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## The Favorites

by Layne Fargo

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## **Discussion Questions**

1. What threads does THE FAVORITES share with its literary inspiration, WUTHERING HEIGHTS? Where do the stories differ?
2. How does Kat Shaw's self-description in the beginning ("a bitch, a diva, a sore loser...") shape your initial perception of her? How does this perception evolve throughout the book?
3. Kat's ambition often conflicts with her relationships. How does her drive to be the best impact her connections with Heath, Garrett and Bella?
4. Heath Rocha's background is touched upon briefly. How do his racial and cultural identity play into his experiences and relationships within the story?
5. Kat loves Heath --- but she loves skating even more. What was it like for you to read a love story where one of the leads prioritizes something else over her love interest?
6. Sheila Lin is a significant mentor figure in the book. How does her influence shape the paths of the younger skaters, and what does her character reveal about the pressures of competitive sports?
7. What makes Bella and Garrett Lin such perfect competition for Kat and Heath? How do the relationships --- and everyone's skating --- change when the foursome switches partners?
8. What roles do race and class play in the novel? How do these themes affect the characters and their trajectories?
9. The book includes multiple perspectives and flashbacks, as well as interview transcripts. How does this narrative structure affect your understanding of the characters and their motivations? How does author Layne Fargo use these devices to add tension and foreshadowing?
10. How do Kat and Heath's reputations --- on the ice-dancing circuit and then in the blogs and tabloids --- affect their senses of self? Conversely, how do they change as people when they're out of the spotlight?
11. The theme of betrayal runs deep in the novel. Discuss specific instances of betrayal and how they affect the characters' dynamics and development.
12. "When I was strong and self-assured, people recoiled from me," Kat says. "They told me I was too competitive, too ambitious, too much. But when I was brought low, bruised and bleeding, a princess in need of rescue instead of a conquering queen, they loved me." Discuss the parts of herself that Kat feels compelled to hide.
13. How does Heath change after Russia? What did it teach him? What did the experience teach Kat?
14. Discuss Kat and Bella's friendship. Did you think it was authentic --- or would you call them frenemies?
15. Kat's outburst during the interview about being asked when she will start a family highlights gender expectations. How does the book address the pressures faced by women in sports --- and society at large?

16. What does the book suggest about the cost of ambition? Are the characters' sacrifices justified by their achievements?

17. What did you think of the ending of the book?

## Author Interview

I'm so excited to share this spoiler-free interview with you. I'm particularly thrilled that Layne graciously shared and linked to some great skating programs to watch if you can't get enough of Shaw and Rocha. Enjoy!!

**Sara Hildreth:** Can you give readers a brief summary of The Favorites for those who haven't read it yet?

**Layne Fargo:** A modern retelling of Wuthering Heights about the toxic, decades-spanning romance between a pair of hot mess ice dancers.

**SH:** Can you share your initial inspiration for the novel? How and at what point in the writing process did Wuthering Heights come into The Favorites?

**LF:** The Favorites came out of two other failed projects: a Gothic romance and a thriller about rival ice dance teams. I kept bouncing back and forth between the two, desperately trying to make them work but they just... didn't. I picked up Wuthering Heights, which I hadn't read since high school, hoping to find some inspiration for the Gothic book, and instead I thought: what about a Wuthering Heights retelling with ice dancers? Then I thought I'd lost my mind (this was deep into the pandemic FYI, when we were all feeling a little unhinged!), but my critique partner assured me it was a good idea. So I went for it and quickly found that mashing up Wuthering Heights and figure skating worked better than I could have imagined.

**SH:** What are some of your favorite nods to WH and the Brontës that appear in your novel?

**LF:** Pretty much all the character names are Brontë Easter eggs. Jane Currer = Jane Eyre + Charlotte Brontë's pen name Currer Bell. Inez Acton = Agnes Gray (Inez is the Spanish version of Agnes) + Anne Brontë's pen name Acton Bell. And of course Ellis Dean is Nelly Dean from Wuthering Heights + Emily Brontë's pen name Ellis Bell!

I can't get too specific about this one because it's a spoiler, but there's a character whose last name came from a real-life person who said some not so nice things about Emily Brontë back in the day — so giving their surname to this particular character is my petty literary revenge.

**SH:** You do an incredible job of building the world of elite figure skating. How did you go about researching everything you needed to know about ice dancing? I'm interested in everything from where you learned about moving up levels and local competitions to what brackets and choctaws are to what it's like to be an elite competitor in the sport.

**LF:** Since I wrote the book primarily during COVID lockdown, almost all of my research was online or from reading books, especially memoirs by skaters. I have a library science background and absolutely love to research — like it's hard for me to stop researching and actually write the damn book. All the old issues of U.S. Figure Skating's official magazine have been scanned and are freely available online, which was a treasure trove. The articles were useful, but so were the cheesy 90s and early 2000s-era ads!

**SH:** My favorite sections of the book were the documentary transcripts. You nailed so many different voices in these sections! Which characters were the most fun to write?

