

The Sixteen Pleasures Study Guide

The Sixteen Pleasures by Robert Hellenga

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Plot Summary

"The Sixteen Pleasures" by Robert Hellenga is a novel filled with art, intrigue, and self-discovery. Margot Harrington, age 29, decides to fly from Chicago, where she lives, to Italy. She plans to help repair old books that were damaged when the Arno River flooded. In Italy, Margot learns about religion, love, comes to terms with her mother's death, and learns about convent living.

Margot spent time in Italy with her mother when Margot was younger. It was a very happy period of her life where her future looked golden. Life took a harsh turn and Rita's mother died. Now Margot is back in Italy surrounded by the memories.

She works with people from Harvard, a school she almost attended herself. She is a translator and she gets to work sharing her book restoration knowledge with students. Margot meets a man who restores paintings who takes a great interest in her life. Through his connections, she finds a place to stay long-term, a convent.

Margot has a gift for book restoration. She is working in the convent, trying to repair flood-damaged books in the convent library. It is strange for her since she is not religious and publicly announces the fact. While she is in the convent, she develops close relationships with the nuns and comes to greatly respect and admire them. While Margot is working in the library, they find a rare book, which the abbess shows her. It is a pornographic book from a famous artist and it is the only copy left since the book was banned. The abbess asks Margot to take the book to determine a value for it.

Seeing it as the adventure of her life, Margot lovingly restores the book while keeping it out of the greedy bishop's hands. He has heard about the book and she foils him by giving him a copy of another old book while she restores the Aretino. As she is doing this, she is growing as a person and learning about love.

Life is looking wonderful once again for Margot after many years of darkness. Then she is betrayed. This time, she finds the will inside herself to go on with life. She sticks to her original goal of getting the rare book to auction and using the money to help the nuns at the convent. This takes a serious amount of planning and strategy since she has to prove that the book came from out of the country. She also has to arrange finances so that the bishop never gets hold of the donation.

Margot finds a way to accomplish all this. As she does so and as she travels around, she is able come to terms with her mother's death. She also learns to appreciate her family and home at an entirely different level.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

In Chapter 1, entitled "Where I Want to Be," 29-year-old Margot Harrington decides to fly from Chicago, where she lives to Italy. She plans to help repair old books that were damaged when the Arno River flooded. Against her father's wishes, she embarks on the journey, even though it also means that she might lose her job. Flashing back in time mentally, Margot remembers when she was almost in college, felt free, and had her life planned out. Life did not go as she had planned.

Slipping back and forth from past memories to current travels, Margot looks deeply into the world around her. She merges past experiences with the present. On a train going through France, she is mistaken for a French woman and inadvertently learns intimate details about two American women traveling in the same car.

She escapes to the next compartment where she meets a young man who drew her attention at a previous stop. What could have turned into a delightful tryst ends up falling flat. As she realizes that there is nothing exciting happening, the train conductor comes in to tell her to go back to her former compartment.

Margot heads back to her former seat only to find that her American identity was revealed by the conductor. As she explains herself to the offended women, she finds that she has established an emotional attachment to the ladies, especially after she almost misses her train at a stop where she is trying to purchase food for them and they illegally rescue her by pulling the emergency cord.

In Chapter 2, called "Pockets of Silence," Margot gets off the train in Florence and is trying to decide where she should go. She has not kept in touch with any of her former friends so she cannot stay with them. She wants to stay in a boarding house for the night, but none of the ones near the train station are open. She asks the taxi driver to take her to a boarding house near the center, and notices that it is beginning to rain harder.

The taxi driver tells her a bit about the flooding as they are driving, then the vehicle gets a flat tire. A man comes over with an umbrella and offers assistance. He notices that she has an accent and begins to speak with her in French. The taxi driver says that she speaks Italian. Margot keeps her American heritage under wraps, but the stranger soon figures it out. The stranger invites her to stay at his place, but she declines.

She stays at that Pension Medici, yet keeps herself separate from the other Americans of staying there. Margot decides to take the next day as it comes. After breakfast, she heads outside and finds herself in an area where she and her mother used to walk. It brings back memories of her mother and her childhood.



Margot remembers how much she loved living in the area back in 1952 when she was 15. Life was not easy at first. She had a hard time fitting in at her first school, and their house had many problems. The problems were so overwhelming that they led Margot's un-religious mother to church where she met a man named Señor Bruni who seem to make everything better for them. It wasn't until years later that Margot realized that Señor Bruno had become her mother's lover. She tried to be upset about it, but was actually thrilled.

She thinks about a time when her mother was dying and her mother had asked to record messages that she wanted to give to her family after her death. Margot's father set up an elaborate recording system for her. The family could frequently hear her dictating into the device even in her weakened state. Years after her death, the family was finally ready to listen to the tapes. When they put them on, they discover that there was an error in the recording. None of the mother's words had ever made it to tape. Papa broke down and cried. Margot admits that from that point on her life is filled with little pockets of silence. Whenever there is a period of silence between sounds, such as when the telephone rings, she finds herself listening for the sound of her mother's voice.

Chapter 3, "The Road Not Taken," begins with a memory of a time when Margot visited the Villa I Tatti. She had gone there for an interview to get into Harvard. If she makes it, it will be an exciting life for her where she can network with others and make great things happen. She made it into Harvard and everyone, especially her mother, was ecstatic. This was before her mother became ill. The illness changed Margot's course of living, and she never did attend Harvard. The college became a taboo subject in the household, unless someone is saying something negative about it. However, after her mother's death, Margot finds a stack of Harvard magazines. She thinks about what her life would be like now if she had attended Harvard. Margot sees a ghostly double of herself looking sharp and knowing exactly how to act and behave. She names this alternate self Margeaux.

Margot walks into Villa I Tatti to see what her assignment is in the relief effort. She does not really know how to act, but Margeaux does. She discovers that it is her job to translate for Professor Eugene Chapin who comes from the Houghton library at Harvard. He is expected that evening. Heading out to explore the city, Margot looks at the Mud Angels, the 20-somethings who are in the town to help with flood damage and who live outdoors. She realizes that she is getting too old to appreciate living like that.

The next day, Margot meets Eugene, the man she was supposed to meet the night before, and he doesn't impress her very much. He tries to make himself look good in every arena, but can't always back up his actions with reality. Thinking he knows best, he doesn't listen to advice, even when discussing a topic he is unfamiliar with. After 10 days of working together, Margot is in a taxi with him discussing a problem with the drying process for books. The taxi driver comes up with a solution. Everyone is in good spirits, and Professor Chapin asks Margot if she wants to be his lover. She can't decide at first. Margot is relatively inexperienced and nervous about the proposal. Margeaux persuades her to go through with it. It is not terrible, but it is not great, either.



The next day is Thanksgiving, and Eugene is supposed to take Margot out for dinner. He gets the opportunity to do some business networking, and leaves her stranded on Thanksgiving day. Margot remembers a poem that her mother always talked about by Robert Frost entitled "The Road Not Taken." As she thinks about this poem, she thinks about her alternate person and watches Margeaux leave.

