



The Birth of Venus

Sarah Dunant

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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.

The Birth of Venus Details

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From Reader Review The Birth of Venus for online ebook

Kate Quinn says

A lovely debut novel about the Italian Renaissance. An old nun dies and her habit is stripped away to reveal a sensual and scandalous tattoo - but this is only the beginning. Alessandra is a girl of fourteen in fifteenth-century Florence, mesmerized by art and life when she should be preoccupied with marriage and suitors. Her imagination is fired by an intense young painter, but marriage brings her friendship and maturity as she realizes she has been wed as a shield to a kind but homosexual merchant. Left to pursue her own dreams, Alessandra is swept up in the fever of reform as the fanatical Savonarola begins scourging Florence - and in the fever of art as the Renaissance takes hold. The tale of the old nun and the young girl meet in an ending destined to surprise. The book's hero is perhaps a bit weak, but Alessandra's voice sweeps the story along: a girl who recognizes the privilege of being alive at such a dangerous, vibrant, and marvelous period of history.

Chrissie says

Halfway through the book: I do NOT think this is a wonderful book. I am terribly disappointed. Description of Renaissance Florence is fine. I have no quibbles with that, but the plot is so foreseeable, so predictable. The characters seem as modern day caricatures. For me this is pure fluff. Am I learning anything new, to compensate for all my my other disappointments? No!

On completion: If you want to read a book about art during the Italian Renaissance read *The Agony and the Ecstasy: A Biographical Novel of Michelangelo*. You will learn something there, and the time spent reading will be enjoyable.

If you are looking for a light fiction novel where lead characters just happen to meet all the right people at the right points in time, where all the strings of life are neatly tied up, where character portrayal is shallow, go ahead - read "The Birth of Venus". Then read "The Agony and the Ecstasy" and make a comparison. You will see what I mean. Here is my review of Stone's book, which I gave 4 stars:
<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

On the other hand I did very much enjoy Dunant's *In the Company of the Courtesan*.

I will give "The Birth of Venus" 2 stars b/c I did bother to complete it. Do keep in mind that it is a very light read.

Elphaba J says

(Este livro era 2 estrelas nas primeiras páginas e depois mudou para 4... surpreendente?)

O Nascimento de Vénus transporta, com subtileza, o leitor para a época renascentista, para o momento exacto em que a bela Florença unia a arte à religião como se o todo de ambos fosse a única forma de honrar devidamente o Senhor.

Através de uma abastada, conservadora e, ainda assim, modesta família conhecemos Alessandra. Uma

protagonista que da sua meninice à maturidade deslumbra pela sua inteligência brilhante, atendendo às limitações impostas à mulher. Conhecemos a sua amizade pura com Erila, uma rara serva negra, o seu crescimento precoce, preenchido por uma sede imensa de saber, e a sua paixão avassaladora pela arte que, como quase todas as paixões em tempos castos, se revela proibida, perigosa até e, mais ainda, com a chegada de um misterioso e jovem pintor incumbido de retractar a família para a eternidade e dar luz, vida, ao anseio de toda a família pintando a tão desejada capela no palazzo Cecchi.

Só pela intensidade das suas personagens esta é uma narrativa preciosa, por vezes tocante, e outras tantas vezes inspiradora. Mas, como tudo nesta época de fé e beleza, são muitos os conceitos que chegarão ao leitor seduzindo-o para outros tempos sendo a religião, fundamentalmente, o centro de todo o enredo que cresce e ganha contornos avassaladores com as alterações que vai sofrendo enquanto acompanhamos o crescimento dos intervenientes.

Da adoração benigna à devoção extrema, são vários os momentos em que a crença e a sua influência muda o rumo natural da história modificando homens, mortificando mulheres, sem que ninguém esteja a salvo, principalmente, a excelência do artista que se prevê perder a cor.

Também a sexualidade, e as suas variantes, são questões de debate neste texto que de forma subtil, mas evidente, aborda sem tabus controversas relações, familiares e afectivas, que se vão desenvolvendo e adensando o mistério em torno da vida de Alessandra e do seu fim, anunciado na sinopse.

