

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Before Romeo
loved Juliet, he loved

FAIR ROSALINE



A Novel

“Irresistible. An excellent spin on a
timeless classic.” —JENNIFER SAINT,
Sunday Times bestselling author of *Ariadne*

NATASHA
SOLOMONS

Reading Group Guide

1. What are Rosaline's objections to entering the convent? Would any of her other options allow her to have all the things that she wants?
2. What initially attracts Rosaline to Romeo? How does he initially compare to her idea of "A Montague"?
3. Describe Rosaline and Tybalt's relationship. How does their time apart change their childhood closeness?
4. How does the feud between the Montagues and Capulets color Rosaline and Romeo's early interactions? How does she feel about keeping their identities secret while out together and the truth of their relationship to herself?
5. What does Romeo want from the girls he seduces? How does Rosaline disappoint those expectations?
6. How does Tybalt react when Rosaline finally tells him the truth of her situation? What did she hope to gain by telling him?
7. Rosaline struggles to get Juliet to see the danger that she is in and knows that she was just as stubborn in Juliet's position. Can you

think of a character whom Rosaline might have respected as she eventually breaks through to Juliet?

8. What role does pride play in the book? In what scene does a character's pride cause the most harm?
9. How do Paris and Romeo compare in their pursuit of Juliet? Are their goals the same or different? Do you agree with Rosaline that Juliet's parents are to blame for the way the two men made a victim of Juliet?
10. At the beginning of the book, Rosaline's freedom is the virtue she holds most dear. By the end she sacrifices it to earn the abbess's help. What changed for her?

A Conversation with the Author

Was it daunting offering a new take on a story as well-known as *Romeo and Juliet*? What was most exciting about developing an alternate interpretation?

I was so daunted! It's one of Shakespeare's best loved plays and everyone knows the story even if they've never read it or seen it performed. Also, I took a firm, unequivocal stance on the play and the character of Romeo and I knew from the beginning that some people would really resist my interpretation. The more books I've written, however, the braver I've become. I'd prefer to write a novel that some people absolutely adore and feel really passionate about, than a safer story everyone likes. I've learned to be bold. There was only one moment when the thought of readers' reactions did wobble me, so I spoke to a good friend who's a well-known Shakespeare director. He told me to think like a director of a radical production, not like an author, and to imagine my book with its two covers like the wings of the stage: whatever happens on my page, as on the stage, belongs to me. This novel is my vision, my production. That's not to say that others can't exist too. That's the joy of Shakespeare—there are so many interpretations. We reinvent him for every age.

How did you first become interested in Shakespeare's work? What has been the most surprising thing you've learned from your studies of his plays and historical context?

I read Shakespeare at school, but I don't think I really connected with his work properly until I played Hermione in *A Winter's Tale*. I was seventeen and it's a story of marital jealousy, loss, and the hope of redemption. An unlikely choice for a school play but I loved it. I also had to wear a massive pregnancy belly and when my granny saw me in it (she hadn't been warned), I heard her scream across the theatre.

I find it useful to think of Shakespeare as a jobbing writer and actor as well as a genius. His plays are marvels of the English language. We talk and think in his words and see the world the way we do in part because of him. Yet, while his genius is unquestionable, he was also under pressure to produce content quickly for a demanding and varied audience. He reuses turns of phrase and ideas. Partly because, as like all writers, the same themes fascinate him again and again, but also because he was often short on time and under pressure.

Rosaline first balks against the loss of her freedom, but then chooses it in service of the greater cause. What do you think her definition of "freedom" looks like now?

The 'freedom' she has in the convent is the freedom not to have her life dictated and controlled by a man. She's free from the dangers of childbirth. Raising children and running a household took almost all of a women's time, and so she had very little left for intellectual pursuits. Rosaline will have a creative and intellectual freedom. But, there is also the sense that she has made a sacrifice for Juliet. She loves her so much that she was willing to make that choice, but there is a cost. Rosaline is still forced to relinquish much of the world.

Speaking of freedom, the conversation with the abbess hints that there was much more than met the eye going on in the cloisters of

nunneries. How did nunneries serve as an alternative society for women?

In Italy, families would deposit their unwanted daughters in convents. Marriage required a significant dowry and to marry off multiple daughters was incredibly expensive. While poor women were needed as labour, unmarried wealthy women proved troubling for their families. They wanted them safely and cheaply kept away from mischief and the tempting lure of men. The convents required a dowry, but a much smaller one than a groom would expect. If a father or a brother paid enough to the convent, a nun could experience a relatively easy life in a furnished, comfortable cell and she was released from the most exacting parts of convent life—like the very early or late prayers—or more strenuous work. But even if she was lucky enough to afford the material ease, she still remained sequestered from the world.

You chose to have Rosaline save Juliet, sparing her from the tragedy. What do you imagine might be next for Juliet? How will she need to change to escape the romantic notions that led her into the Capulet tomb?

I imagine Juliet spending some time in the convent with her cousin Rosaline and growing up in peace, un-harassed by any more Romeos. I don't think she needs to change—we all make mistakes while growing up, it's how we learn and develop as people. Juliet made a mistake with Romeo but she was not even fourteen. I'm not sure it was so much romantic notions that led her to fall for Romeo's nefarious charms. He seemed to offer an escape from her forced marriage to Paris. She felt trapped and he apparently showed her a way out. Only it was really the same option: marriage and sex with another (older) man. In the convent, she can have

time to decide who and what she wants to be—if she wants to remain in the convent or be with a man one day. But she can make that decision as a grown woman and not as a child. It will be her choice to make.

What is the most satisfying part of a story for you to develop, and why?

The most satisfying part of writing *Fair Rosaline* was ensuring that my story wraps around the original play. I loved Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* and I wanted my novel to work in a similar way where we feel the edges of Romeo and Juliet just off the page. I include some of the same scenes but the angle is different. When you go to the theatres and see *Romeo and Juliet*, I want you to imagine the events of *Fair Rosaline* happening off in the wings, only just out of sight.