

How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life

by Mameve Medwed

HarperCollins

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY

Abigail Randolph is having a mid-life crisis in her thirties. She's a Harvard drop-out who is spending her days in a rented booth at a Boston antiques market. Selling antiques was never her idea of fun. In fact, it was Clyde (the *C* of *A & C Collectibles*) who wanted to get into the business. At the opening of the story, Clyde has taken off with another woman, leaving Abigail wishing she had chosen another name for her business. At the same time, she is dealing with the fallout from a scandalous book her ex-lover wrote, detailing all of her flaws and mistakes. Not to mention that the man in question is the son of her mother's (female) lover, who perished with her mother in an earthquake the year before.

Following the death of her mother and her lover Henrietta, their daughter Lavinia is given the task of splitting up their mothers' possessions. Of course, she keeps the goods for herself and her brother. The only thing Abby gets out of the deal is an old chamber pot. When a colleague suggests she take the pot onto *Antiques Roadshow*, Abby complies, but she goes expecting to be dismissed early in the evening. As things turn out, the pot is worth \$75,000 and is said to belong to none other than Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself. Soon a lawsuit follows as Lavinia and Ned sue for the chamber pot. Through all of the trials and tribulations, Abby is forced to re-examine herself and her relationships. Abigail emerges as a stronger, more confident woman in the end. All because of a chamber pot.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Children often feel the need to win the approval of their parents, even into adulthood. How do the lives and examples Abigail, Lavinia and Ned's mothers impact the choices the children make as adults?
2. It is said that money can divide a family following a death. This is certainly true in the novel. In what ways were the characters divided before their mothers' deaths? How do those deaths further separate the children?
3. Is Clyde totally without redemption?

4. In what ways does Abigail's self-esteem rely on how she is seen by others? Give examples.
5. Abby and Lavinia were childhood friends before their mothers ended up together. After what transpires between them, do you believe they can salvage that friendship?
6. Abby's first instinct is to give in and not fight. Why do you think that is?
7. What role does humor play in the novel?
8. Do we define ourselves by our failures, or our successes? Why?
9. How does each of Abby's relationships change once the origins of the chamber pot become known?
10. Do you think Abby and Ned stand a chance?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Mameve Medwed is the author of three others works of fiction, *Mail*, *Host Family*, and *The End of an Error*. Her first novel, *Mail*, has been optioned for motion picture development. Mameve lives in Cambridge with her husband. They have two grown sons.

HELPFUL LINKS

The author's website: <http://www.mamevemedwed.com/index.php>

HarperCollins Readers' Guide to the novel:

<http://www.harpercollins.com/author/authorExtra.aspx?isbn13=9780060831196&displayType=readingGuide>

SUGGESTED READING

Freund, Thatcher. *Objects of Desire: The Lives of Antiques and Those Who Pursue Them*. Pantheon Books. 1994.

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Wolf, Virginia. *Flush: a Biography*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1933.



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