Opinião completa: <http://historiasdeelfaba.blogspot.pt...>

Sammy says

Wow, I really enjoyed this book. I read it in a day. I didn't read it like I read *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* nor did I read it like I plan to read Book 6 on July 16, but I read it in a day it was that good. I'm just going to address my one major problem with the book before I go on to tell you exactly why I liked it so much.

Language. I don't know how they spoke in the 1490s, but some of the language seemed very current. Some of the slang used to describe various body parts and bodily functions seemed like something I would hear today on the streets of England. Not America because Americans aren't quite classy enough to say "Shitting." Instead we say things like, "Take a crap." Yeah... real high brow. That was just my one major problem... and it wasn't even that big of one.

I loved the characters in this book... well... except the ones you weren't supposed to love, like Savonarola and his followers. I especially loved Erila, and I'm sure you will/do too. They were all very well-developed and real, even for their time. Art lovers and appreciators will love this book for all the praise it gives to Renaissance art and it's artists. But even if you know diddly squat about art you will still more than likely enjoy the book and understand even it's most obscure art references.

Sarah Dunant is an amazing writer, stretching her craft to it's fullest when she must describe not only the art work itself, but more often than not, the colors. To see colors is one thing, but to read them is a completely different.

There are several surprising loops and turns that cleverly take place throughout the story, and I don't want to spoil any for you, so I'll stop my review now before I accidentally say something revealing. Overall, the book was wonderful. Definetly a must read. Especially if you're like me and you're into this type of historical fiction.

P.S. My mom and I are in a debate right now. Maybe you guys can clear it up if you've read the book. Michelangelo was not Alessandra's painter, was he? I'm positive he's not, and I've been trying to prove it to my mom, but she just won't believe me. Even after I've read evidence to her FROM the book. Can you guys help me out?

Arybo ? says

3.80

Molto bello sotto il profilo della ricostruzione storica - la morte del Magnifico, il potere di Savonarola, i Piagnoni, il falò delle vanità -, meno appassionante nella narrazione vera e propria. Il lettore si immerge nella Firenze di fine Quattrocento, a cui è dato molto spazio nel romanzo. Tutto questo spazio appare, però, a discapito della storia personale di Alessandra Cecchi, la protagonista. Altro punto a favore del libro è la facilità di lettura: le parole scorrono velocemente, anche i tratti più densi di nozioni storiche attirano l'attenzione del lettore e lo trascinano nella passione per la conoscenza.

Pauline Ross says

I loved this book. Right up until the very last chapter, I loved it. And then... if I hadn't been reading on my Kindle, I'd have hurled the thing across the room. Ack. I can't talk about the reasons for this without giving away spoilers, so if you don't want to know anything, don't read the second half of this review.

Here's the premise: fourteen-year-old Alessandra is the oddball of her fifteenth century Florence family. She's not beautiful, as her sister and two brothers are, she's not content to follow the prescribed duty for a well-to-do woman and either marry and push out babies, or take herself to a nunnery, she's been educated and she has artistic talent. Her drawing is a secret, abetted by her slave maid, Erila. She yearns for freedom, but is constrained by the need to remain virginal. But when her father employs a painter from the north to paint the family chapel, Alessandra is drawn to him, despite the prohibitions on both of them.

You would think, given all this, that the story would play out as a romance. Girl meets painter, girl is attracted to painter, painter is attracted to girl, insuperable obstacles... yada yada. And to some extent, it does. But the author has ambitions far beyond the simple romance; she wants to write Literature. So what we get instead is historical fiction with the romance pushed firmly down to the bottom of the priorities list.

And it almost works. The backdrop of Florence - the city itself, the art, the social culture - is beautifully and lovingly drawn, with an almost painterly richness of colour and texture. The political setting, with the fall of the powerful Medici family and the rise of a charismatic religious leader, is covered pretty well, although Alessandra's situation means that she misses most of it, and has to depend on other characters to tell her what happened. This leads to long, slightly info-dumpy dialogues. And sometimes the plot contrivances to get her into place for some historic event were creaky, to put it mildly. However, the complications and swirls of political fortunes were well described, and I was never at a loss to understand what was going on.

The characters were, in some instances, interesting, but all too often their motivations were unclear or downright unbelievable. Alessandra's brother, Tomaso, for instance, is a major influence on her life, and not for good. Much of what happens to her is because of his machinations, and it's hard to see why he chooses to be so evil towards her. Sibling rivalry just isn't a good reason for some of the things he does. Why does he hate her so much?