Chapter 4, "Un Uomo Mediterraneo," shows Dottor Alessandro Postiglione looking out over the Piazza. He is part of the restoration process and enjoys it. The first part of the chapter is written from his point of view. He watches as a colleague, Professor Steckley, sorts through the people who are invited for the Thanksgiving dinner. Alessandro notices one woman who is left behind. It's the woman he tried to help on that rainy night when a taxi had a flat tire. He can't understand why the American men have left her behind. Taken with her, he observes her as she heads out. A German Shepherd breaks loose and a little boy tries to get him back. The girl speaks to the dog, who listens and obeys her.

Dottor Postiglione walks over to introduce himself to her and notices that she is upset. He reminds her of the time they met on the rainy night and invites her out for coffee. As they converse over their coffee, she tells them about the train ride and explains that she is a book conservator who is doing some translation for Professor Chapin.

Postiglione has heard of Chapin and the way he solved the problem with the drying process. He mentions this to the woman, and she tells him that the man is not very impressive. She also lets him know that it was the taxi driver, not Chapin, who came up with the drying idea.

After they converse some more, Alessandro suggests that she look for a position at the Carmelite convent, where they could use help with their books. His cousin is the abbess there. The girl explains that she is not religious, but that isn't a problem. They part on good terms but without any solid answers about her work plans.

The chapter switches back to Margot's point of view. Jed comes to make love to her again, but now she is turned off by him. Not only did he abandon her on Thanksgiving, but she does not appreciate his act. She tells him that she might enter the convent and he fires her.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The main character is introduced in Chapter One. The book is written in first person, connecting the reader with the main character. Margot Harrington clearly sets herself apart from everyone else. She points this out herself with a metaphor in which she says her former English teacher said people were like onions with many layers and no inner core. Margot sees herself more like a peach or other fruit with a rock in its core.

She remembers a time when life was good, back when she was 19. It was right before her mom became seriously ill and Margot's world left its steady course. As she heads to Italy when she is 29, Margot remembers former trips to Europe and Italian influences in



her household such as her father's cooking. While she is at odds with him because he told her not to take the trip, she also appears to have fond memories of him.

Margot shows aloofness and disdain for those around her. She ignores her father's advice, goes against her boss' wishes even when it might mean that she loses her job, and keeps herself separated from the women in her train compartment. Even as she keeps herself separated, her thoughts are frequently sexual, demonstrating a lack of inhibition inherent in her soul. A reader knows that she feels a bond with Italy and dislikes France many pages before she says it outright.

Chapter 2 Gives a little bit of insight into Margot's character. Although she is now arriving in a town where she once lived, she has lost contact with all her previous friends, a fact that she admits she doesn't even understand herself. She talks with the driver, and doesn't get overly upset when the taxicab gets a flat tire. Although she tells the reader that she feels as if the flat tire is a nuisance, she doesn't take it out on the taxi driver. She is always looking for signs, and now realizes that the world is full of meanings, but they all contradict themselves.

Margot talks easily with a stranger who offers her a place to stay, but is wise enough to turn down the offer since she doesn't know him. Everywhere she goes, she separates herself from the Americans, and doesn't admit that she is American unless people ask her right out. This chapter also demonstrates her relationship with her mother as she delves into her memory to a time when she and her mother lived in the area. She admits that when she found out her mother had a lover, she was secretly thrilled. Through another memory, Marco shows that she is still constantly looking for her mother around her.

Chapter 3 shows how intelligent Margot is. The reader learns that she has a gift with languages, especially modern languages. In this chapter, she introduces a ghostly double of herself. This double she names Margeaux. In her opinion, this is who she would have been if she had gone to Harvard and moved on with her life instead of taking care of her sick mother.

Margeaux is very sophisticated and knows how to act in situations where Margot feels uncomfortable. She takes advice from her other self for it while, but eventually comes to a point where she realizes that her second self holds no place in her world now. She refers to the poem her mother had loved by Robert Frost entitled "The Road Not Taken." Margot realizes that there is no "other road." Her only life is the one that she is living now.

In Chapter 4, there is a shift in point of view. This chapter is shown through Dottor Alessandro Postiglione's eyes for most of the chapter. This hints that he might become a character of importance. The reader discovers that he is the stranger who offered the umbrella earlier in the book to Margot. Now he runs into her again, and the reader sees how he develops an attraction to her not just for looks, but also for her personality. He is very caring and helps her out of embarrassing situations and tries to make her feel at



home in the country. When he finds out she is running short on funds, he offers a place for her to stay.

The end of this chapter flips back to Margot's point of view. She shows strength of character when she stands up to the man she translates for, who has become her lover. Analyzing her life, she realizes that she is ready to take control.



Chapters 5-8

Chapters 5-8 Summary

"What Nuns Talk about a Night" is the title of Chapter 5. In this chapter, Margot gives a brief history of the religious order and comes to the content to settle into her new room. At first, her cell reminds her of a prison. She doesn't have any place to hide the books that she has brought, and there are no windows. She used her imagination to put herself in another place where she was happier. After she settles in, she heads out into the corridor to explore the convent. Margot sees signs of flood damage, and comes across some frescoes. Although she is not normally impressed by that type of painting, she finds herself drawn to them because they had been done by a woman named Lucia who entered the convent back in 1714. The woman had also brought a considerable dowry.

As Margot is looking at the paintings, the abbess comes up to her and introduces herself. She is very welcoming and nonjudgmental. They discuss the library at the convent, and Madre Badessa, the abbess, talks about how it's more important to have the quality of the books that they have in their small library than the quantity of books found in other libraries such as the Harvard library. She offers a brief history of books, including how many of the books that are best for learning are channeled through monastic communities.

The two enter the library, and Margot is introduced to the sisters she will be working with. They come up with a plan of action. At first, Margot thinks that they need a man with some strength to help take apart the bookshelves that have swelled. The nuns show her how to readjust her thinking to make the task manageable without a man. She assesses the books and realizes that they aren't too damaged inside. However, there is a lot to do with the outside of the books. The team sets to work, and Margot discovers that the nuns work in silence. She has a hard time with this at first, but after a while she appreciates it. Nothing is said that doesn't need to be said.

Margot settles into a rhythm at the convent. She enjoys working with the sisters and appreciates their talent in many different areas. The book restoration is going well. She needs some supplies, but is hesitant to get back in touch with Alessandro. After a while, she has to, and he finds ways to give her the supplies that she needs.

Margot enjoys the evenings when the nuns gathered together to converse. She learns about the inner workings of the convent and its vast land holdings as well as the politics of the church. After few weeks, the book restoration is going well, and Margot starts to become more curious about the nun's lives. She asks specifically why some of them became nuns. She sees that the story is different for each person. Margot wonders what it would be a nun herself.



Chapter 6, "What Sort of Thing Is a Man?" opens with Margot returning from one of her afternoon forays. She senses that something is wrong and discovers that two of the postulants are in trouble. She invites one of her coworkers, Sister Gemma, to her room and asks what happened. Margot discovers that the postulants have discovered a pornographic book in the library, and that they had kept it overnight. Margot is very interested in seeing the book.