**LF:** Ellis and Inez were the most fun, because I got to bring in my snarky, queer, extremely online perspective on Kat and Heath's often tragically heterosexual life choices. The true fun was in creating the contrast between characters, though — contrast in their perspectives about the events covered in the documentary, and also contrast in their voices. I have a playwriting background, and establishing distinctive characters through dialogue alone is such a fun challenge. It was such a dream to have those parts of the book brought to life by a full cast of talented performers too — including actual Olympian Johnny Weir as Ellis!

**SH:** For readers who want to go down an ice dance rabbit hole after reading your book, can you share some of your favorite programs or skaters they can look up on YouTube?

**LF:** I always tell people to start with the gold-medal-winning iconic ice dance classics: Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean's "Bolero" from the 1984 Olympics, and Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir's Moulin Rouge! program from the 2018 Olympics.

Some other programs that have major Shaw & Rocha energy include Madison Hubbell and Zach Donohue's "Caught Out in the Rain" free dance, Virtue & Moir's "Say It Right" exhibition program, and this ultra-dramatic program about a toxic relationship by Lorraine McNamara and Anton Spiridonov.

And of course, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier's gorgeous Wuthering Heights program from the 2023-2024 season. My jaw dropped when I found out they were doing a WH-themed free dance, I was yelling at the TV like, SEE Wuthering Heights and ice dance DO go together!!

**SH:** Is there anything you'd like to share about The Favorites that you haven't gotten to yet or any question that you wish someone would ask you, but no one has yet? [Very vague spoiler ahead.]

**LF:** Again don't want to get into spoiler territory, but I've been genuinely surprised by how many people are upset about the book's ending, which is by far the happiest, most wholesome ending I've ever written (and maybe ever will write...). I considered a lot of different conclusions for the book, but only this one felt authentic for these particular characters and their eternally messy interpersonal dynamics. As an author I take it as a huge compliment, though, that readers have such strong feelings about these characters and how they wanted them to end up!

**SH:** Do you have any book recommendations for FictionMatters readers?

**LF:** If you enjoyed The Favorites, I think you'll also love the novels Finding Her Edge by Jennifer Iacopelli, Let the Games Begin by Rufaro Faith Mazarura, and Dances by Nicole Cuffy. Also figure skater Gracie Gold's gutsy memoir #Outofshapeworthlessloser is a must-read! I wish I'd had it when I was writing The Favorites, she really takes the skating world to task in a way that would make Katarina Shaw incredibly proud.

## **Author Biography**

Layne Fargo has a background in theater, women's studies, and library science, so it's only fitting that she now writes deliciously dramatic, unapologetically feminist stories for a living.

She's the bestselling author of the novels *The Favorites*, *They Never Learn*, and *Temper*, as well as co-author on the Widows Series, and her work has been translated into more than twenty languages. Layne lives in Chicago with her partner, their pets, and an ever-expanding collection of books she's definitely going to read before she dies.

## Reviews

### THE FAVORITES by Layne Fargo

Colleen Hoover–style romance heads to the Olympic rink. Buckle up.

Star-crossed figure skaters whiz through decades of melodrama on and off the ice.

Fargo's latest feature pairs skaters entwined by destiny and irradiated by fan and media obsession, as she cleverly tells her tale by alternating between narrative sections and clips from the script of a fictional 2024 documentary called *The Favorites: The Shaw & Rocha Story*. Katarina Shaw and Heath Rocha are “small-town Midwestern trash,” both orphans, he of mysterious origins. Teen lovers, they enter the world of skating at the 2000 Nationals, where they meet their rivals, brother and sister skaters Garrett and Bella Lin, the privileged twin children of figure skating icon-turned-coach Sheila Lin (and an anonymous Sarajevo Olympic Village sperm donor). For the next 14 years, violent passions, bloody on-ice accidents, bedroom betrayals, sabotage, paparazzi-driven scandals, and nonstop cliffhangers—“Unfortunately, it was only the beginning”—lead up to an epic brouhaha at the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia, by which time the reader’s capacity for outrage and surprise has gotten quite a workout. But don’t give up in the stretch: “NBC Sports commentator Kirk Lockwood reports live from the Sochi Olympics. ‘In all my years covering skating,’ he says, shaking his head solemnly, ‘I’ve never seen anything like this.’” Though the stereotype-driven characterizations of the skaters are a couple dimensions short of real or relatable—Heath in particular is a furious cipher—Fargo does a nice job with the narrators of her documentary. One of them, a former skater turned gossip blogger named Ellis Dean, can be relied on to spill the tea (“That program was the most passive-aggressive shit I’d ever seen—and I’m from the South, honey”), while an uptight U.S. Figure Skating official dryly tows the party line: “Ice dance can have a certain sensuality to it, yes. Many programs express the beauty of the love between a man and a woman. But what Ms. Shaw and Mr. Rocha were doing bordered on vulgarity.” After all the histrionics and hormones, the unlikely ending Fargo bestows on her characters is a hoot.