Both the mother, with her own chequered past, and the slave maid Erila, are actually much more interesting than Alessandra herself, who always seems to be the victim of other people's needs and manipulations. Her husband, too, is a fascinating character. All of these are people who, unlike Alessandra, made their own decisions, their own lives and remained true to themselves (yes, even the slave, who seems to have had more freedom than her mistress). The painter would have been interesting if we had ever seen enough of him to judge, but he remains a shadowy figure for most of the book. I did, however, like the conceit of not naming him, so that readers can imagine their own favourite northern painter in the role.

And then we come to the ending, and here is where everything fell apart for me. However, the rest of the book was very enjoyable, so it merits four stars but with a hazard warning: this is NOT the book to read if you want a satisfying ending.

Spoilers ahead...

I had some logic issues all the way through (the brother's hatred for his sister, the mother's contradictory attitude of educating Alessandra while somehow hoping she will just conform to her allotted role), but the nunnery puts all that in the shade. When her marriage ends, Alessandra is left a wealthy widow. The world is open for her. She could, if she'd chosen to (and if the author had embraced the romantic theme), have gone to Rome to find her painter.

But no. Her mother says: "Our city is cruel to widows." And, with no other justification, carts her off to a nunnery. Not just any nunnery, though; this one is incredibly liberal and relaxed, Alessandra learns (finally!) to paint, is charged with painting the chapel, is happy in her art, living amongst other women. Sisters doing it for themselves. Yay!

But wait. When Alessandra was fifteen, and the French army was about to march through Florence and all unattached women were hastily married off or whisked into nunneries, why was this wonderful place never mentioned? Why did her mother allow her to be married to a man three times her age, who was gay and in love with her brother, rather than tell her about this nunnery where she could be herself at last and not shoehorn herself into society's expected role? What on earth was her mother thinking?

And then, the final insult. The painter returns. No longer shy and overwrought, but settled and wealthy. Happy ending ahoy, surely. He'll carry Alessandra off to Rome, along with her daughter, now fortuitously revealed as the painter's daughter, and they'll all live happily ever after. {Cue violins}

But no, again. Alessandra decides she's "made her peace with God". Well, that might be what she says, but it's not at all how she behaves. She sleeps with the painter (in the nunnery! Very liberal), and she tattoos herself from neck to crotch with the image of a snake, with the painter's face on it, tongue extended. And once she's waved goodbye to her lover and daughter, she's prostrate with grief. These are not the actions of a woman at peace with God, and comfortable with her decision to give up the secular world.

She is so NOT comfortable with it, that she ultimately kills herself. Why? Why stay at all when the nunnery was so constraining, when she had lost everything she ever cared about or wanted? Even her art, a victory so painfully won. And after she kills herself, Erila is planning to go off to England to find the painter. What? Why doesn't Alessandra do the same?

Here's the big problem with Alessandra's character. All the way through she is pushed into doing things she doesn't want, or into not doing the things she does want. She hides her art. She does what she's told. She conforms. She marries when she's told to. She has a child because it's what her husband wants and to cover up her fling with the painter. She goes to the nunnery when her mother suggests it. The only time she does anything for herself is with regard to the painter. Here, at last, she shows some spirit, some sense of independence, of knowing herself.

But when at the end she has the opportunity to seize her life and take control, a moment that would have rounded off the book beautifully and brought her arc to a triumphant end - she doesn't. Far from taking control of her life, she does the exact opposite: turning her back on life altogether, figuratively by rejecting the painter and literally by killing herself.

Now I understand that the author was avoiding the happy ever after that would have dumped the book on the romance shelves. I get that. A literary historical story is what she wanted to write, and that's entirely her choice. I suspect that she wrote the prologue first, and the premise of the nun of many years with a secret past ending her life by suicide is a fascinating one. Trouble is, the story that came after didn't quite fit with that premise, and in the end it felt like the author struggled to create the character that would convincingly turn into that nun.

