



How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life

By Mameve Medwed
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Introduction

Abby Randolph, a 33 Harvard drop-out, is a reluctant dealer indeed, renting a booth at a Boston antiques mart, but it was always her ex-lover who was interested in selling their wares. But when Abby is encouraged to go on the Antique Roadshow to discover the value of a chamber pot her late mother has left to her, she is shocked to discover that not only is it worth a whole lot of money, but that it also belonged to none other than Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself. But it's more than money that Abby receives from this discovery. And it's more than a lawsuit for the pot itself, slapped on her by her ex-best-friend and daughter of her mother's (female) lover. Rather, Abby embarks on a journey of rediscovery of self, of disputes both legal and romantic, friendships dissolved and gains, love and sex spurned and welcomed...and all because of a sickly 19th century poet known for a famous lover and a dog named Flush. Who could have imagined that a chamber pot could offer the kind of education you can't get at Harvard?

Questions for Discussion

1. Not only has Abby Randolph never forgotten her first love but she also has barely survived its loss. Are first loves the most indelible? And can you ever recapture those early feelings when you reconnect with your first love many years later?
2. Though not sisters, Abby and Lavinia certainly experience sibling rivalry. Is this the inevitable result of personality differences or something else? After what happens between them, is the friendship salvageable?
3. There are a lot of betrayals in this story. Clyde. Todd. Yet for Abby, Ned's is the ultimate betrayal. Can any of these characters' actions be excused or even forgiven?
4. If Abby and Ned, the boy next door, had known earlier that their mothers' dream was for them to end up together, would that realization have put the kibosh on any romance?
5. Can the reader understand why Abby lets Todd seduce her? Is she deluding herself? Can she—and the reader—justify her behavior? Discuss what, if she'd had her wits about her, she should have done.
6. In Ivy League Cambridge, the expectations of academic star parents are a burden each of their children has shouldered in his and her own way. How have such impossible standards affected Abby and Ned and Lavinia? How do these characters balance the hopes of their parents against what they themselves want?
7. Is Abby a wimp? Why is her first instinct not to take what is rightfully hers? How do you explain the choices Abby makes?
8. Mameve Medwed wanted to write about an object in contention. She originally considered something belonging to Freud, to Marie Antoinette, to Albert Einstein or Mark Twain. She picked the chamber pot both because the object is funny in and of itself and because of its juxtaposition with such a frail poetess. Do you agree with this choice? Or can you come up with other possibilities.
9. As we know, the mother/daughter relationship is often fraught. What effect has the mother/mother relationship on the mother/daughter bonds of both Abby and Lavinia? And how do the different ways these young women view their mothers and their mothers' lifestyle reflect their own characters?
10. How would this book change if it were written from Ned's point of view? Or Lavinia's? Would the reader's empathy for the characters shift depending upon who is telling the story?
11. Objects carry a lot of weight in this novel. How can what people collect define or complete them? How might possessions determine the choices they make in careers, friendships, lovers? What do your collections say about you?
12. What is the role of humor in this book? The author has suggested that comedy is often viewed as the stepchild in literature, that a funny, entertaining book will by its very nature be dismissed as "lite." Despite this unwarranted second-class citizenship, she claims that comedic writers deal with the same subject matter as heavy-duty novelists—love, life, death, divorce, children, marriage, morality. What are the universal themes in this novel and how are they changed—or not changed—by a comic rendering?
13. Because the Randolph and Potter dinner table talk is literate to the nth degree, do the references to EBB, E.E. Cummings, Virginia Woolf underscore and compliment the families' world? Are these references an intrinsic part of the story and characters or simply a layer of local color?
14. Did EBB really save Abby's life? Was the chamber pot a literal vessel of change or a piece of good luck?

15. Do you think Abby and Ned are headed for the happily ever after or a rockier marital road?

16. If there were a movie of this, how would you cast it?

Reading list:

Sonnets from the Portuguese—Elizabeth Barrett Browning
E.E. Cummings Anthology
Flush—Virginia Woolf
Objects of Desire: The Lives of Antiques and Those Who Pursue Them—Thatcher Freund
Hidden Treasures: Searching for Masterpieces—Joan Barzily Freund
The Barretts of Wimpole Street—Rudolf Bessier
Snatched From Oblivion: A Cambridge Memoir—Marion Cannon Schlesinger
Vera: Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov—Stacy Schiff

Novels set in Cambridge:

Mail-Mameve Medwed
Host Family-Mameve Medwed
While I was Gone—Sue Miller
Love Story—Erich Segal
The Namesake—Jhumpa Lahiri
The Man of the House—Stephen McCauley
The Dogfather—Susan Conant
The Probable Future—Alice Hoffmann

Academic novels Mameve Medwed loves:

The Way Men Act—Elinor Lipman
Joe College—Tom Perrotta
Prep—Curtis Sittenfeld

About the Author

Mameve Medwed is the author of three previous critically acclaimed novels, and is a long-time teacher of fiction writing. Her short stories, essays and reviews have appeared in many publications, including *Redbook*, *Missouri Review*, *The Boston Globe*, *Playgirl* and *Newsday*. Born in Maine, she currently lives in Cambridge, Mass. with her husband.