

“Buy the book. Find a free weekend and a quiet place. . . . Recall what it means to know a world through the surface of a page, created in the words of a gifted stranger, made uniquely yours by your own storehouse of experience and the mystery of your subconscious.”

—*The Globe and Mail*

“Few novels truly deserve the description ‘rollicking’ in the way Mary Novik’s *Conceit* does. A hearty, boiling stew of a novel, served up in rich old-fashioned story-telling. Novik lures her readers into the streets of a bawdy seventeenth-century London with a nudge and a wink and keeps them there with her infectious love of detail and character. A raunchy, hugely entertaining read that will leave you at once satiated and hungry for more.”

—Gail Anderson-Dargatz, author of *The Cure for Death by Lightning*

“Fans of novels like A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* and Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl With a Pearl Earring* will enjoy Novik’s perspective on one of the great figures of English literature.”  
—*The Vancouver Sun*



Mary Novik grew up in a large family in Victoria, British Columbia. She now lives with her husband in Vancouver where she is at work on a new novel. For a blog, biography, photos, more book club materials, and a Q&A with Mary visit [www.marynovik.com](http://www.marynovik.com)

*Conceit*  
Doubleday Canada

Longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize

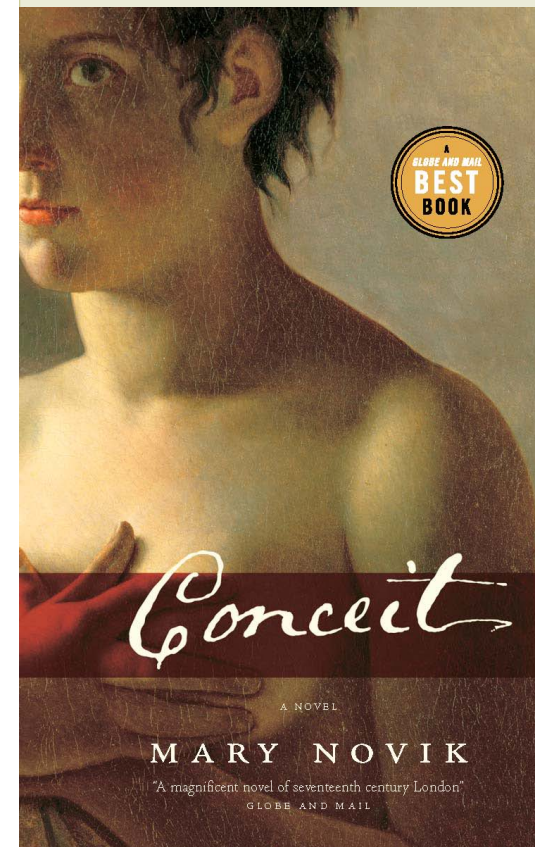
Winner of the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize

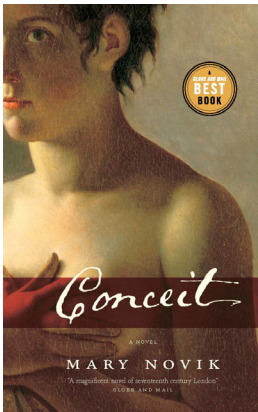
A *Quill & Quire* Book of the Year

A *Globe and Mail* Best Book

[www.marynovik.com](http://www.marynovik.com)

## Book club guide for *Conceit* by Mary Novik





“[An] extraordinary debut novel”—*Quill & Quire*

Set against the lively backdrop of seventeenth-century England, from Elizabeth I’s court to the teeming, bawdy streets of Restoration London, this audacious novel vividly portrays the lives of men and women driven by passion.

Pegge Donne is still a rebellious girl, barely in her teens and already too clever for a world that values learning only in men, when her father, the famous poet John Donne, begins arranging marriages for his five daughters—including Pegge.

Pegge, however, is desperate to experience the all-consuming passion that led to her parents’ clandestine elopement. She sets out to win the love of Donne’s friend, Izaak Walton, and tries to draw the secrets of desire out of her father during his final days.

Intertwined with Pegge’s singular voice are those of John Donne and Ann More, each telling their own story of a love that swept all before it. Exquisitely written, *Conceit* is seductive, elegant, and richly satisfying.

## QUESTIONS

1. Why does Pegge risk her life to rescue her father’s effigy from St. Paul’s during the London fire of 1666?
2. Pegge is bright, quick-witted and independent yet chooses to lavish her attentions on Izaak Walton—a man she sometimes calls “idle” and “oafish”. Why does Pegge choose Walton as the object of her affections?
3. What does the delayed arrival of Pegge’s “fleurs” herald? How does Pegge’s emotional turmoil during menstruation affect her perceptions of everyone around her—sisters, father, Walton, even her dead mother?
4. Why does Pegge so fervently covet her time with her father, particularly when he is dying? Why does she protect those moments so vigorously from her sister and Walton? Why does she run away from the Deanery after her father’s death and roam the streets of London like a vagrant?
5. What convinces Pegge to accept William Bowles as her husband?
6. As well as portraying John and Ann’s marriage, and Pegge and William’s, *Conceit* also includes glimpses into the marriages of Samuel Pepys and Elizabeth, Walton and his two wives, and Constance and her husbands. Why do you think these relationships are included? Do they suggest an evolution in love-relationships and marriage in the 17<sup>th</sup> century?
7. Intertwined with Pegge’s unique voice are the voices of her parents, John Donne and Ann More. What are your impressions of Ann and the story *she* tells? Was she really “slain by love, at far too young an age”? Why does she lie in wait for Donne to die?
8. What do you believe is the essence of John and Ann’s love? How does Pegge’s love for William differ? Do you believe one relationship is a truer expression of love than the other?
9. Pegge believes that after becoming a priest, her father decided to “cleanse himself of the taint of having loved”. Consider whether or not—and why—Donne believes the love he feels for his wife is a sin.
10. When William discovers Pegge’s notes in Walton’s biography of Donne, he is intent on deciphering her code. What do you believe Pegge has written between the lines? What was her motivation? What is your reaction to the conversation between William and Pepys about the volume?
11. While a visitor at Clewer after surviving the Great Fire, Walton is surprised by an amorous late night visitor. Walton believes it to be Con. Do you agree?
12. What motivates Pegge to return her father’s effigy to St. Paul’s?
13. Does Donne ultimately possess the secrets of love that Pegge seeks? Do you believe these secrets to be knowable? What are your impressions of Pegge’s final attempt to pull the secrets from her father? Why does a full revelation of this incident occur only after the Great Fire of 1666?
14. Is there a part of the story of *Conceit* that you can’t leave behind? Is there a character you fell in love with? What is it about the character that appeals to you the most?
15. Although *Conceit* is a fictional account of the lives of John Donne, Ann More, and Pegge Donne—as well as Izaak Walton and Samuel Pepys—reading about the real people might shed light on how the author fictionalizes them. Visit [www.marynovik.com](http://www.marynovik.com) to learn more about the 17th-century backgrounds. What did you discover that enriches your reading of *Conceit*?



“A magnificent novel of 17th-century London”  
—*The Globe and Mail*