Alessandra never quite becomes either the suppressed conformist, or the open rebel. She pursues her art, but only in secret (and with the complicity of her mother). She sneaks out at night, but gets frightened and runs home. She wants to talk to the painter, but is petrified of being caught. She meekly marries, is given the freedom to pursue her art but, far from appreciating her luck, she still spits at her brother and husband, and seduces the painter under her husband's roof. She bravely finds her way into church when women are excluded, yet hasn't got the gumption to define her her own life when her husband leaves her a widow. She tries to follow the religious tenets of the day, while flouting them outrageously when it suits her. She's neither one thing nor the other, merely a cipher swept along by a soapy plot.

And this is the root of the problem. The story is, at heart, a romance, a soap-opera of a life, the highlight of which is an instant attraction worthy of Mills and Boon. The arranged marriage, the fling with the painter, the child who could be the husband's or the lover's... these are almost cliches in the genre. Add in the dramatic return of the painter, who's been searching for her for fifteen years, and the hot sex, and you have all the conventions of a perfectly standard historical romance. Cut out the prologue and the last chapter or so, and this is exactly what it would be. Thus the most obvious, most fitting ending would be the happy ever after with the painter.

It's not the only one that would work. Alessandra could have been genuinely content in her nunnery, with only God to comfort her. That would have been a valid and interesting choice. She could have been a powerful widow in Florence, using her wealth to do good, and help women or orphans or the church (or simply commissioning art). She could have had a rapprochement with her brother. She could have found herself another husband, one of her own choosing.

All of these would have worked with the somewhat contradictory depiction of Alessandra's character. But to make the eventual ending credible required a different trajectory, a different Alessandra, one who was gradually trodden into the dust, so that rising again or ever taking her life into her own hands was impossible. The best ending for any book is the one that is completely inevitable, given everything that has gone before. And in this case the ending, so far from being inevitable, was not convincing to me in the slightest. I find it impossible to believe that Alessandra, so aware, so intelligent, couldn't see any other possibilities, especially given the free-spirited example of Erila right under her nose.

The theme of Alessandra's life was freedom: her lack of it as a child, suffocated by the stultifying constraints of her society, and her need for it as an adult. In her life she was in fact offered a number of possible freedoms. The freedom of marriage. The freedom of wealth. The freedom of art. The freedom of love. And the freedom of religious life, the acceptance of God's will. Alessandra rejects every one of these. And I can't for the life of me understand why, except that the author had her ending all planned out and none of these fitted.

Lori says

I'm finding it difficult to select a rating for this book. It begins with a bang (5 stars for interest, mystery, intrigue), slows to a disconnected simmer (2 stars) which cools to lukewarm (1 star). The story does pick up (2-3 stars) but then spirals into a disappointing ending that, to me, seems inconsistent with the character. (1 star).

Aditi says

"Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life."

----Pablo Picasso

Sarah Dunant, the British bestselling novelist, has penned a delectable and extremely tempting historical fiction, *The Birth of Venus* that is set against the backdrop of the Renaissance Florence and that which revolves around a young 14 year old girl who is not beautiful or skilled like her elder sister, yet her talent and eye for art and mind for translating languages is extraordinary but with the changing times, she is forced into matrimony at a tender age, and little did she knew what fight she is put up for, in the name of honor, respect and womanhood during the Dominican rule in the 15th century Florence.

Synopsis:

Sarah Dunant's gorgeous and mesmerizing novel, Birth of Venus, draws readers into a turbulent 15th-century Florence, a time when the lavish city, steeped in years of Medici family luxury, is suddenly besieged by plague, threat of invasion, and the righteous wrath of a fundamentalist monk. Dunant masterfully blends fact and fiction, seamlessly interweaving Florentine history with the coming-of-age story of a spirited 14-year-old girl. As Florence struggles in Savonarola's grip, a serial killer stalks the streets, the French invaders creep closer, and young Alessandra Cecchi must surrender her "childish" dreams and navigate her way into womanhood. Readers are quickly seduced by the simplicity of her unconventional passions that are more artistic than domestic:

Dancing is one of the many things I should be good at that I am not. Unlike my sister. Plautilla can move across the floor like water and sing a stave of music like a song bird, while I, who can translate both Latin and Greek faster than she or my brothers can read it, have club feet on the dance floor and a voice like a crow. Though I swear if I were to paint the scale I could do it in a flash: shining gold leaf for the top notes falling through ochres and reds into hot purple and deepest blue.

