

The Sixteen Pleasures

by Robert Hellenga



About the Book

"I was twenty-nine years old when the Arno flooded its banks on Friday 4 November 1966. On Tuesday I decided to go to Italy, to offer my services as a humble book conservator, to save whatever could be saved, including myself."

The Italians called them "Mud Angels," the young foreigners who came to Florence in 1966 to save the city's treasured art from the Arno's flooded banks. American volunteer Margot Harrington was one of them, finding her niche in the waterlogged library of a Carmelite convent. For within its walls she discovered a priceless Renaissance masterwork: a sensuous volume of sixteen erotic poems and drawings.

Inspired to sample each of the ineffable sixteen pleasures, Margot embarks on the intrigue of a lifetime with a forbidden lover and the contraband volume--a sensual, life-altering journey of loss and rebirth in this exquisite novel of spiritual longing and earthly desire.

Discussion Guide

1. What factors contributed to Margot's decision to go to Florence to become a "mud angel"?
2. Margot's mother comes up throughout the novel. What bits of advice from her mother does Margot remember? What lasting effects does the affair between Margot's mother and Bruno Bruni have on Margot? Discuss what you think Margot's relationship to her mother was.
3. *The Sixteen Pleasures* contains vivid descriptions of the restoration of some Florentine frescoes as well as the intricate details of book conservation. Discuss how these details enrich the story.

4. In what ways is *The Sixteen Pleasures* a coming-of-age novel?
5. Margot's love interests, first Jed Chapin, then Sandro Postiglione, are quite different types of men. Discuss how these characters are contrasted in the book.
6. Margot's stay in the Santa Caterina convent introduces her to the lifestyle of a Carmelite order. What life lessons does she learn there and how does her experience there change her?
7. Madre Badessa, the mother abbess of Santa Caterina, is a strong female character with an agenda to preserve her convent. Discuss the measures she takes to do this. Do you think she is a feminist?
8. *The Sixteen Pleasures* is told from alternating points of view: Margot narrating some chapters and an all-knowing narrator telling others. Discuss how this is an effective technique to tell the story.
9. Margot's relationship with Sandro is somewhat unconventional, as is Sandro's relationship with his wife. What compromises, if any, does Margot make to be with Sandro. Do you think it's worth it in the end. Does Margot?
10. *The Sixteen Pleasures* takes place in 1966. Discuss aspects of the novel that feel contemporary and those that feel old-fashioned.
11. Foods, arts, sexuality, and spirituality are interwoven in *The Sixteen Pleasures*. Is there a commentary on the philosophy of pleasure here?
12. Margot briefly considers a life in the convent. In the end, she decides against it. Which do you think is the saving grace of life for her, art or religion?

Author Bio

Robert Hellenga was educated at the University of Michigan and Princeton University. He is a professor at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, and the author of the novels *THE SIXTEEN PLEASURES*, *THE FALL OF A SPARROW*, *BLUES LESSONS*, *PHILOSOPHY MADE SIMPLE* and *THE ITALIAN LOVER*.

Critical Praise

"Although the pleasure of reading this book can hardly compare with any of the 16 (not that I've known them all), still, I'd put it high on the list of pleasures one can have alone. "

The Sixteen Pleasures

by Robert Hellenga

Publication Date: May 1, 1995

Paperback: 384 pages

Publisher: Delta

ISBN-10: 0385314698

ISBN-13: 9780385314695