

“In the tradition of Tracy Chevalier, A.S. Byatt, Sarah Dunant, and—more recently—Cathy Marie Buchanan, Mary Novik’s captivating second novel imagines the circumstances surrounding the creation of venerated works of art . . . Brimming with political, cultural, and religious detail, *Muse* depicts a period of stark contrasts when soaring works of human ingenuity and creativity were produced amid social corruption, degradation, and plague.” — Dana Hansen, *Quill & Quire*

Muse “is rich and powerful, wiser than it may initially appear, and thought-provoking on a number of levels. Solange herself is a stunning fictional creation . . . allow yourself to be swept up in an account of how the world changed, and of the woman who was at the centre of it all.” — Robert J. Wiersema, *The Vancouver Sun*

“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*



Mary Novik grew up in a large family in Victoria, British Columbia. She lives in Vancouver, where she is at work on a new novel. For a blog, biography, photos, backstory for *Muse* and *Conceit*, and a Q&A with Mary visit www.marynovik.com

Muse

Doubleday Canada, 2013
ISBN 978-0-385-66821-7

Also published in French
and Italian translations

Conceit

Doubleday Canada, 2007
ISBN 978-0-385-66206-2

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

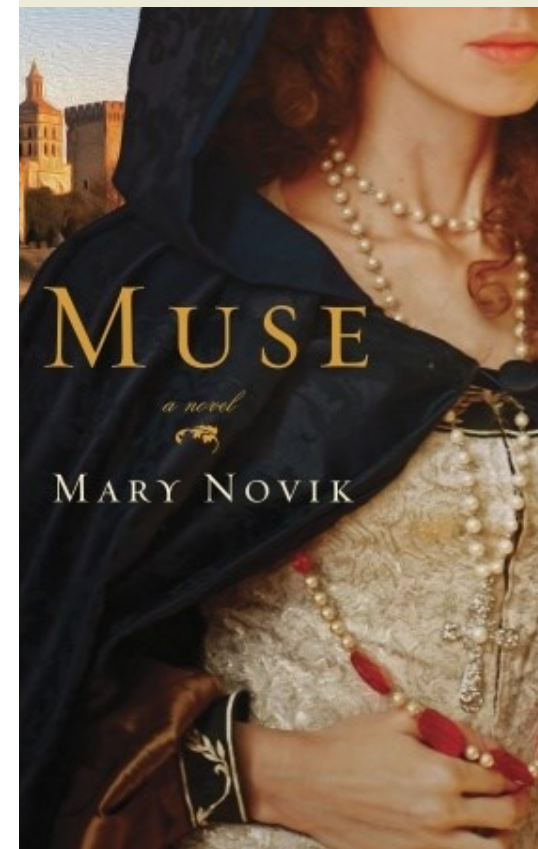
www.marynovik.com

Book club guide

for

Muse

by Mary Novik



Muse by Mary Novik

Richly engaging historical adventure in the vein of *The Winter Palace* and *The Malice of Fortune*.

Muse is the story of the charismatic woman who was the inspiration for the poet Francesco Petrarca. Solange Le Blanc begins life in the tempestuous streets of 14th century Avignon, a city of men dominated by the Pope and his palace. When her mother, a harlot, dies in childbirth, Solange is raised by Benedictines who believe she has the gift of clairvoyance. Trained as a scribe, but troubled by disturbing visions and tempted by a more carnal life, she escapes to Avignon, where she becomes entangled in a love triangle with Petrarca, becoming not only his muse but also his lover.

Later, when her gift for prophecy catches the Pope's ear, Solange becomes Pope Clement VI's confidante and mistress in the most celebrated court in Europe. When the plague kills a third of Avignon's population, Solange is accused of sorcery and is forced once again to reinvent herself and fight against a final, mortal conspiracy.

Muse is a sweeping historical epic that magically evokes the Renaissance, capturing a time and place caught between the shadows of the past and the promise of a new cultural awakening.

QUESTIONS FOR *MUSE*

from Doubleday Canada

1. In *The Golden Legend*, the book read aloud at mealtimes in the abbey, many female saints are tortured or mutilated (losing heads, breasts, eyes, or teeth) because they refuse to sacrifice their virginity. How do these stories resonate with Solange in *Muse*?
2. Born at Pentecost, Solange speaks in tongues and has dramatic visions. What do you think her visions mean? Sometimes she has doubts that they are authentic. What do you think?
3. Images recur throughout the novel, for instance eels, insects, rivers, bad weather, planetary systems. What did you notice about floods and lightning? Discuss the moon and sun as powerful forces in Solange's world.
4. When she meets Francesco, Solange tells him, "I was trained in an abbey and came here to earn a living with my pen, just as you did" (p. 95). Does she triumph over the odds of a woman succeeding in Avignon, a city of men? Is she victimized or empowered by her experience?
5. Discuss the novel's title. Who is the muse? Could there be more than one? Does Francesco have a legitimate need for two women in his life?
6. Why does Solange continue to love Francesco despite his broken vows and apparent selfishness? Does he deserve her lifelong devotion?
7. Solange takes lovers and earns notoriety as a prophet and courtesan in local folklore. Would you say she is made more or less powerful by her sexual alliances? Why does she behave in this fashion?
8. In the portrayal of the Avignon popes, their lavish life style, and their sometimes sinful behaviour, do you believe that Novik was drawing more on history or on her imagination? Can you think of any echoes in the church today? You might like to visit the author's website at www.marynovik.com to gain insight into her writing process.
9. When Solange is attacked by the smiths who want to collect pieces of her clothes and body to ward off the plague, she is rescued by the pope's guards. "To my shame, I shrank from my dark roots and became, once more, a creature of the light" (p. 265). What does she mean by this?
10. Discuss the relationships between mothers and daughters throughout the book. Do the

relationships between women come full circle at the end of the novel?

11. Solange is taught from childhood that lost body parts will be reunited with their owners after death. How does this theme evolve, from the bracelet of hair around her mother's wrist to the ring Solange discovers at the end of the novel?
12. At the end of *Muse*, Solange is still seeking to get revenge on her rival, Laura. Why does she dislike Laura so much? Do you think she is responsible for Laura's death?
13. When Solange fantasizes about her reunion with Francesco after death, she imagines "a laurel wreath clinging victoriously to my brow as I embraced him in the ecstasy of our resurrected flesh" (p. 307). Does she just crave his love, or does she wish to share his fame as well?
14. Discuss the letter that Solange writes to her daughters at the novel's close, in which she begs her children to protect her life story against false biographers. What does she hope to accomplish by confessing her own sins? Do you think she will succeed?
15. Would you describe Solange as a woman hero, or an anti-hero? What do you think of the choices she has made in life? Did elemental forces or destiny play a role in the unfolding of events?
16. If you read the novel a second time, knowing the ending, would you see Solange's journey in a new light and interpret it differently?



"Solange is a compelling voice and the reader is as helpless to her seductive charms as the powerful men in her life are." —*Globe and Mail*