Alessandra's story, though central, is only one part of this multi-faceted and complex historical novel. Dunant paints a fascinating array of women onto her dark canvas, each representing the various fates of early Renaissance women: Alessandra's lovely (if simple) sister Plautilla is interested only in marrying rich

and presiding over a household; the brave Erila, Alessandra's North African servant (and willing accomplice) has such a frank understanding of the limitations of her sex that she often escapes them; and Signora Cecchi, Alessandra's beautiful but weary mother tries to encourage yet temper the passions of her wayward daughter. A luminous and lush novel, The Birth of Venus, at its heart, is a mysterious and sensual story with razor-sharp teeth. Like Alessandra, Dunant has a painter's eye--her writing is rich and evocative, luxuriating in colors and textures of the city, the people, and the art of 15th-century Florence. Reminiscent of Tracy Chevalier's Girl with a Pearl Earring, but with sensual splashes of color and the occasional thrill of fear, Dunant's novel is both exciting and enchanting.

Alessandra Cecchi, the 14 year teenage daughter of a reputed merchant is more passionate about painting and translating languages, rather than being interested in womanly dreams like being a mother and a wife and honing off the girly skills to impress the best suitors. And with the arrival of a unknown yet extremely talented young artist in their family home, Alessandra can gradually feel the spasms of attraction and weakness of her young heart, but as Florence comes under the strict Dominican rule of Girolamo Savonarola and the possibility of a war, Alessandra's father make haste to marry off her unwed daughter to a suitable suitor in order to protect her. And the only suitor he managed to get for his young daughter is a very old, prosperous and lonely family friend, Cristoforo. Reluctantly Alessandra says yes to this alliance, and unfortunately she becomes a victim to an ugly truth about her husband that finally spins off her life out of control. So with the support and trust of her servant, Erila, an African slave, Alessandra explores the art, history and the dark secrets of the beautiful and charming city of Florence, all the while finding herself and the desires of her soul.

Maybe its my weakness towards reading historical fiction that led me to this enchanting yet slightly disappointing book, *The Birth of Venus* where the story line may lack development and reality yet somehow the backdrop allured me to lose myself into the heavy Italian flair layered well with the snippets of Renaissance era. The story is, no doubt, addictive but here and there, the story lacks from depth hence the readers will failed to acquire a clear perspective to contemplate with the story line. Reading this book made me realize that the author has done her research well enough to paint this simple story with so much deep knowledge about Florence during the period of Renaissance.

The author's writing style is classy and emotionally strong enough to make the readers feel its sharpness that will grip the readers completely. The narrative is sometime dull but at times, it will give the readers goosebumps although overall the dialogues are articulate and layered deeply with the flair of the then time period. This story has got many layers but rarely the author explored those layers, instead all the while the focus remained upon the central character and the her adventures and ordeal with the her city and life. The pacing is slow but steady in which the author opens a wide window to the lost and forgotten era of art and strict Catholicism rules in Florence.

The backdrop painted by the author is magnificent and eye catchy with myriad of colors that bring alive the city of Florence vividly. The author captures this fascinating Italian city with its proper historical significance and references in order to make it look properly synced with that era. From the mentality of the folks from that era to the conventional norms in the Churches to the format of art to the life style to the architecture to the spirituality behind the art are all strikingly portrayed with enough details to make the readers visually imagine Florence right before their own eyes.

The characters speak their minds but they lack depth in their developments, hence the readers might fail to connect with the characters from this book. The central character, Alessandra, is a brave and free woman irrespective of her time and era and also her desires and her pain evolves her into a mature woman, who learn to embrace her wretched destiny. The love story is so-so, there is nothing much passionate about it. The other characters, especially the female ones could have given more character and back story to make them look justified in their respective demeanor and struggles.

In a nutshell, for me this was a captivating enough story that engaged and enlightened me about Renaissance art, love and spirituality on the last day of the year!

Verdict: *A promising and evocative story of art and religion!*

Courtesy: *A BookChor find!*

Tempo de Ler says

Na *bella Italia* Renascentista, em Florença, a arte - inspiração de Deus - está por toda a parte; na música, nos edifícios, nas peças consumadas para os adornar e até mesmo nos diálogos. A beleza do corpo era um tema de conversa tão habitual e comum como a própria beleza da arte... Mas nem toda a arte do mundo será suficiente para salvar uma cidade quando a estrada que a conduz à redenção está atravancada de **fanatismo**, **ignorância** e **intolerância** religiosa.