Margot is called to Madre Badessa's office where she is asked if she could put a value on the book. She thinks she might be able to. She and the abbess have a discussion about God and of vows. The abbess challenges Margot to define which vow is the hardest to keep. The abbess gives the answer as obedience. Margot is surprised since she thought poverty and chastity would be more difficult. The abbess points out that it's very difficult to be obedient to the bishop, especially when he doesn't think women should have the power that they are able to keep because of Lucia's endowment.

When Margot opens the book, she is shocked and embarrassed by the images represented in the etchings. They are very graphic, and it was disturbing viewing them in front of Madre Badessa. The abbess is all business, however. She knows that the convent has been hit hard by the floods, and that they might not be financially viable after all the damage to their properties. She tells Margot what she thinks might be the history surround the book and suggests that it might help save the convent's library from the bishop who thought it was in poor form for women to have a library anyway. Madre Badessa gives the book to Margot to take care of.

Chapter 7, "Pray without Ceasing," begins with a flashback to the flood on November 4. It addresses what Alessandro did that day. He heard about the rising waters, and he left his upstairs apartment doors wide open to help others in need. He then went off to the museum to try to save the masterpieces.

Abbott Remo comes to him in anguish, worried about the frescoes. He says that if the frescoes are ruined, the monastery will be ruined since it is a main tourist attraction. Alessandro goes with the monk to assess the damage. He discovers that they are having a problem with calcium nitrates. In the past, he recommended that they install a moisture barrier, and when they neglected to listen to his advice, it resulted in this damage. Alessandro does not hold a grudge.

In Chapter 8, "Una Cittadina," Margot is out in the shopping area. She heads over to the coffee shop where she went on Thanksgiving day, and sits down in a private corner to read the book that was now in her possession. She checks it for damage and realizes that the inside is not badly damaged. The book is actually two works bound together. The first is a prayer book, and the second is the Aretino. There are sonnets written alongside the engravings, and she has a hard time reading them because they are so crude and coarse.

While she did not appreciate the sonnets, she is very drawn to the drawings. They seem private to her, and Margot feels as if she is part of the process and not just a spectator. She decides to look for Alessandro to see if he can help her determine the value of the



book. His secretary tells her that he was working. She goes to look at some frescoes at the Badia, remembering how much she enjoyed going there with her mother. She finds Alessandro at the Lodovici Chapel, working. After watching him work for it while, she offers to help, and he accepts. Margot helps for the rest of the day. After they leave, she realizes that she left her bag behind. Alessandro says it will be safe. She tells him about the book and asks him to look at it. She tells him that she is enjoying living at the convent.

The next day her bag is delivered to the convent. The book is no longer in it, but a newspaper clipping is. It's a summary of the previous day's event in which she is named as a *cittidina*, which makes her very happy.

Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Margot enters the convent to live in Chapter 5. She has made it clear that she is not religious, but she is open to learning more about the people who do live there by choice. She shows some knowledge of the history of convent and is ready to explore her new domain. At first she feels as if the place is a dungeon, but she uses her imagination to make it more interesting.

As she explores, the reader comes to understand that she appreciates art in frames much more than she appreciates art on the walls. However, she is drawn to things created by women. When she meets Madre Badessa, the Mother Abbess, Margot has an interesting reaction. The abbess tells her that she wants to treat her as if she were her own daughter, and Margot is grateful beyond words. The woman reminds her of her own mother. This scene particularly shows the reader the gaping hole left in Margot's world when her mother died, even though she was already old enough to be considered a woman.

After the talk, Margot begins to develop an appreciation for the history behind the convent library. She meets her co-workers and also develops an appreciation for the nuns themselves. At first it's difficult for her to work with the same amount of silence the nuns work in. Eventually it becomes soothing to her.

Instead of fighting this strange new world, Margot easily adapts to it. She is curious about what makes the nuns choose their own callings and has the tenacity to inquire about it. She is reminded of her own relationship with her sisters and looks inside herself to see if she might have her own religious calling. She's not really sure where she stands in this arena.

In Chapter 6, the reader finds out that Margot is more innocent than one might have imagined. She learns about the book that was found in the library that is filled with pornographic etchings. It embarrasses her to look at the book, especially in front of the abbess. Although she is embarrassed by it, she also appreciates the artistry and possible value of the book.



The book seems to be moving forward at a faster pace once the Aretino is found and shown to Margot in Chapter 6. The momentum is broken in Chapter 7, which is once again Postiglione's point of view. Not only is it in his view, but it's a flashback to November 4 when the city flooded. This is before he even met Margot.

In this chapter, the reader learns a bit of the science behind art restoration. Readers also learn about Alessandro, himself. Once a prisoner of war, he is willing to work hard to protect things he values. He is also very forgiving. The abbot had not heeded his previous advice, which would have saved the frescoes during the flood. Instead of harping on this, he is willing to move forward without holding a grudge to help save the beautiful paintings.

Chapter 8 returns to Margot's point of view. She is going to look at the book in a private place and goes to the place where she had coffee with Alessandro. As she read the comments that accompany the engravings, she is mortified. She can't help blushing, but she is also extremely intrigued by it. Two hours pass before she even realizes it as she analyzes the book.

Margot decides to find somebody who could help her place a value on the book. She looks for Alessandro, and when she finds him he is working on the frescoes. She begins to help him. For the first time, the two work together, both bringing their restoration knowledge to saving works of art. At the chapter closes, Margot learns about a newspaper article that mentions her as an anonymous cittadina and she comments that she was as pleased as if she had been presented with the key to the city. She has found a place where she is appreciated.



Chapters 9-12

Chapters 9-12 Summary

"Non Voglio Morire," Chapter 9, revolves around death. At the very beginning of the chapter Sister Agata Agape becomes ill. Margot misses her presence in the evenings. Father Francisco has apartments at the other end of the convent from the infirmary, and he makes it clear that he doesn't want to be disturbed unnecessarily. Margot heads to the infirmary to say goodbye to the dying nun. The nun says she doesn't want to die.

Margot thought that would be the last time that she would see her, however this was not the case. When it is time for Sister Gemma to visit, she is very nervous. She asks Margot to join her. After expressing concern over whether or not to call the priest, they are informed that Sister Agata said she doesn't want the priest to come. This leads to a discussion about religion with Sister Gemma who is concerned about the other one's soul if she dies without the presence of a priest. During the night, the sick nun dies. It reminds Margot of her mother's death.

Chapter 10, "The Sixteen Pleasures of Pietro Aretino," begins with Margot visiting Alessandro's apartment every afternoon to work on the book. She has taken the book apart, washed it before interleaving it with absorbent paper and set it in a thymol chamber. Sometimes Alessandro, who she calls Sandro now, is present when Margot arrives and sometimes he is not, but shows up while she is working. She has her own key to the apartment. They brew a pot of espresso and talk.

