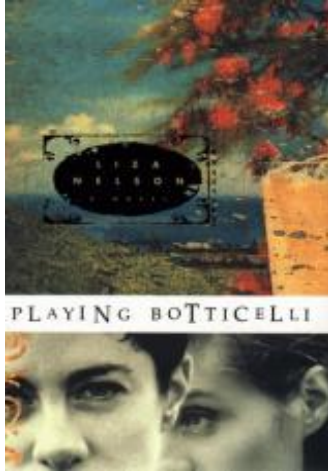


# Playing Botticelli

by Liza Nelson

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## About the Book

*"Playing Botticelli is one of those wonderful novels that treats the mother-daughter relationship for what it is?part minefield, part love nest."* ?Pat Conroy

Liza Nelson's debut novel tells the story of Godiva Blue, an artist, single mother, and self-proclaimed visionary, who believes she has found a haven for herself and her daughter, Dylan, in the backwaters of northwest Florida in the mid-eighties. A refugee of the late sixties, Godiva revels in a self-reliant existence that allows her free reign of her eccentricities.

But Godiva, who has buried pieces of her past, discovers that she cannot handpick the parts of her life that she would prefer to box away. On a casual trip to the post office, she glances at the FBI most wanted poster and recognizes the face of the man with whom she conceived Dylan while attending an antiwar rally sixteen years earlier. Meanwhile, a combination of pride and chance keep Godiva from recognizing that fifteen-year-old Dylan is chafing under her mother's overwhelming personality. When Dylan discovers the poster, which Godiva has taken and hidden in a rare moment of self-doubt, she begins to build a fantasy centered on reuniting with a father she has never met, setting her?and Godiva's?course.

Beginning with Godiva's point of view, then alternating throughout the novel with Dylan's perspective, **Playing Botticelli** offers the frank and funny juxtaposition of a mother's vision of the world with her daughter's reality. Through their individual voices, Nelson movingly explores motherhood and daughterhood, the ties that bind as well as those that must bend and even break.

## Discussion Guide

1. In many mother-daughter stories, the reader's sympathy, as well as the author's, is weighted ultimately toward one or

the other. As the reader, did you find Godiva and Dylan equally sympathetic? Does the author seem to favor one or another?

**2.** In discussing her first novel, Liza Nelson has said, "Whether we love them or hate them, obey them or rebel against them, we are, like Dylan Blue, in a permanent state of reaction to our parents." What clues does Godiva share about her relationship with her own mother? How does Godiva's mothering change, and remain the same, when her own daughter begins to rebel against her?

**3.** While Dylan and Godiva are both fully developed protagonists, they see each other in limited ways. How do the roles of "mother" and "daughter" limit these characters perception of each other and of themselves?

**4.** By the standards of the "nice ladies" of Esmeralda, Godiva's language, particularly in the first twenty pages, might be considered "coarse." How does her voice affect a reader? What about the story's more lyrical passages?

**5.** Does Dylan sound her age, or do you ever notice her voice sounding older or younger than her years? At certain points throughout the novel, she catches herself sounding like Godiva. Is this a sign of her growing maturity or does it reveal something else?

**6.** How do men fit into the lives of the novel's female characters? What is it about Joe Rainey that so attracts Godiva? Would she have been as drawn to David Balboa if they were to meet as adults? Are the men (and boys) in the novel believable?

**7.** Dylan's encounter with Randall "Spider" Gervais parallels Godiva's brief affair with Hank seventeen years earlier. What do their experiences reveal about the way sexual adventures and romantic relationships have changed or remained constant over time?

**8.** How does Dylan's fantasy of being adopted by Reverend and Mrs. Braselton connect with her desire to meet the father she's never known?

**9.** David Balboa never owns up to being Dylan's father. As the reader, do you think he was? Why does or doesn't his physical paternity actually matter?

**10.** Why does Godiva feel such a need to be in control at the beginning of the novel? Is it connected to her being a single parent, or more basic to her character?

**11.** This novel explores many forms of friendship. What attracts one character to another? What are the similarities and differences between Godiva's friendship with Louise Culpepper and Dylan's friendship with Cass? What different bonds does Godiva form while visiting the hospital, and Dylan while on the road?

**12.** What will life be like for Godiva and Dylan once Dylan returns home?

## **Author Bio**

Liza Nelson graduated from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in 1972. She eventually settled in Atlanta, where she was editor of *The Great Speckled Bird* and *The Atlanta Gazette*, alternative weeklies, and was literary manager for The Alliance Theater. More recently, she has been a biweekly columnist, writing on life beyond the suburbs, for *The Atlanta-Journal Constitution*. Nelson has written essays for *The New York Times*, *Glamour*, and *McCall's*, and her poetry has appeared in *Ploughshares* and other journals. She lives on a working farm in Newnan, Georgia, with her husband and two children.

## Critical Praise

"Liza Nelson is a terrific writer, and these are wonderful characters."

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