Florença estava a virar-se contra si mesma, batalhando conta o pecado, e ninguém está seguro quando se destrói a vontade destruindo corpos. «*Florença é divina mas Deus é cruel para Florença (...)*»

A influência dos Médicis desvanece-se à medida que o fanatismo se insurge por detrás do púlpito da igreja. O possível avanço do exército invasor de Carlos VIII paira como uma nuvem negra de fatalismo. Deus e o Diabo andavam à luta nas ruas da cidade. E no meio de tudo isto, temos *Alessandra*...

O Nascimento de Vénus começa de forma muito **intrigante**. O fim de vida de Alessandra leva o leitor a desenvolver de imediato uma curiosidade imensa sobre esta personagem tão preciosamente caracterizada ao longo do livro.

Sarah Dunant fez um trabalho fantástico na transmissão dos conceitos e mentalidade da época - a forma como nos mostra que, onde algumas pessoas veem beleza sincera, outras poderão ver algo bem mais perverso...

Na Florença do século XV a que Dunant nos leva, Deus está em tudo o que é dito ou até mesmo pensado - conforme era visto como uma entidade vil, irada e punidora ou benevolente e compreensiva. É verdade que o pecado assume gravidades conforme quem o contempla.

A história pessoal de Alessandra, influenciada pela História que se escreve em tempo real ao seu redor, é intrincada e complexa, misturando amor e traição em igual medida. A sua paixão impossível pela pintura nasceu bem cedo acompanhando-a no dia-a-dia até que ela cresce, os tempos mudam e é necessário procurar uma solução para a tensão vivida no momento: casar, mesmo que isso signifique abandonar tudo o que conhece.

O pretendente, um homem sério mas muito mais velho do que Alessandra, torna-se a solução mais sensata para o futuro dela... só que Cristoforo não foi completamente honesto: o seu coração já foi arrebatado.

Adorei acompanhar Alessandra numa viagem tão envolvente e apaixonante como esta. É notável como a autora a faz transparecer tão solitária quando está na verdade rodeada por tantas pessoas. Como a vincula tão ferozmente à sua paixão pela pintura e como a moldou tão realisticamente com fraquezas e os ditos «defeitos» de personalidade.

Depois do sucesso que foram para mim as leituras de *Corações Sagrados* e *O Nascimento de Vénus* vou

definitivamente guardar interesse em continuar a ler trabalhos de Sarah Dunant.

Lesley says

I read this title for a book club and from the description, I thought it would make for a very good discussion. Unfortunately, the story did not live up to the expectations created by the inside flap.

If you like historical fiction, it does have a fairly interesting depiction of Renaissance Florence going for it-- and I did learn some things along the way, like I usually do with good historical fiction. However, without giving too much away, the ending and the character development greatly disappointed me. This book also fails to deliver on its promise of mystery and a potentially riveting side plot.

That being said, as a quick vacation or casual read, it's not a terrible choice. Unfortunately, I can't recommend it as a good book discussion choice.

Carol ?? says

[Cristoforo ca

David says

With an overpowering deluge of verbs and a merciless amount of description, only surpassed by Tolkien taking 60 pages to walk around a mountain, I found myself continually drifting off. The novel has a meticulous feel to it, with robotic research covered by a light skein of unbelievable emotion and a pseudo-attempt at mystery that is all gunked up. Like many books published by large corporations its inherent shallowness and malleability would make a great movie.

Jen says

A friend gave me this book as a birthday gift. Oddly, it was a book she'd never even read (and she's an even more avid reader than I am). She just indicated that she'd thought it looked like a good one, and as it was a "bestseller" she figured it must be. She wasn't wrong, however, for the first few chapters, I constantly wondered why on earth she'd pick out such a book (with such content) for me...

After convincing myself I was an adult and it was ok to continue (I still have alot of my mother's book-chosing influence from childhood buzzing around in my brain), I found she was right.

Sarah Dunant's The Birth of Venus is an intriguing and educational read- an ingenious and original tale set in a time one wouldn't consider such antics taking place. I am now reading it for the second time, and enjoying it just as much as the first.