The two discuss each other's past and talk about the book. They analyze the book's possible history. Sandro and Margot become lovers and for the first time, she understands the delight and joy of lovemaking. Sandro is a true romantic and makes her feel beautiful. After their first time of making love, Margot returns the convent late and is called in to Madre Badessa's office. She thinks she is in trouble, but aside from saying that she had been worried about her, Madre Badessa doesn't mention anything about Margot's evening. She asks when Margot is planning to leave the country. Margot tells her that she is planning to leave before Christmas.

Madre Badessa tells Margot that she is willing to stay there as long as she wants. She gives a brief history of how she ended up in the convent. Then she goes on to say that the bishop has learned about the book and wants to see it. The abbess regrets giving the book to Margot and making her feel responsible for it. She asks Margot to bring the book back.

The next day Margot meets the bishop, who she immediately dislikes. He reprimands her for not calling the priest when Sister Agata was dying, even though it was the nun's wish. Margot lies about the whereabouts of the book when questioned specifically about it. The rest of the chapter focuses primarily on the history of the book, how the book might have ended up in the convent library, and the magnetism of the book.



Chapter 11, "The Sixteen Pleasures Restored," begins on December 20. Margot is leaving the convent, and it's hard for her. She's developed friendships with the nuns, especially Sister Gemma. She plans to leave Florence the following day, but doesn't tell the nuns that. This gives her time to say goodbye to Sandro in private. Without his knowledge, she watches him cross the piazza and realizes that she isn't ready to leave him. Margot decides to stay in Florence.

She knows she does not want to leave because she is in love, but she also wants to stay because she wants to keep the Aretino away from the bishop. She feels that the nuns deserve the money. She also wants to restore the book herself. Sandro contacts an antiquarian book dealer for her, and they send an inexpensive volume of pornographic engravings to the bishop after Margot has treated it to make it look old and water damaged. Margot makes a worksheet defining what she has already done to the Aretino, what she plans to do to it, and all the fine details about its composition.

She celebrates Christmas Eve and Christmas morning with Sandro and calls her father. Margot tells her father that she stayed in Florence because she is in love. He informs her that he is putting the house up for sale and is considering a move to Texas. Margot continues working on the book since she can do everything except the finishing right there in Sandro's apartment. In the middle of January, she heads to Prato where Signor Cecchi is ready to help her with the finishing of the book. He respects that she wants to do it herself, but is there for advice and to supply equipment. Margot gets to work on the fine details of finishing the book. She is nervous about working with the gold, but makes it through the process all right except for one minor flaw. Signor Cecchi tells her not to worry about it, and that she won't even notice it the next day. This is true, and it isn't until a few days later that she realizes that he has touched it up himself. She is very grateful.

Chapter 12, "Gli Abruzzi," opens in the third week of January as Margot and Sandro go to visit his family in Montemuro, in the Abruzzi. As they drive there, Margot thinks about how much she loves him and about how caring he is. She asks Sandro about the first time he fell in love, and he relates a story about a time in November of 1928 when he fell in love with the movie star who came to his town. The movie star was in trouble and needed help getting to Rome. Young Sandro accompanied her to Rome, but she ignored him once they got there. She would have nothing to do with him, and he was on his own for his return visit with very little resources. He had been 12 years old at the time.

Margot meets Sandro's sister, his niece and nephew, and his parents. They enjoy a nice dinner, and Margot play the piano after dinner, noting beautiful music with comments written in English on the music sheets. At night, Margot and Sandro are given separate bedrooms. He said that he would try to get to her during the night so when a knock on the door catches her attention, she opens the door wearing nothing. Sandro's mother is on the other side. She suggests that Margot get a nightgown.

The mother explains that her son has had bad luck with women. She realizes that Margot is important to him since he did not come home for Christmas. The mother then



asks to see the book. Although she is embarrassed, Margot gets the book and shows it to her. After a few more questions and answers, the mother declares that her son's luck might be changing.

The next morning, Margot wakes up to find out that the men are going out hunting. The women go over to the off of oil factory half a mile away. They fill tins with fresh oil and go back to the house where they toast chunks of bread at the fireplace, cover the bread with garlic, and pour the fresh oil over the chunks for breakfast. At Margot's inquiry, the women confess that they rarely do this, but it is a treat they made for her.

Chapters 9-12 Analysis

Chapter 9 concentrates on death, religion, and politics. In this chapter one of the nuns becomes severely ill. She is going to die. While the women in the convent are trying to make her more comfortable, the only male, a cantankerous priest, adds stress to the situation by telling the nuns not to keep calling him unnecessarily.

Margot is confronted with the issue of last rites and whether or not she truly believes that someone needs to see a priest before they die. The situation reminds her of her mother's death and how her mother wouldn't go to church. Margot realizes that she doesn't believe in a religion where you can live a good and pious life then be eternally damned by not observing a traditional act right before death. This chapter also breaks down some stereotypes regarding nuns, especially when the dying sister tells Margot that she doesn't want to die.

Life goes on in Chapter 10 as Margot continues working on the Aretino book. She goes daily to Alessandro's apartment, and they become very close friends. In this chapter they become lovers. This is her second lover in Italy, but the situation is vastly different from the first one. The first lover was all about himself. Alessandro makes her feel beautiful, and they share a love for art.

The new status of their relationship is the first step in her break from the convent. Margot has never taken the vows, and no-one mentions her increasingly late arrivals at the convent at the end of the day, but Margot now has a different relationship with them. As she puts it, "I never thought I really had to lie to her (Madre Badessa), though I sometimes spread a thick coat of varnish over the truth."

In this chapter, the abbess once again reminds Margot that she views her as her daughter. She admits to a mistake and that is giving her the book when she should have given it to the bishop. He has heard about it and wants it back. Margot knows that she will have to face him. When she finally does, it only reinforces her opinion that the politics are wrong, and she should do everything she can to protect the convent. She lies about the book, but never tells the abbess about the lie.

In Chapter 11, Margot is stepping out of her life at the convent and making the final break. Initially she plans to go home to the United States. This is what she tells the abbess that she is going to do. Once again, she is lying to protect someone else. She



knows she is going to spend one more night in Italy, saying goodbye to Alessandro. When she does this, she realizes that she loves him and she is going to stay in the country.

Early in this book, the reader sees a time when Margot is happy, and that was while her mother was still alive and she was still in high school. In this chapter, she is staying in Italy because she is so happy and because she is in love. She is no longer the girl she was when she arrived in the country, subject to everyone else's whims and bad turns of fate. She has a life and she has a purpose. Her intelligence and personal sense of what is right and wrong help her come up with a solution to the dilemma with the bishop. She gives him a false book in sets to work restoring the Aretino.

It's in this chapter that the reader sees Margot's determination to do everything she can to make sure the Aretino is restored properly. And she wants to do it herself. She works under the careful eye of an expert as she finishes the book and only makes one mistake. She's very frustrated by the mistake, but is willing to listen to him when he says it won't matter in the future. Later, when she realizes that he helps her by fixing the mistake after she had left, she is grateful to him instead of getting mad as others might do.

