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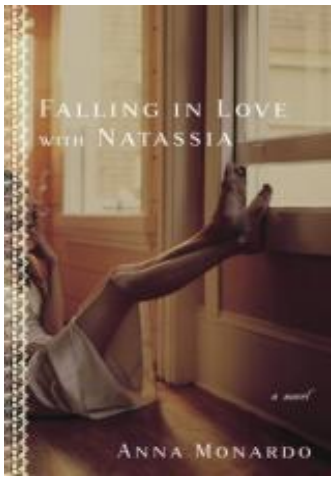
Falling in Love with Natassia: A Novel

by Anna Monardo



About the Book

Mary and Ross were in Rome on a junior-year-abroad program when they had their baby, Natassia, who was conceived on a dare: "Do it with no birth control," another couple had challenged. "We'll do it if you do it . . ."

Mary and Ross are unmarried, ambitious, and way too young, and though smitten with their daughter, they eventually?and with regret?abdicate responsibility to Ross's parents, who raise Natassia in the intellectually stimulating (and seemingly loving) atmosphere of their Manhattan apartment. Fifteen years later, 1989, Natassia is an honors student and a violin player. Despite the absence of her mother, a world-class modern dancer who survives by living in the moment, and her father, a physician in the Pacific Northwest, Natassia is thriving?until her mysterious romance with a man she will not identify derails her so profoundly that her parents, grandparents, and even her godparents, Nora and Christopher, must come together to save her. A dancer, a doctor, two book editors, a painter and a psychotherapist?all are forced to turn away from and also draw upon the creative and intellectual endeavors that consume and define them. Struggling to buoy Natassia, her guardians sink along with her into the deepest darkness.

Mary, a Korean war orphan, must learn from step one how to provide the mother love she herself never received; indeed, the daughter's breakdown sparks the mother's coming-of-age. Ross, still in love with Mary after ten years' separation, must face the consequences of his obsessions. And Nora and Christopher, burdened by a decades-old secret, use desperate measures to save Natassia?and their marriage.

Within the intimate universe of one unorthodox family, **Falling in Love with Natassia** explores the blurred lines between love that heals and sex that harms. These characters will shock you with how forcefully their hurt hearts demand restitution; they will mystify you with the paths they choose as they move toward recovery and redemption.

Discussion Guide

The story of a young woman in crisis and the family and friends who must save her, **Falling in Love With Natassia** is an exploration of the blurred lines between love that heals and sex that harms.

Steeped in psychological insights into controversial questions about love and sex, **Falling in Love With Natassia** is ideal for reading group discussions.

1. There is much discussion throughout the novel about parenting. Mary, in particular, is concerned with whether or not she is a "good mother." Her mistakes are fairly obvious, but are there moments when Mary truly is a good mother? Do other characters demonstrate moments of good parenting? If so, what qualities do they demonstrate in those moments? In your mind, what is good parenting? Good mothering? Are "moments" enough?

2. The novel is an interweaving of several different love relationships: Mary and Ross, Nora and Christopher, Natassia and the B.F., Lotte and David, Christopher and Denise, Denise and her late husband. Are there others? Which are the true "love stories?" What makes a love story? There are conventional and unconventional couplings throughout the book. Compare them. What does the conventional offer that the unconventional does not, and vice versa?

3. Natassia grows up with several adults invested in her well being, and yet she slips through the cracks. Her guardians fail her in many different ways, but do they manage to redeem themselves? If so, how? If not, where is their redemption incomplete or insufficient?

4. Natassia is described as being exceptional. Do you think she is? What makes for an exceptional child?

5. Natassia must repeatedly accommodate herself to the needs and demands of the adults around her. Talk about the tension between a child's needs and a parent's needs. Is there a balance? How can balance be achieved?

6. How would you access Natassia's situation at the end of this story? What is her prognosis for a successful adulthood? What kind of success do you imagine for her future? What kind of future do you imagine for Natassia?

7. Mary describes Christopher and Nora as "the best married people we know, except for Lotte and David." Both marriages are longstanding, but would you call them successful? Whether you believe these marriages are "good" or not, what factors do you feel make them "work."

8. These characters make some difficult choices: Mary's decision to let Natassia be raised by Lotte and David. Christopher's choice to call Denise, Denise's choice to accept Christopher, Nora's choice at the end of the novel to "try" to accept Donby. Do you see these choices as inevitable? What do you think drives each of the characters to make the choice he or she makes? When in your own life have you made a choice that was difficult and that now seems inevitable?

9. The course of Mary's life is determined largely by her involvement in dance. In fact, "dance was and had always been Mary's only mother, the thing that took care of her, body and soul." To your mind, does that statement describe the relationship between the artist and her or his art, or is Mary's situation particular, given the circumstances of her life? And consider Abe?when he's with Nora, he's there, and not there. Would you call this absorption a form of self-absorption? Is it selfishness? How do you imagine it feels for the artist to live "inside" her or his art? How do you imagine it feels to their loved ones who may live "outside?"

10. For many years, Mary reveres Lotte. Mary feels Lotte is a safe and wise and loving mother figure. How do you see Lotte as a mother and a grandmother? As a wife? How does Mary's perception of Lotte change? Why?

11. Nora is presented as "the Model." In what ways does she fit that role; in what ways is the label ironic?

12. Both Mary and Nora suffer tragic events in the early parts of their life; how are their later lives shaped by these events? In what ways are their adult lives a response to these early events?

13. Is Ross's derailment inevitable?

14. Natassia falls in love for the first time, and then she falls apart. Consider the various adults around her: in what ways does each adult fall with her?

15. Christopher's actions with baby Natassia shape much of the emotional life of Christopher and Nora's marriage. Do you feel she forgives him? Is it possible for her to forgive him? Do you forgive him?

Author Bio

Anna Monardo is the author of **The Courtyard of Dreams**. Her work has appeared in a variety of anthologies and journals, including Prairie Schooner, where a prize-winning excerpt of **Falling in Love with Natassia** was first published. After many years in New York City, she now lives in Nebraska, where she teaches in the Writer's Workshop of the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Critical Praise

"A passionate novel about a dancer and her daughter as they rediscover the nature of grace --- within their bodies and their souls. Anna Monardo writes beautifully and vividly about the fusion of love and sorrow, about the mystery of redemption."

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