Rebecca says

I made it to page 168. I saw this book at Costco as I was browsing. It seemed interesting enough so I checked it out at the library. I found myself forcing myself to read each page. I did not find the book intriguing or engaging. This story is not something to curl up by the fire with. It is about a girl who loves art, but lives in a time where women cannot openly be artists. Fearing that she will be sent to a nunnery because of the impending French occupation of Florence Italy, she decides to marry a 48 year old man. Then, to her horror, she finds out that her husband is gay and the lover of her brother. Her brother thought that this would be a great arrangement because her husband would allow her to paint and then the husband would not be suspected of being a sodomite in the future. Sound good so far? Not really! Don't even get me started about the wedding night scene. That was waaaaay to explicit for my taste! It was just gross to read about. Had this plot been written differently, I just may have finished it, but alas, it tanked for me. I couldn't risk reading about any more of the nasty serial killer murders or weird love scenes. Maybe the book gets better, but I didn't want to chance it.

Lesley Visutsiri says

After reading this for the second time I wish I could give it higher than five stars. I discovered new things about this book that I hadn't caught before. Such a wonderful book and I can't wait to read it for the third time!

This is an absolutely amazing book. The author has done a lot of research and it shows in her writing. This is a historical fiction. The imagery is wonderful and you really get wrapped up in the lives of the Character. Now that I have been studying Mythology I would like to read it again and see what mythic images I can get from it based on Botticelli's painting.

Tracy says

For some reason, I always feel the need to apologize when giving a high rating to a book that is not marvelously written from a technical standpoint--I think I've been privy to too many technical writing conversations. While this book is not a classic of literary style, it was a very good read. Its strengths rest in its emotional honesty at difficult moments. Dunant has an eye for those small defining gestures that convey volumes.

As a historical novel, it also covers some interesting territory. The novel takes place in Florence, Italy during the fall of the Medicis and the brief rise of the monk Savonarola, and that place and time (and the role of the Church in it) are central characters. As the monk cracks down on all who run counter to his theology (including the pope), Alessandra, an intelligent, art-loving girl of 16 from a well-to-do merchant's family, rushes into marriage to escape exile to a convent, only to quickly find herself in a situation that is hardly the stuff of women's dreams -- but then, Alessandra had unconventional dreams to begin with. For a woman of the time, relationships within the family substituted for relationships to the entire world. Alessandra's family allows a complex consideration of the messy betrayals and redemptions of love. This novel addresses social class, sexuality, beauty, despair, relationships between men and women, and the relationship between God and the Church. Not bad for a 391-page novel.

Hannah says

Really **2.5 Stars**.

First let me start by saying I'm surprised at how much I liked this book, yes even though I only gave it 2.5 stars. The Medieval era and the Renaissance are two of my least favorites times in history, and this book is rooted in the Renaissance. My main issue with the Renaissance is the overwhelming presence of religion in everything (art, daily life, literature, etc.). Of course I understand the importance of that time period and everything produced it in. However I'll spare you the details of the reasons why this isn't my favorite era because GR isn't the place for that. :) But yes, I did enjoy this book to an extent.

I liked the main character Alessandra. She did her best to break out of the rigid lifestyle Renaissance women had to live. She is intelligent and well-spoken, though at times still naive. I also liked the painter. His character was undoubtedly strange but provided a nice contrast to everyone else. Other than those two, I didn't care for any of the other characters. Alessandra's husband, at first I really liked him (view spoiler). But then events transpired that just frustrated me. I mean (view spoiler). Erila and Alessandra's mother were alright but not necessarily amazing or my favorites in any way. And her brothers, well.... Luca is the ultimate bandwagoner - not an original bone in his body, and Tomaso is just evil. Oh! And her sister, flighty.

At first, I really liked that Alessandra wasn't concerned with sex/relationships/marriage like her sister and mother. (view spoiler)

The writing is fine, descriptive but not too flowery. It reads quick and held my attention most of the time while I read it. The reason it only gets 2.5 stars is because I felt that there were certain things that happened that just seemed ridiculous (not the historical events, but events that happened within Alessandra's life). Also, I felt that nothing really happened. Of course things did happen but I wasn't impressed. I can't quite put my finger on it but I was left, at the end of the book, frustrated but also going eh. There's more meat to this story than, say, *All the Light We Cannot See* which I gave 2 stars but there is something lacking here too.