Chapter 12 is all about family. The reader already knows about Margot's connection to her own mother and her love for her papa, even when they are at odds. Now she meets Alessandro's family. On the way to the house, she learns about his first love, a woman who betrayed him. At night, his mother comes in to talk with her and lets her know that he has been unlucky in love. She warns Margot to be careful with him. Margot thinks this is quite ironic since she had been warned about his seductive charms, and it is interesting seeing him as a victim. However, it is not really an issue for her. Margot loves his family and truly loves him. The mother thinks perhaps her son's luck is changing. For the first time in a long time, Margot lets herself slip into a fantasy in which she is happily married and has a home of her own.



Chapters 13-16

Chapters 13-16 Summary

Chapter 13, entitled "Impotentia Coeundi," covers Sandro's annulment proceedings. He enters the proceedings happy, knowing that he is in love with Margot. His smile soon disappears. The judges take their job seriously, ensuring that married couples stay together. Sandro's strategy for obtaining an annulment is to declare impotency. He recalls the embarrassing examinations and humiliating questions already asked regarding this area of his marriage.

The judges find out that his impotency only seems applicable to one person, his wife. It is their decision that because of this, he should spend more time with his wife. They feel that if he does this, he might find out that he isn't impotent anymore. Sandro relates all this to Margot later on in the day as they rest and try to make love, but he has, ironically, become impotent.

As Chapter 14, "An Instinct for Happiness," begins, Sandro is driving in a taxi with Margot. He is thinking about how beautiful and intelligent she is, and how different she is from the hesitant young woman he saw standing on the steps of the Uffizi. Sandro appreciates her zest for life. Although he has been unlucky in love in the past, he now feels that he has found what he has been looking for and starts to mentally prepare a speech in which he is proposing to her.

The two are on their way to meet with a rare book dealer. When Margot asks how he knows he can trust him, he responds that they were in North Africa together in a prisoner of war camp. The man's offices are impressive and Volmaro is very friendly. He looks at the book and offers a price. As he starts counting out the money, Margot asked him how he arrived at that sum. He tells her he is being generous and she points out a different aspect of the market, showing that she knows what she is talking about.

She asks what he thinks it would sell for at auction, and he tells her that it doesn't really matter, because he and Sandro had already reached an agreement. Margot points out that he did not have an agreement with her, and she's the one who has the book. She tells him that the book is no longer for sale. Volmaro is not so congenial anymore as the other two leave.

Margot and Sandro go to a Chinese restaurant, which is a new experience for Sandro. It doesn't suit him. He can't get a handle on the chopsticks, and he doesn't appreciate the food. As he eats, he reflects that it is the most humiliating day of his life. He was humiliated by the judges, humiliated by his impotency, and humiliated by his old "buddy," Volmaro Martelli. Sandro also realizes that Margot probably figured out that he was trying to deceive her when he cut the deal with Volmaro. He decides that he is unworthy of her and shouldn't ask her to be his wife.



Sandro comes to the conclusion that he is December and she is May. Sandro is concerned that she is in love with Italy, as many American women are. They might marry an Italian man and settle down for a few years, then the novelty wears off and they regret their marriage. He doesn't want Margot to feel this way.

In Chapter 15, "Mont Blanc," the workers are getting ready to detach the frescoes in the Lodovici Chapel. Margot watches the process and knows about it from listening to Sandro. She is very interested in the process. Margot takes the day off of work to see the removal. It goes well, without incident. She congratulates Sandro on a job well done, and he says that it feels like a defeat to him whenever a fresco is taken from its original wall space.

It's a very happy time of life for the two of them in Margot's opinion. She enjoys living in the town and reconnects with former friends. She doesn't go back to the convent, but is very drawn to it. Two weeks after Sandro takes down the fresco, he tells her that he has accepted a position as Director of Conservation for the Vatican Museum. He is going back to Rome and to his wife, who refused to have any more examinations to prove the impotency. He tells Margot that she can stay in his apartment for as long as she wants. They have two weeks left to be together.

Margot is stunned, but doesn't fight the issue. As he is about to leave, she asks him what he would have done with the money from the book if she had let the agreement with Volmaro go through. He told her that he would have paid off his debts and asked her to marry him. She asks him why he didn't ask her for the money and why he double-crossed her. He explains the differences between them and offers his December and May theory. She goes with him to Rome to say goodbye.

They arrive in Rome around noon, and she never sees him again. Margot walks around and drinks at several different bars then goes shopping and buys a special postcard that is postdated in the future. She also buys an expensive fountain pen. She is almost out of money. Margot sits down at a table and writes a postcard to Sandro, but she never sends it because she doesn't have his address.

In "Remedia Amoris," Chapter 16, Margot reflects on her relationship with Sandro. She slips into a depression and stays in the apartment, eating very little. Soon she is almost out of money, and she decides to begin living again. Margot pawns some of her jewelry and heads over to Certosa. She invites some students to a meal at a nice restaurant. The next day, Margot goes to Sandro's former boss and says she is willing to work with the students for a certain amount of money. She bargains well with him, showing where a job is necessary and how she can fill it. He agrees, and now she has income.

Margot is thinking about Sandro at the end of March, and is trying to figure out what is really keeping her in Italy. She realizes that it is the book. She takes a train to Basel because her visitor's permit needs to be renewed, and she has to leave the country to do this. She also has another strategy. Margot realizes that in order to take the Aretino to Sotheby's, she has to explain where she had gotten it. She needs to lead a false trail so she doesn't have to worry about an export license. Once she gets to Switzerland,



she examines books in different antique bookstores. She doesn't really need a book, just a receipt. She purchases an old copy of "Pilgrim's Progress" because it reminds her of her mother. On her way back to the hotel, she purchases carbon paper, a sharpener, and a pencil. When she gets back to her room, Margot practices copying the handwriting on the receipt. Putting a sheet of carbon paper between the real receipt and her new "original," she creates a receipt for the Aretino.

Chapters 13-16 Analysis

Chapter 13 is written in the third person. This makes the reader more comfortable since it's dealing with a very sensitive topic. Alessandro is to appear before judges regarding the annulment process. It's a very humbling experience as they question him, and frustrating also when they tell him that he must spend more time with his wife. This experience is followed by another humiliating experience - one in which he truly is impotent when with Margot. This chapter is the beginning of a transition, foreshadowing a change in Alessandro as the reader knows him. The generous, strong, outgoing man is beginning to look helpless.

Chapter 14 begins once again in third person omniscient. Alessandro is beginning to notice the age difference between himself and Margot. When they arrive at the antique book dealer, it's apparent that Alessandro has teamed up with man to swindle Margot, adding to the humiliating experiences mentioned in Chapter 13. As he analyzes their relationship, he determines that it would never work out.

In Chapter 15, the point of view switches back to the first person. Margot is watching Alessandro take the fresco off the wall. She is proud of him and the job he is doing, but he reacts by pointing out the negatives in the job. This is very uncharacteristic and has her concerned.

