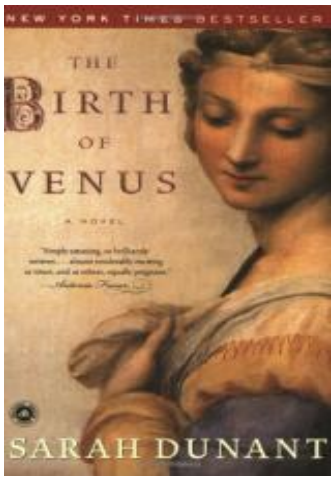
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The Birth of Venus

by Sarah Dunant



About the Book

Alessandra Cecchi is not quite fifteen when her father, a prosperous cloth merchant, brings a young painter back from northern Europe to decorate the chapel walls in the family's Florentine palazzo. A child of the Renaissance, with a precocious mind and a talent for drawing, Alessandra is intoxicated by the painter's abilities.

But their burgeoning relationship is interrupted when Alessandra's parents arrange her marriage to a wealthy, much older man. Meanwhile, Florence is changing, increasingly subject to the growing suppression imposed by the fundamentalist monk Savonarola, who is seizing religious and political control. Alessandra and her native city are caught between the Medici state, with its love of luxury, learning, and dazzling art, and the hellfire preaching and increasing violence of Savonarola's reactionary followers. Played out against this turbulent backdrop, Alessandra's married life is a misery, except for the surprising freedom it allows her to pursue her powerful attraction to the young painter and his art.

The Birth of Venus is a tour de force, the first historical novel from one of Britain's most innovative writers of literary suspense. It brings alive the history of Florence at its most dramatic period, telling a compulsively absorbing story of love, art, religion, and power through the passionate voice of Alessandra, a heroine with the same vibrancy of spirit as her beloved city.

Discussion Guide

1. Alessandra has the will and the talent to paint. She does not have the training or the social opportunity. How far does **The Birth of Venus** explain why, in the great roll call of artistic geniuses of the Renaissance, there are no names of women?

2. The image of the serpent with a human head is a motif that runs through the novel in many different forms. What are its guises and how does its meaning shift as the novel progresses?

3. Both Alessandra and her mother in their own ways subvert and rebel against the world they are brought up in. Which one of them do you think is the happier or most fulfilled?

4. The only character in the novel who seems to have any real freedom is Erila, yet ironically she is a slave with no rights or apparent power. How is it that she can walk such an independent path when those around her are so trapped?

5. Lorenzo the Great dies early on into the novel, yet his spirit and that of his family, stalk the book both politically and culturally. What image do you get of him and the impact that the De Medici's had on Florence?

6. Alessandra's entire world is contained by her belief in God. Yet in the time she is writing there seems to be almost two different kinds of God, depending on whether you are a follower of the renaissance or of Savonarola. How does Alessandra see the difference between the two and how fairly do you think she judges them?

7. How far is Savonarola the villain of the novel?

8. How far is this a novel about a city as much as a character?

9. The novels contains many different kinds of love: intellectual, spiritual, sexual, maternal. Which moves you most and why?

10. Alessandro and her brother Tomaso are at odds with each other form the beginning of the novel. But how far should we trust Alessandra's judgement of him, given that they are in competition for the same man?

11. How much sympathy do you have for Cristoforo as a character and what kind of portrait of homosexual life in Florence do you get from his thoughts and actions?

12. Alessandra's marriage, though painful in some ways, is in other ways quite fulfilling, given the confines of the time. At a time when women were seen as so fundamentally inferior, do you think it would have been possible for them to have an equal relationship sexually and intellectually with men?

13. In 15th century there was also no word for depression, only melancholy, and no treatment. How different would suffering depression have been in time when all meaning was seen to stem from God? And why does the painter fall into this trap?

Author Bio

Sarah Dunant is the author of the international bestsellers THE BIRTH OF VENUS, IN THE COMPANY OF THE COURTESAN, SACRED HEARTS and BLOOD AND BEAUTY, which have received major acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Her earlier novels include three Hannah Wolfe crime thrillers, as well as SNOWSTORMS IN A HOT CLIMATE, TRANSGRESSIONS and MAPPING THE EDGE. She has two daughters and lives in London and Florence.

Critical Praise

"It's to Dunant's credit that the vast quantities of historical information in this book are deployed so naturally and lightly....On the simplest level, this is an erotic and gripping thriller, but its intellectual excitement also comes from the way Dunant makes the art and philosophy of the period look new and dangerous again....Theology has rarely looked so sexy."

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