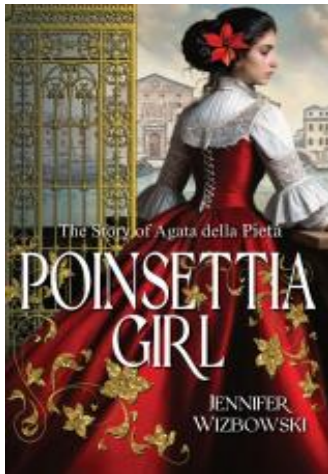


Poinsettia Girl: The Story of Agata della Pietà

by Jennifer Wizbowski



About the Book

Venice, 1710

POINSETTIA GIRL is based on the true story of Agata della Pietà, an orphan musician of the Ospedale della Pietà.

Ten-year-old Agata's world is shaken at the sudden death of her mother. Left only with her egregious father, a working musician in Venice, her ailing grandmother sends her to the well-known orphanage, hidden from everything she's ever known.

Agata auditions for the conservatory-style music school where music is both salvation and spectacle. Hidden behind ornate metal grates, adorned with poinsettias in their hair, the singers are veiled in mystery, their ethereal music drawing noble audiences, including gilded young men who see them as treasures --- not only for their sound but as coveted marriage prizes.

Just as she reaches the height of her musical journey, a marriage proposal from someone outside the audience tempts her with the promise of a new life --- a return to the old neighborhood she's longed for and a home she barely remembers. Torn between the music that has defined her and the hope of belonging to a family, Agata must confront the most profound question of her life: Is her purpose rooted in the music that shaped her, or in the love that might free her?

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Discussion Guide

1. Community plays such an impactful role in our lives. In 18th-century Venice, people would have barely strayed from

the community they lived in, sharing a well and crops at the center of their campos. How did Agata's community in San Canciano compare to the community you live in today? How is it different, better or worse?

2. There are three churches that are a part of Agata's life throughout her childhood and young adult life. What is the significance of them to her story? What do you think they signify to her?

3. One cannot discuss Venice without considering the impact of water on its design. What themes are representative in water as they relate to Venice as a whole and the Pietà in this narrative?

4. Agata's father, Pietro, was a wounded soul. What do you think contributed to his overall attitude?

5. Did Guilelma make the right call in removing Agata outside of the influence of Pietro? Do you think she knew what was happening underneath her own roof?

6. Agata suffered a traumatic loss, losing her mother at such a young age, but she had many women across her lifetime play a mother figure. Discuss who you think those women were and the impact they had on Agata personally.

7. Guilelma (Nonna), Benedetta and Alba were a connected trio. Does their dependence upon one another echo current relationships in your life? Is that still attainable in our more disconnected world?

8. The Pietà was run like a nunnery, its schedule mimicking the office of the hours. What do you think it would be like to live in a world where spontaneous conversation was not only discouraged but unwelcomed? How would you handle that, and how do you think it affected the women and girls and their capacity to grow and heal within the walls of the Pietà?

9. Friendships play an important role on either side of the green door, particularly kinship among women. Describe some of the aspects of friendship outside the green door and compare them to the ones inside the Pietà.

10. Discuss the impact of light and dark imagery, especially inside the Pietà. How does it differ from our modern-day relationship with day/light versus night/dark?

11. Due to the six-month-long festivities and allure of Carnival, late Renaissance Venice had a bit of an abandoned child issue. They ran four major Ospedales across the city in response to that. Do you think the overall concept of the Ospedale della Pietà was a good one? Why or why not?

12. The man in the red jacket is presented as a bit of a mystery to the reader, but Antonio Vivaldi was historically one of the Pietà's biggest contributors and definitely the most celebrated musician in Venice's history. As a modern reader, do you think the role and impact of men was overplayed as hinted at in the novel? Or do you think the women may have been more subdued and controlled? (ie, mastras, prioress, etc.).

13. Have you either been to a concert or sung *Gloria in D* by Vivaldi? (someone cue music!) It is often sung at Easter in church services/masses. Did you realize that all the parts were written for all women to play and sing? Would it have

sounded different sung by all women?

14. In the early 18th century, the common man would not have been exposed to music outside his own propensity to sing. Interestingly, the Catholic Church did not even have choirs with women in them at the time. What layers of response do you think the general populace would have had in response to not only girls singing, but girls performing and, further, performing in church? Considering that, do you think the Poinsettia Girls were considered a commodity of Venice, or did the favor of educating the girls with such skills outweigh that?

15. Considering the societal norms in the above question, discuss how you think a Poinsettia Girl might view herself.

16. The women who performed in the Coro had a dowry saved from their years teaching so that they would have something to offer if a marriage proposal came in. On the exterior, it sounds positive that an orphan child raised in confinement could have the opportunity to marry and manage her own home. But on the other side, do you think the idea of someone choosing a woman from the sound of her voice is sexist and/or immoral? Is it possible for a healthy marriage to come out of such a circumstance?

17. How do you feel about the rule that stated a Poinsettia Girl was not to use her musical skills once she left the Pietà or married. Is this a fair ask? Why do you think they would require this?

Author Bio

Jennifer Wizbowski spent her childhood days lost among the spines of her favorite books. Inspired by the daffodil fields of Wordsworth and the babbling brooks of Shakespeare, she earned her bachelor's in English literature, a minor in music, and a secondary teaching credential, then wrote freelance for local business journals, taught in classrooms, and authored a Teen and Tween column for a parent magazine --- all while raising her family.

As those years ended, she knew it was the right time to pursue her lifelong aspiration of bringing her own books to life. She now devotes herself to illuminating everyday women's stories often lost in the shadows of history, revealing how they became heroines of their own time and place.

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