He tells her that he is going to leave, and consistent to the character she has shown before, she accepts the bad news gracefully. But she isn't weak. She asks him why he tried to trick her with the book dealer. She thinks back to the time when her friends pulled the emergency cord on the train, and it stopped. She wishes she could pull a similar cord to stop her life right now. Once again she is homeless and without love.

As Chapter 16 begins, Margot has slipped into a depression. It does not last very long, however. She develops a plan of action for getting a receipt for purchasing an antique book in Switzerland. This shows her business savvy and willingness to lie for a good cause. The book she chooses to buy is one that once again ties her to her mother. It is a book her mother read to her when she was young.



Chapters 17-19

Chapters 17-19 Summary

As Chapter 17, "Under the Hammer," begins, Margot is thinking about a purple Bible that could have sold for a lot of money at auction. She receives a letter from her father who is double checking to make sure she got the invitation to her sister's wedding. Margot has received the invitation, but hadn't responded to anyone. She realizes that her own adventure is coming to an end and is anxious to see how it is going to turn out.

She takes the book to the head of Sotheby's. She had already sent a letter and they are ready to see the book. When questioned by Mr. Tony Reynolds, she says that she found the book in Basel when she went to renew her permesso di soggiorno. Margot explains that she has been working in Italy and that she is filling in for Professor Panuccio. He says that he knows who she is because Florence is a small town. He knows about a talk that she is about to give and says there are signs for the talk all over town. She has not been aware of that. They talk about the book a bit more and begin negotiations. Margot realizes that she can get the upper hand anytime she mentions taking the book to Christie's.

Tony helps Margot create a catalog description and photograph the book. Sotheby's thought it should put an estimate of 8,000 pounds on the book, but Margot has been doing some research. She thinks the book is worth more. She says she wants an estimate of 20,000 pounds and a reserve of 15,000. When Tony protests, she threatens Christie's again. He tells her that she has to remember that if the bidding doesn't reach the reserve, she has to pay a 5% penalty. She agrees to this.

The two, Tony and Margot, get to know each other a little bit more after Tony attends her talk at the American Church. She is tempted to tell him the true story behind the book, but decides not to so she doesn't put him on the spot professionally. They discuss books, art, and auctions. Tony talks about collecting and the weight of owning things. She tells him a bit about her family.

Tony heads over to England in the middle of May, and Margot decides that she is not going to go to England for the sale. At the last minute, she changes her mind. Margot is getting increasingly nervous as the auction opens. She watches the first day of the sale and gets a feeling for the atmosphere. She finds herself estimating the buying power of the bidders instead of the value of the book.

As the Aretino comes up for sale, a bidding war begins. It sells for a record-breaking 89,000 pounds. One newspaper summary describes the book as "expertly restored and beautifully bound." This gives Margot great satisfaction. Although her name isn't mentioned, her work is highlighted and appreciated.



Margot had initially planned to visit Elgin Marbles, her mother's favorite work of art, and to call her father after the sale as Chapter 18, "The Elgin Marbles," begins. Instead, she shops for a present for her sister. She's given herself a 10% commission for selling the book.

On her last day in London, she calls her father. She tells him that she sold the book and asks for advice on how to set it up so that the convent maintains control over the money. He offers her advice. They talk a bit about money and the past, and he asks her to come and stay in Texas with him. She tells him that he never should have left Chicago, her only home. At first he seems hurt, then he explains how the move was difficult for him, but he had to go on with his life. For the first time, she realizes that her father is more than just a dad. He's a man with his own life to live. She apologizes to him for her comments about the home.

That afternoon, she and Tony become lovers. In the early evening, the two head over to the British Museum to see the Elgin Marbles. She once again feels a connection with her mother.

Chapter 19, "A Nun Takes the Veil," shows that Margot is still living in Sandro's apartment. She has set up a trust at the bank and is adamant that she doesn't want the bishop to get his hands on the money. 90% of the funds are going to be used for the care and maintenance of the content library and 10% will go back into the principle.

Margot goes back to the convent where Madre Badessa offers her her old room. She declines, but is surprised at the intensity of the feeling that she still has for the sisters and the convent. She never tells the true story of the Aretino because she knows that the nuns don't need to have a lie on their conscience. Margot reconnects with Sister Gemma, who is about to take her perpetual vows. Margot attends the service where she is confronted by the bishop. He brings up the amazing sale of the Aretino, and she pretends ignorance.

Heading back to her apartment, Margot thinks about everything that has happened to her and reflects on her own life. She realizes that she is right at home there in Florence. The Piazza especially intrigues her, and she realizes that she loves it because it's a microcosm that gets away from the "life is a journey" metaphor. She is finally home.

Chapters 17-19 Analysis

In Chapter 17, there is an increase in the story's momentum that will carry the reader through the climax of the book. Margot proves that she is no fool when she goes to Sotheby's and gets the Aretino up for auction. She bargains, wheels, and deals until she comes to an agreement she is satisfied with. It's during this chapter that she suddenly begins to realize that she has made something of herself through the entire book experience. She is respected in the city and is doing something that is going to help others.



Contrary to her initial plans, Margot attends the auction. When the bidding stagnates, she bids on her own, and doesn't regret the action in the least. For someone whose life has already been thrown off course by illness and other events, she is still impulsive. This is to her benefit, and she is rewarded by breaking records with the sales. She also shows a strong sense of pride when she reads the newspaper coverage of the auction and is happy to note that someone commented on her work in a positive manner. No one knows that she is connected to the book, and she doesn't look for name recognition. She appreciates the admiration for the work itself.

Life has completely changed for Margot in Chapter 18. She is still looking for a home now that her father has moved to Texas and she has plenty of money. Margot calls her father and expresses some of her anger over the move. Through that conversation she begins to see him as a man, not just her father. She asks for his advice in setting up money so that the convent can use it without any repercussions or fear of it being taken away by the bishop.

As Chapter 19 opens, Margot has learned a lot about herself. She has learned to embrace her past but not dwell on it. She is ready to face the future. She thinks about her connection to the convent and even considers joining it. She knows this is not the right place for her, however. She loves living in the world too much. Her gift to the convent is the book sale. Margot talks with the bank and sets everything up so that the money for the convent is donated anonymously, and she never lets on the connection between her and the real book because she doesn't want it on the abbesses conscience.

In the final pages, Margot considers her life in Florence. She thinks about her future. She decides that she does not have to worry about any of it. She has finally found a home and it is right there where she wants to be.



Characters

Margot Harrington

Margot Harrington is the main character in the book. Most of the story is written in the first person from her perspective. She grew up in Chicago, but spent a small part of her youth living in Italy with her mother. It is a time she remembers fondly. She is very intelligent, and managed to get accepted into Harvard, but she was never able to attend because her mother became very ill with cancer. She became a book restorer with a true passion for the craft. Margot is constantly looking for signs to see where she belongs in life. When she realizes that signs are not accurate telltales, she's okay with that idea. Along with her love of art and books, Margot looks for kindness and beauty in those around her. She has a strong sense of fairness and will go through great lengths, even lying, to protect the innocent.

