

## THE ROSSETTI LETTER

### Readers Group Guide

#### Introduction

In seventeenth-century Venice, Alessandra Rossetti becomes entangled in a dangerous political conspiracy when the Spanish viceroy of Naples and the Spanish ambassador to Venice devise a scheme to bring the Venetian Republic under the dominance of Spain. Historians know that Alessandra wrote a letter to the Venetian Council exposing the plot, but none have ever been able to determine how she learned of the conspiracy or what became of the young courtesan after the treachery was revealed.

Claire Donovan, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University, is researching Alessandra's role in the Spanish Conspiracy of 1618. Divorced and broke, Claire has doubts that she will ever make it to Venice to complete her thesis. When she finds out that an academic rival is researching the Spanish Conspiracy for a book, she reluctantly agrees to her best friend's suggestion that she chaperone a wealthy, spoiled teenage girl on an Italian vacation. Claire is soon on her way to Venice, where Cambridge University professor Andrew Kent is lecturing on the conspiracy at an academic conference. If Kent's theory that Alessandra was a co-conspirator of the Spanish proves right, it will destroy Claire's work – jeopardizing not just her dissertation but her future in academia.

*The Rossetti Letter* weaves together Claire and Alessandra's stories in alternating narratives, bringing to life Venice both past and present. As Claire races to discover the truth about Alessandra's role in the conspiracy, she explores Venice with a beguiling Italian man, matches wits with worthy adversary Andrew Kent, helps a troubled young girl find her way, and learns a thing or two about bouncing back from heartbreak and living *la dolce vita*.

#### Questions & Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the novel's structure. Did the alternating chapters between the past and the present enrich the reading experience? How so? In what ways does this technique allow the author to heighten the suspense in the story?
2. Claire's dissertation "filled her thoughts so completely that sometimes it was a shock, at the end of the day, to find herself returned to her mundane, uneventful, twenty-first century existence" (25). Completing her dissertation is an important milestone in Claire's career, but is she in a sense using the past to avoid living in the present? Why has Claire, as her friend Meredith claims, shut herself away?
3. Claire's first impression of Gwen is a negative one, and it's reinforced by the teen's inappropriate behavior during the flight to Venice. How does Claire come to change her opinion of Gwen during their time together? What does Gwen gain from her trip to Venice and also from Claire's influence?

4. When Alessandra finds out she is nearly penniless, why does she choose to become a courtesan rather than opt for one of the more traditional resolutions to her predicament, such as entering a convent or living with relatives? Is it possible for modern-day readers to fully understand the constraints placed on women during this time period? Why or why not?
5. "Claire wondered how Alessandra felt about being a courtesan. She preferred to think that her heroine was happy, or at least complacent, knowing that she'd made the best of what life had offered her. But was it possible to be happy living the life that Alessandra lived? Or even content?" (152). Given what you know of Alessandra, how do you suppose she would answer these questions?
6. When Antonio first meets Alessandra, he is impressed with her "incredible self-possession" (161). What makes Alessandra, as Antonio acknowledges, different from the other women he has known? What compels him to confide in Alessandra the story of his ill-fated love and his father's death, something he has kept to himself for nine years?
7. Discuss the author's depiction of Venice, both in the seventeenth century and the present. How integral is the Venetian setting to the story? How does the author's use of historical facts about Venice color the narrative? Is this an aspect of the book you enjoyed? Why or why not?
8. "I did what I had to do," La Celestia says (322) about being pressured to arrange Alessandra's introduction to the marquis of Bedmar. Is La Celestia as much of a political pawn in this situation as Alessandra? Do you have any empathy for La Celestia? Why or why not?
9. At her manservant Nico's suggestion, Alessandra writes a letter detailing what she knows of the Spanish ambassador's plot and sets out to deliver it to the Great Council. What motivates Alessandra to take this course of action—fear for her own safety, to avenge La Celestia's murder, a sense of civic duty, or something else?
10. What does Claire see in Giancarlo? Is she merely attracted to his good looks? Why does Claire decline Giancarlo's invitation to return to Venice after she reunites Gwen with her father in Paris?
11. What prompts Claire to ask Andrew for help in translating Alessandra's letters? Does this encounter change their relationship personally as well as professionally? Why do you suppose Andrew remains in a romantic relationship with a woman as unbecoming as Gabriella, particularly after her behavior toward Claire over the diary taken from the library?
12. "Our job is to discover the truth, not make it up," Andrew says to Claire. Ultimately, what benefits Claire more in uncovering the truth about Alessandra's role in the Spanish conspiracy: her training as a historian or her intuition?
13. During his second lecture at the academic conference, why does Andrew call Claire to the podium and invite her to deliver the lecture? Did you find this to be a surprising

gesture given his contentious history with Claire? Why does Claire at first refuse to take the stage when Andrew is offering her the very thing she came to Venice to seek— recognition for her work?

14. Antonio is ordered to kill Alessandra, but instead he devises a ruse to fake her death. What reasons does he give her for doing this? What is the tipping point that finally compels Antonio and Alessandra to acknowledge their love for one another?
15. Alessandra writes the letter that Senator Silvia dictates, believing that doing so will save Antonio's life. Did she make the right decision? What, if anything, could she have done different?
16. Discuss the novel's ending. Were you surprised at the direction Alessandra's life takes, particularly her relationship with Paolo? What instances in the story foreshadowed this turn of events?