



The Forty Rules of Love

Elif Shafak

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The Forty Rules of Love Summary and Study Guide

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OVERVIEW

The Forty Rules of Love is a 2009 novel by Elif Shafak. The book tells the story of **Ella Rubinstein**, a woman in her late thirties who has settled into the complacency of her life. She exists without drive or passion. The **narrative** follows her unlikely escape from what at first appears to be inevitable unhappiness. The novel also concerns itself with the deep, fraternal **love** between Sufi dervish **Shams of Tabriz** and the mystical scholar-poet **Rumi**. The story of Shams and Rumi comes to Ella through a book she is reviewing for her new job as an assistant to a literary agent; that book, *Sweet Blasphemy*, is a novel about the lives of the two mystics and the friends, families, and enemies they touched. As Ella reads *Sweet Blasphemy*, she becomes increasingly aware of the lack of love in her life compared to the love experienced by the characters in the book. Ella tends to relate to the world around her through her relationships, and her dual roles of mother and wife. Pouring over the pages of *Sweet Blasphemy*, Ella grows discontent with her passionless marriage to David and inspired by the love related by the author, Aziz. This study guide references the 2011 Penguin Books Edition of the text.

Plot Summary

The text of Sweet Blasphemy begins with Sufi dervish Shams of Tabriz's vision of his own death and the discovery of his body by the master he knows he must come to find. After decades of wandering, Shams knows that he is meant to be joined with this master in order to learn from him and for them to explore new ideas about Islam and love together. After months of waiting, Shams goes to Konya and meets Rumi, a famous Islamic scholar whose sermons are attended widely by the masses. Together, Shams and Rumi bring their teachings to a sometimes receptive but often hostile flock who do not understand Shams or the Sufi teachings—the scholars think the Sufi are nonsense and the work of Satan. Shams is frequently threatened by members of Rumi's family, particularly Rumi's younger son, **Aladdin**, whose jealousy eventually turns to hatred.

As Ella reads *Sweet Blasphemy*, she begins to research the author and eventually sends him an email, introducing herself and sharing a little about her life. Before long, Aziz and Ella are emailing each other multiple times a day, and sparks alight as their flirtations begin to resemble romantic feelings. Ella is taken with Aziz's openness about love and living in the present and begins to imagine what it would be like to meet him.

In *Sweet Blasphemy*, despite the positive message Shams is spreading, his divisive personality and possessiveness of Rumi continue to rub Aladdin the wrong way, and Aladdin and his friends hatch a plan to have Shams murdered. In the end, Shams's warnings that his death will destroy Rumi are not heeded by Aladdin, and Shams is killed; shortly after, Rumi finds Shams's body in a well. These events inspire Rumi's poetry, the words flowing out of him after the loss of his companion.

Meanwhile, Ella is experiencing love and loss of her own. After telling her husband she wants to meet Aziz, Ella drives to Boston to do so. At the end of the visit, Ella tells Aziz that she wants to go with him back to Holland; it is then that Aziz breaks the news that he has terminal cancer and no more than 16 months left to live. The two separate for a few days; then, one evening, after fixing dinner for her family, Ella packs her bags and leaves to be with Aziz. Aziz and Ella explore the world for a year before they go to Konya, where Aziz's book takes place. When he dies from cancer, Ella hosts his funeral and then decides to live like Aziz did—fully in the moment—and makes plans to move to Holland, to see where life will take her.



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