Dottor Alessandro Postiglione

Dottor Alessandro Postiglione first appears on the scene as a stranger who is offering an umbrella and a place to stay to Margot the night that she arrives in Italy. She declines his offer. They meet again on Thanksgiving day and go to a coffee house together. He helps her find a place to stay at the convent where his cousin lives. He helps Margot with the restoration process, which he understands because he himself is an art restorer. She works on the book in his apartment. The two become friends then lovers. In spite of a wide difference in age, they fall in love, and he even contemplates marrying Margot, but he is still having trouble receiving an annulment from his wife who he has been separated from for many years. Although the relationship doesn't work out between the two of them, Margot knows that he truly loved her as much as she loved him.

Fabio Fabbriani

Fabio Fabbriani is the boyfriend that Margot had in high school.

Papa

Papa is Margot's name for her father. He lives in Chicago and does not believe that Margot should go over to Italy.



Mama

Mama was the name Margot had for her mother who died from lung cancer. She had a great appreciation for art and lived with Margot in Italy. She helps her daughter develop an appreciation for art.

Yolanda

Yolanda is an American traveler who shares a train compartment with Margot on the way to Italy.

Ruth

Ruth is another American traveler who shares a train compartment with Margot on the way to Italy.

Signor Bruni

Signor Bruni is a man that Margot remembers from her past. He helped her mother out when they were in need. Later in life, Margot realizes that he was her mother's lover.

Meg

Meg is Margot's sister. She is married with children. Margot thinks she has the perfect husband.

Molly

Molly is Margot's other sister who is more of a free spirit.

Professor Steckley

Professor Steckley gives Margot the assignment of translating for Professor Eugene Chapin.

Professor Eugene Chapin

Professor Eugene Chapin comes from Harvard to help the relief effort. He is an acquisitions librarian and knows little about conservation of books. He becomes Margot's first lover in Italy.



Lucia de' Medic

Lucia de' Medici was a wealthy woman who entered the convent in the 17th century. She was an artist who painted the frescoes that are shown in the convent. It was her donations that helped create the library Margot is trying to help restore.

Madre Badessa

Madre Badessa, the abbess, is Alessandro Postiglione's cousin. She is in charge of the convent where Margot lives. Modern-thinking and with an acumen for business, she is not judgmental and treats Margot as if she were her daughter.

Sister Gemma

Sister Gemma is a novice who Margot becomes very close to. Initially, she shows Margot the ropes and the two become good friends.

The Bishop of Florence

The Bishop of Florence is a power-hungry man who does not appreciate the woman's success. He is very fascinated with the book and its possible value.

Signor Cecchi

Signor Cecchi is a book restorer that Margot visits to finish the book. He has the proper tools and is an expert in the arena, yet he understands that she wants to do the work herself. He mentors her.

Sybil Connolly

Sybil Connolly is an actress that Sandro fell in love with when he was 12 years old. She was the first of many women who betrayed him.

Marissa

Marissa is Sandro's sister. She lives with the family and has a son and a daughter in their teens.

Sandro's father

Sandro's father is laid-back and somewhat remote.



Sandro's mother

Sandro's mother is the opposite of her laid-back husband in looks as well as personality. She is a sharp woman who is ready to protect her family.

Isabella Colonna

Isabella Colonna is Alessandro Postiglione's wife that he is trying to get an annulment from.

Signor Volmaro Martelli

Signor Volmaro Martelli is a book dealer who works with the antique books. He is interested in purchasing the Aretino, but is not willing to offer a fair price for it.

Tony Reynolds

Tony Reynolds is the head of Sotheby's office. He is an Englishman who seems to have a firm handle on what is really important in life. He appreciates beautiful things, but does not let them own him. He becomes Margot's third lover.



Objects/Places

Chicago

When the story begins, Margot lives in Chicago.

Train

After traveling from New York, Margot takes a sleep train to get to Italy.

Mulhouse

This is the town in France where Margot tries to get food while the train is stopped. It takes too long since she forgot how to speak French and the train leaves her stranded until the two passengers in her compartment come to her rescue.

Pensione Medici

The Pensione Medici is the boarding house that Margot stays in when she first arrived in Italy. It is not cheap and threaten to sap the little resources that she has.

Villa I Tatti.

The Villa I Tatti is a home that belongs to Harvard University. It is where she went for her Harvard interview when she was in high school and is now the hub of activity for volunteers helping with the restoration projects.

Santa Caterina Nuova

Santa Caterina Nuova is the convent where Margot lives for a while. It owns lands that produce honey, olive oil, and wine as well as a decent library. The convent is in financial jeopardy after the damage caused by flooding.

The Book

The Book looks like a 17th century prayer book, but it is actually two books bound together. One book is a prayer book and the other one is filled with pornographic engravings by Giulio Romano and sonnets by Aretino.



Allesandro's Apartment.

While still living at the convent, Margot begins to work on restoring the book at Allesandro's apartment. Later they become lovers and she lives there.

Prato

Margot went to Signor Cecchi's workshop in Prato to complete the Aretino.

Montemuro

Margot takes a trip with Elizondo to visit his family in Montemuor in the Abruzzi.

Rome

Margot follows Alessandro to Rome when he leaves her to rejoin his wife.

Basel, Switzerland

Basel, Switzerland is the place that Margot heads to in order to purchase an antique book. She renews her visitor's permit there.

Sotheby's

Sotheby's is the auction house that Margot takes the Aretino to. It has offices in Italy and the auction itself is in England.



Themes

Restoration

Restoration is a major theme in this book. At first, it seems logical that this is a theme since Margot's job is restoring antique books. However, it's about much more than books. It's about the restoration of the city, the restoration of relationships with friends, the restoration of relationships with family, and the restoration of ones' self.

As high school is coming to an end, Margot knew exactly what path her life was going to take. Her mother's devastating illness changed the course of her life forever. Since that point, Margot is trying to discover where she fits in, what she believes in, and what she can call home. Throughout this book, she learns about herself. She develops relationships that challenge her and help her grow spiritually and mentally.

With her new self-awareness and a purpose, Margot, herself, is in the process of being restored. As the book progresses, the reader can also see how the city of Florence is restored after the flooding of the Arno River. The story takes place over a matter of months, so it's easy to see progress on the streets and in the art galleries and libraries.

The book also takes the reader step-by-step through the book restoration process. It defines different types of damage, then shows how to restore a book to its original glory. It shows how particular care and knowledge are crucial parts of the restoration process.

Relationships

This book is about different kinds of relationships. Margot is always looking around her to see how she relates to the people within her vicinity. Sometimes she separates herself from others, and other times she wants to be part of a group such as the sisters in the convent.

Margot has a strong relationship with art and literature. This is inspired by her mother, who taught her to appreciate art and literature from a very young age. She feels a special connection to the Aretino, realizing that it is the big adventure of her life.

Throughout the book, Margot shows that she is sorely missing her mother. She has fond memories of the past, always keeps her mother's thoughts and lessons in her head, tries to see the world through her mother's eyes, and expresses respect for the woman. She is constantly searching for a mother's love and is extremely grateful when she finds it in people such as the abbess.

