



## Book club 12: Love & society

### The Forty Rules of Love by Elif Shafak

## Rules

In this book club you will discuss *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak in a group of 4-6 readers. You will start a conversation by responding to discussion questions about the text. The book club opens with a brief introduction that one of you reads out loud. The book club then continues in four rounds

- 1 Round 1 consists of 5 quiz questions about the text. One of the group members acts as the quiz master who reads each question out loud, after which everyone (including the quiz master) writes down their answer. The correct answers will appear on the screen after you have turned over the final question card. You may then check your answers and calculate your scores.
- 2 Round 2 consists of genuine questions that you have. Each group member consults the group about a part of the text that they thought was unclear. Together, you try to find answers to the questions that are raised. After everything has been cleared up, your group is ready to proceed to the next round.
- 3 Round 3 consists of questions for discussion. There are two categories to choose from. The person with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to be the first to turn over a card and respond to the question. The other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas. Take turns until all cards are flipped.
- 4 Round 4 is when you get to review the text. How many stars would you give the text and why? Discuss this together until you have reached a shared verdict. Use the text box to explain your choice.

This book club was developed by the editors of LitLab, a digital laboratory for high school literature research. For more teaching materials, visit [www.litlab.nl](http://www.litlab.nl). A teachers' manual and a didactic justification of this teaching method are available at [www.litlab.nl/docenten](http://www.litlab.nl/docenten).



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### Introduction

*'...no one, including Ella, could explain what was going on when she filed for divorce in the fall of 2008 after twenty years of marriage. But there was a reason: love...Love came to Ella as suddenly and brusquely as if a stone had been hurled from out of nowhere into the tranquil pond of her life.'*

The *Forty Rules of Love* tells the story of Ella Rubinstein, an American woman who leads a boring, domestic life with her cheating husband and three children. When she is asked to review the novel *Sweet Blasphemy*, written by the mysterious Sufi Aziz Zahara who travels the world, she is handed a lucky escape from what at first appears to be inevitable unhappiness. As she is drawn into the novel, she learns about the deep, fraternal love between the wild Sufi dervish Shams of Tabriz and the mystical Islamic scholar-poet Rumi. While reading *Sweet Blasphemy*, Ella becomes increasingly aware of the lack of love in her own life compared to the unconditional love experienced by the characters in the book. Ella gradually grows discontent with her passionless marriage to David and slowly gets inspired by and attracted to Aziz, which eventually leads her to embark on a life-changing journey of true love.

In this book club, you are invited to discuss these topics, and to find answers to your own questions about the book.

### Round 1: Quiz

Turn over the 5 cards with quiz questions one by one. Write down the answer on a piece of paper.

### Round 2: Initial questions

What questions popped into your head while reading *The Forty Rules of Love*? Were there any parts that left you confused or wondering? Take turns sharing your questions about the story and try to come up with answers together. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.

### Round 3: Discussion

The player with the most correct answers to the quiz questions gets to turn over a card first from one of the two piles of discussion questions. Once they have answered the question, the other members of the group may then add to the discussion by responding and sharing their ideas.

### Round 4: Review

Review *The Forty Rules of Love* by rating the novel on a scale of one to five stars, and then provide an explanation for your choice. Discuss what aspects you enjoyed and what aspects you didn't, and provide reasons for your opinions. Reflect on whether the discussion influenced your individual perspective, and if so, how. Incorporate examples and arguments from your responses to the discussion questions to support your review.



### Question 1

What does the title of Aziz's book *Sweet Blasphemy* refer to?

### Question 2

Why did Shams ask God to take away his ability to dream?

### Question 3

Why does Rumi decide to adopt Kimya and let her be his student, despite her being a girl?

### Question 4

Why does Rumi decide to adopt Kimya and let her be his student, despite her being a girl?

### Question 5

Shams and Kerra do not get along well at first. At what point does Kerra see that Shams has a big heart?

### Answers

- 1 a story about God scolding Moses for reprimanding a praying shepherd
- 2 So he knows it's not a dream when God reaches out to him.
- 3 Rumi's deceased wife would have wanted it.
- 4 Shams tells her that the essence of true religion is the same as sculpting a Virgin Mary out of dough.
- 5 His wife died, he lost his job and home, and became a drug addict.



Question

3

Question

2

Question

1

Answers

Question

5

Question

4



### Personal connections? 1

Hassan the Beggar's verdict about Rumi's religious sermon is not entirely positive. Explain why. Do you agree with him?

### Personal connections? 2

Although Shams seems to have a lot of respect and compassion for all kinds of people, he doesn't seem to have a lot of compassion for Kerra and Aladdin. How does that make you feel about Shams?

### Personal connections? 3

Which of the Forty Rules spoke to you the most and why?

### Personal connections? 4

In Rule 5 Shams states that most problems in the world stem from linguistic mistakes and simple misunderstanding. Do you agree? Can you give an example from your own experience?

### Personal connections? 5

In Rule 18 Shams states that if you want to change the way people treat you, you should first change the way you treat yourself fully and sincerely, otherwise there is no way you can be loved. Do you think that is true? Why (not)?

### Personal connections? 6

'Every true love and friendship is a story of unexpected transformation. If we are the same person before and after we loved, that means we haven't loved enough.' This is what Shams says toward the end of the novel. Have you ever experienced a friendship or love that has really changed you, or do you know anyone who has?

### Personal connections? 7

Did you know anything about Islam and Sufism before reading this book? Did that knowledge or lack thereof influence the way you read the book? Name at least two new things you have learnt about Islam and Sufism.

### Personal connections? 8

Both Shams and Aziz know that they are going to die. What effect does that have on their behaviour and choices? What would you do in a situation like that? Would you make different choices?



Personal connections?

3

Personal connections?

2

Personal connections?

1

Personal connections?

6

Personal connections?

5

Personal connections?

4

Personal connections?

8

Personal connections?

7



### Food for thought? 1

What struggles do women face in the Islamic world of Sweet Blasphemy? How are the lives of Kerra and Desert Rose, the Harlot, restricted when it comes to social and/or religious conventions and education?

### Food for thought? 2

What are the main differences and similarities between Rumi/Ella and Shams/Aziz?

### Food for thought? 3

In the Prologue the ripple effect of a stone hitting various bodies of water is discussed. 'If a stone hits a lake, however, the lake will never be the same again' (p.1). How is this applicable to Ella's life? And how is this applicable to Rumi's life?

### Food for thought? 4

Who is the real protagonist of this novel? Ella? Rumi? Shams? Give at least three arguments for your answer.

### Food for thought? 5

Is Shams a hero or an anti-hero? Give at least three arguments.

### Food for thought? 6

The novel is a frame story (a story within a story). Ella's story is told from a single point of view, but Sweet Blasphemy is told from multiple points of view and narrators. What if Ella's story were told by multiple narrators as well (for example by David, Jeanette, the twins Orly and Avi)? Would that make Ella's story more interesting?

### Food for thought? 7

According to Shams, love is the most important thing in life, and love is the only way to truly get closer to God. Yet, in the book, there are a number of 'casualties' of love. Who do you think are the casualties of love in this book? Explain why.

### Food for thought? 8

Desert Rose goes from being a whore in a brothel to leading a new life devoted to true love and God. How does Desert Rose reclaim her independence by the end of the book?



Food for thought?

3

Food for thought?

2

Food for thought?

1

Food for thought?

6

Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

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Food for thought?

7