelings for Stephanie, he must no longer have feelings for Meg. Do you think there is truth to that, or can you have feelings for more than one person at once?

10. Discuss this description of Alec and Meg’s relationship: “Once he had possessed her, it slowly dawned on him that he could not intoxicate himself with another person and let that be his life. Over the years, he had let her know of this epiphany in infinitesimally small increments. A restrained smile. An irritated curve of the lips. A brief but exasperated squint. Meg had collected all of his feedback and dutifully collated it. In response, she became more dramatic, more outrageous, more captivating. The more he withdrew, the harder she worked.” How does their relationship evolve over the course of the novel?

11. When he is trying to get back together with Meg, Alec says he doesn’t want happiness—he wants her. What is the relationship between love and happiness for each of the characters?

12. Alice asserts: “You don’t fall in love...You choose to love a particular person. Humor, brains, eye-color, smile, there’s a huge list of things that click, that tell you this is the match for you...Magic and voosh are there but they’re on the list...They’re part of the things you consider.” What do you think?

13. Constance tells Lizzie what Henry thought of the afterlife: “He said that people left but that love remained.” How is that statement borne out over the course of the novel?

14. Lizzie and Constance often joke about being “scary old ladies,” and Lizzie is hesitant to begin a relationship with Horatio because “she was an old lady”:
“This evening’s flirtation was surprising enough; she should be grateful and move on. One last hurrah before the curtains closed. To make anything more of this unexpected delight would be ridiculous. And foolish. And potentially humiliating.” It’s rare to see older women cast as romantic heroines. How does this novel defy our cultural stereotypes about love and age?

15. The blue tile plays a significant role in all of the narrative threads. The tilemaker describes the color by describing the ocean: “It appears to be blue… The water herself filters out the other colors but the blue remains. The blue light travels down and reflects off the white sand. The waves of light dance with the waves of the ocean. They are in a marriage, you see, of light and form.” Discuss the importance of the blue tile and its relationship with the narrator.