Cautiously recommend it. If you start reading and don't like it, stop. It's not worth it.

Pauline Montagna says

I sometimes wonder if it is safe for a novelist to attempt to portray cultures other than her own. Sarah Dunant is an English writer who now divides her time between London and Florence (half her luck!) I daresay she feels that, having studied Italian history and lived amongst Italians, she knows Italian culture. However, as an Italian woman myself, I know how Italians relate to the foreigners in their midst and they are not as easily understood as a British 'Italophile' might believe.

Ms Dunant's first venture into writing about Italy was a contemporary novel, *Mapping the Edge*, about an English woman's fractured adventures on an emotional trip to Florence. However, this is an outsider's view of Italy. In this book, Ms Dunant has ventured to get inside the Italian psyche. I cannot say she has succeeded.

The Birth of Venus is the story of Alessandra Cecchi, the daughter of a rich merchant in fifteenth-century Florence, who is everything a woman should not be, strong-willed, intelligent, talented and ugly. Alessandra's greatest desire is to be an artist, but as a woman she will never have the means or opportunity to fulfil her ambitions. However, she finds a focus for her creative desires when her father brings home from a

trip abroad a painter to decorate the walls of his house. A withdrawn and taciturn man, the unnamed painter is yet drawn to Alessandra and her artistic sensibilities. But then, as Florence comes under threat from French invaders, Alessandra's parents marry her off for her own protection to Cristoforo, a sophisticated and wealthy older man. The marriage is doomed to failure and has been cynically arranged for his own purposes by her older brother Tomaso because he has always resented her and is jealous of her intelligence and talent.

It is here that I balked. The writer's portrayal of Alessandra's marriage and the circumstances surrounding it is where this novel, however much acclaimed it might be, fatally falters.

Alessandra has never demonstrated any desire for physical love. All her passions have been focussed on art and her cerebral rather than sensual relationship with the painter. Her unsuccessful marriage might be disappointing, but a disappointment for which she would easily find solace through her art.

I also found that in creating this antagonistic relationship between brother and sister, Ms Dunant revealed very little understanding of gender relations in an Italian family. In that time and place, it would have been inconceivable that a boy would be jealous of his sister's abilities. For a traditional Italian man everything he does and is is, ipso facto, superior to anything a woman can be simply because he is male and she is female. And if a woman should have any abilities, those abilities might be ridiculed by the men in her family, but not resented. Yet, while women may be little regarded as people in their own right, they are still cherished and protected as part of the family.

The writer's portrayal of the relationship between the brother and sister, therefore, is not credible and I felt that the writer had fashioned it simply to create conflict and crisis. I would have found it much more credible, and indeed poignant, if it turned out that Tomaso had acted not out of spite, but rather out of a misplaced fondness for his sister. How much more devastated Alessandra would be if she were to learn that the brother she has always adored, who has always seemed to love her and tolerate her eccentricities, has proven to be totally insensitive to her real feelings.

James says

A few points about this book:

If you choose to read it, skip the Prologue. It gives away the last quarter of the book. (I found this very frustrating.)

The middle of the book is fine. It's basic historical romance stuff with interesting, smart characters.

The end of this book sucks. The main character, and her best friend, make decisions which are both odd and unbelievable.

Perhaps you should skip the prologue, read the middle, then when you get to the last few chapters, instead of reading them, skip back to the prologue.

Jess The Bookworm says

This book is set during Renaissance Florence, and follows the life of Alessandra, the daughter of a wealthy

cloth merchant who has dealings with the Medici family. Alessandra is young and innocent when she is married off to a much older man, and although she has more freedom than a woman would have had in those times, her life and marriage doesn't quite turn out as planned.

While Florence is going through tumultuous times, with struggles between the artistic and opulent Medici reign, and the fanatical religious fervour gripping the city, Alessandra clings on to her love of art and painting, all the while developing an increasing fascination for the painter hired by her parents.

This was a fascinating look into this time period in Florence, and it was a very enjoyable read. I didn't connect with the characters however, as they were viewed rather from a distance and quite superficially through Alessandra's eyes.