Although she is very different from her other family members and does not even keep in touch with them well, Margot shows her appreciation for their diversity. She has happy memories of her childhood and does not find it lacking, even when her father expresses sadness over not being able to care for her better. Margot is also interested in different



types of relationships with men. She is not very experienced, but even when a relationship turns sour, instead of dwelling on the negative, she looks at the lesson learned and moves on with her life. Every relationship she has teaches her even more about herself. She is trying to come to terms with who she is throughout the entire book.

Home

Finding a place to call home is a major theme in this book. Margot is constantly searching. She felt very at home in Italy when she was a teenager and visiting with her mother, but had to leave. She claims that the home she had in Chicago with her father and sisters was the only place that she could call home, yet she voluntarily left it.

Margot seems to fit in almost everywhere she goes whether it is a boarding house, an apartment, or a room at the convent. However, she never truly feels as if she fits in. She refers several times to the quote, "Home is a place where when you go there, they have to take you in."

When she first sees her room in the convent, she feels that it is like a jail cell. Later on, she realizes that it is a place that she could call home, yet she opts out of claiming it as a home. When she goes out to visit Alessandro's family in the country, the reader gets a glimpse of her ideal home setting. It's a place with love, laughter, and warmth. It's also a place of stability, something that she finds missing in her own life.

She refers to the poem by Robert Frost of "The Road not Taken." She knows that many refer to life as a journey. This is not what she is looking for. She ultimately discovers that home is the place where she wants to be right then.



Style

Point of View

The point of view in this novel is most commonly first-person from Margot Harrington's perspective, but there are a few exceptions. In some chapters, the first-person point of view shifts to Allesandro Postiglione's perspective. There are also some chapters that are written in the third-person omniscient perspective.

Due to the way it is written, the reader immediately connects with the main character. The first-person point of view shows the inner workings of her mind. It defines her thoughts, her memories, her dreams, and her insecurities. When the author shifts perspectives, it helps the reader to connect even more with her because she is seen from someone else's viewpoint.

The chapters that are written in third person deal with topics that are sensitive. It helps the reader detached from a character they have already known. It relieves potential embarrassment, and gives a clear view of a new facet to the character the reader has already come to know.

A good portion of the book delves into history and memories, setting the stage for the situation Margot faces at the moment. These glimpses into the past define political upheaval, which adds to the tension in the book as Margot does everything she can to keep the valuable book out of the bishop's hands. The memories also show why Margot acts as she does and how her decisions are influenced as she recalls life with her mother.

Setting

This novel is set primarily in Italy. When the book opens, Margot is leaving Chicago to head to Florence to help restore books after the Arno River floods Florence. She is already somewhat familiar with the area because she had lived there and gone to school there for a brief period when she was a teenager. As she restores books and art, she remembers the special places she had visited with her mother. She also remembers the works of art they analyzed together.

Margot knows that she has to prove that she purchased the book in another country so that she does not have to pay extra fees or get in trouble for taking a book from the country. She heads over to Switzerland to renew her visitors license and take care of this issue. She also goes to Rome for a brief period of time. With all the beauty and focus of art that she discusses surrounding Florence, all that is really highlighted in Rome are the bars she goes to in the shop where she purchases a postcard with a date postmarked for the future.



In Florence, Margot lives in two very different primary dwellings. One is a small room inside a convent, where she feels very much at home as she helps restore the books in the library. Her other home is with her lover, overlooking the Piazza. She loves this as well because she enjoys looking at people and appreciates the excitement of life.

Language and Meaning

The language in this novel is very relaxed and conversational. Margot speaks several languages and this is reflected in the text with words interspersed from different origins, primarily Italy. Even if the reader does not understand the language, it never becomes overwhelming. The words are described in context, and sometimes defined immediately in the text following the word.

The novel has several poems and quotations highlighted. In almost every instance, a line at the poem or a lesson she has learned from that poem comes back later in the book. Poetry is used to signify the beginning of the new stage in her relationship with Alessandro when they become lovers. The language of the book not only propels the story forward, it also builds in a rich history and offers the reader an appreciation for art in many forms.

Structure

This novel is comprised of 19 chapters, each varying in length, but most averaging approximately 30 pages. Each chapter has a theme and has a title that highlights the important aspect of the chapter. Many of the titles are in Italian.

The plot of the novel is straightforward, although the synopsis on the back of the book makes it appear far racier than it actually is. While some portions are very explicit, the plot is more focused on the restoration of the book, attaching a value to it, learning who to trust and who to avoid, and using the proceeds from the sale to help save a worthy cause.

Since the chapters have separate themes, it's easy to shift point of view and time tables. The author takes full advantage of this freedom. Because of the structure, the reader never feels lost. The first part of the book is focused on character development. The Aretino is not found until halfway through the book. The last third of the book really picks up pace and the auction scene builds tension to the point where the reader feels as if they are part of the story. The story resolves in a satisfying manner with all the loose ends tied up.



Quotes

"It was a funny thing: I didn't know where I was, but I knew I was where I wanted to be" (Ch. 1, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 33.)

"Home is the place where when you have to go there, they have to take you in" (Ch. 2, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 40.)

"I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference" (Ch. 3, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 76.)

"I must say that the fact that they had been done by a woman did pique my curiosity, and I examined the paintings more closely than I might have otherwise. The fact that they had been done by a woman may also have colored my impressions" (Ch. 5, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 101-102.)

"I had expected peace and calm and (frankly) boredom, but I felt instead that I've stumbled into the backroom headquarters of a revolution" (Ch. 5, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 112.)

"We have to be cunning as serpents, as well as innocent as doves" (Ch. 6, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 129.)

"I felt that I was in motion, that my consciousness was expanding in a way that nothing in my actual concrete experience had prepared before" (Ch. 8, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 155-156.)

"Have you ever had the impulse, when you're working on something, to destroy it completely if you make even the tiniest little mistake?...Signor Cecchi must have realized what was going on in my mind, because he reached over and took my hand in his. 'Niente,' he said. 'It's nothing'" (Ch. 11, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 214.)

"A good book is the precious lifeblood of a master spirit" (Ch. 16, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 296.)

"The little book of pictures wasn't just a valuable piece of property; it wasn't just a unique copy of the most powerful work of erotic art produced by the Renaissance. It wasn't just an occasion to strut my stuff is a conservator. It was the adventures that fate had placed in my path" (Ch. 16, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 297.)

"It was my story-my story. Without it I wouldn't know who I was or where I was going" (Ch. 16, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 297.)

"I was too much in love, not with Sandro Postiglione or with Tony ... but with the world itself, the river of things" (Ch. 19, *The Sixteen Pleasures*, pg. 363.)



Topics for Discussion

What was Margot so eager to leave her home and her job in order to help with the flood damage?

Why did Margot separate herself from other Americans?

How did Margot grow as an individual from the beginning of the book to the end of the book?

Why was the book so important to the convent?

What is Margot looking for throughout the book and does she find it?

How does Margot's relationship with Sandro change her?

How does Margot's views on religion change over the course of the book?