



The Forty Rules of Love

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In this lyrical, exuberant follow-up to her 2007 novel, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, acclaimed Turkish author Elif Shafak unfolds two tantalizing parallel narratives—one contemporary and the other set in the thirteenth century, when Rumi encountered his spiritual mentor, the whirling dervish known as Shams of Tabriz—that together incarnate the poet's timeless message of love.

Ella Rubenstein is forty years old and unhappily married when she takes a job as a reader for a literary agent. Her first assignment is to read and report on *Sweet Blasphemy*, a novel written by a man named Aziz Zahara. Ella is mesmerized by his tale of Shams's search for Rumi and the dervish's role in transforming the successful but unhappy cleric into a committed mystic, passionate poet, and advocate of love. She is also taken with Shams's lessons, or rules, that offer insight into an ancient philosophy based on the unity of all people and religions, and the presence of love in each and every one of us. As she reads on, she realizes that Rumi's story mirrors her own and that Zahara—like Shams—has come to set her free.

The Forty Rules of Love Details

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the one to come?"

Michelle Bird says

I heard the author of this book, Elif Shafak, interviewed on NPR on my way to work and had to rush out and buy the book (in hardback, no less) based on her interview. It's rare to hear someone on the radio and think, "That is an amazingly interesting person. I would love her writing." Kudos to Books Inc. in Alameda (one of the few independent bookstores around)- I walked in and said I was looking for a book by a Turkish author and there was something about love in the title... and they found it!

The Forty Rules of Love follows the parallel life paths of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz in the 13th century (a rather famous pair), the unfolding story of Ella, a Massachusetts housewife with her first editing job, and Aziz Z. Zahara, the globe-trotting author of the book she is reading. I was particularly impressed with the way Shafak told the story of Rumi and Shams through the eyes of the people around them- the historical chapters are alternately written in the voices of Rumi's very different sons, the leper who begs outside the mosque, the prostitute trying to leave her brothel, Rumi's wife, Shams' main enemy, a leading scholar, and many others. Not surprisingly I found the female characters particularly compelling, as they took Shams' forty rules and attempted to apply them to their own lives, often finding they were not always a perfect fit. The forty rules themselves are worth returning to after finishing the book for further contemplation.

I feel I would be able to understand the book on a much deeper level if I knew Arabic and had a basic grounding in the Koran (while reading I had the sense there was a great deal more being alluded to). But even as an English speaking westerner with little knowledge of Islam, I now have a much greater sense of respect for Sufism and the place it occupies opposite the more traditional interpretation of Islam. This book is a study in opposites- discipline vs. spontaneity, reason vs. love, perspective vs. acceptance, wisdom vs. youth, and foundation vs. risk. Although the book argues strongly in favor of love, spontaneity and acceptance, it is actually the balance created between the two extremes that is most important (this balance is often represented as the friendship of two people who represent opposite attributes). Parts of the novel reminded me of The Feminine Face of God (which actually may have no relation to Shafak's writing) and there were bits of aura interpretation that slipped in here and there... what I liked best, however, was its frank treatment of the "dangers" of the spiritual path.

When one pushes beyond the boundaries society draws around spirituality, when one starts to say "no" to things one has said "yes" to before and one says "yes" to things one has said "no" to before, when one challenges accepted notions of respect, holiness, and spiritual authority- this is Pema Chodron's "when the rug is pulled out from under you"- a much celebrated place in spiritual development. What I particularly appreciate about this book is its honest and direct treatment of that place- and the deep confusion and pain it can bring to the seeker and those close to them. And, of course, the beauty and wisdom that come from that difficult experience. Had Shams not challenged every aspect of social order Rumi held dear, Rumi would not have learned. Had Rumi not lost Shams, he would not have become a poet. And we would not have his poetry. This book is a celebration of the radical transformation of Rumi from scholar to poet, from devoted spiritual man to visionary- and a deeply honest (historical, I can't vouch for, but truthful, yes) portrayal of every difficult step of that evolution.

Goodness. I think it's time to read some Rumi.
