

READER'S GUIDE: *THE ROSE VARIATIONS: A NOVEL* by Marisha Chamberlain

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The introduction, discussion questions and author biography that follow are designed to enhance your group's reading of Marisha Chamberlain's *The Rose Variations*, a novel which offers a fresh look at the age-old problems of finding love and balancing love and career, and also examines the fragility and strength of friendship and of family.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

When twenty-five-year-old Rose MacGregor makes her start in St. Paul, she knows no one and has almost nothing but tee shirts and blue jeans, books, a cello, and a temporary teaching job at a college where she's known, not by name, but as The Girl Composer. Rose understands that her chance to make a place for herself is insecure, but she has to start somewhere. She is also looking for the love of her life but career success and love never seem to coincide. Will her true love be her fellow musician, Alan, or perhaps Guy Robbin, the self-made stone mason, who also has an eye for Rose's younger sister? Or could Rose's true love be Lila Goldensohn, the lesbian cellist who fosters Rose's music? Engrossed in her music and eager for friendship, love, and achievement in equal measure, Rose sallies forth, falls hard, gets up, falls again. Though contemporary and thoroughly American, Rose MacGregor has more in common with Jane Eyre than with Carrie Bradshaw. In a picaresque journey of self-discovery, Rose moves beyond her artistic ambition and her quest for the perfect romance to find her balance and herself.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why has Chamberlain chosen *The Rose Variations* as her title? Is the character of Rose MacGregor especially variable? Or could her various approaches to life problems be a sign of resilience? Does Rose learn from her experience or is she caught repeating mistakes in endless variation?
2. The theme of luck comes up repeatedly in this novel, particularly luck in love. Frances Dupre describes Rose as lucky. Is she? What about Frances—is she as unlucky as she claims to be? How does the theme of luck play out in the novel?
3. Music as a pursuit and musical form exert force in this novel. How is the novel constructed like a piece of music? Why would that be, and how does it work for the reader? What is it about theme and variation that attracts composers?
4. Rose and Frances are friends “in spite of themselves.” Why? Are Rose's other friendships equally unlikely? What does the novel have to say about friendship?
5. Rivalry between women comes up repeatedly. Frances compares herself to Rose; Rose compares herself to Ursula Kaiser, her best friend from grad school. Rose's mischievous sister, Natalie, arrives and stirs up sibling rivalry. Does rivalry just seem the natural state of women in this novel?

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6. Rose talks about the “glueyness of marriage”. What does she mean by that? How are the various marriages in the novel portrayed? Would Rose ever be likely to marry?
7. Frances refuses to acknowledge that Alan Gilpin is gay until events force her to do so. What does Rose similarly refuse to acknowledge but inevitably have to confront?
8. Midway through the novel, Rose makes an ill-advised choice to offer herself sexually out of pity to someone who clearly desires her. What makes Rose try this? Does anything good come out of this attempt at connection?
9. In another mishap, Rose is faced with unwanted sexual advances from a conductor who has power over her career. Why does she succumb? What consequence is she trying to avoid, and what consequence ensues?
10. The story includes many less-than-happy events. Is this a sad novel? Why is Rose not mired in depression, given how many things go wrong? What role does her fortitude play in the unfolding of the plot?
11. “Life is a rental,” observes the piano tuner, Graham Lowe, thereby highlighting one of the novel’s themes—impermanence versus permanence. In what characters is this theme most directly evident?
12. In what way is the novel’s ending a victory for Rose, and in what way is it a defeat? Could this be a happy ending, given the unexpected final events?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marisha Chamberlain is a playwright and poet as well as a novelist. Her plays have been seen all over the world: in South Africa, Germany, Australia, Turkey, Britain and Canada as well as in the United States. *Scheherazade*, a stage play, won the Dramatists Guild/CBS Regional and National Awards and in its teleplay version was broadcast across the United States and screened at the British Film Institute Festival. Chamberlain has adapted a number of fictional works for the stage, including Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, Oscar Wilde’s *The Canterville Ghost*, and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. She wrote the libretto for the chamber opera, *Meeting at Seneca Falls*, with music by composer Carol Barnett, with whom she also created *The World Beloved: A Bluegrass Mass*. *Powers*, her book of poems, was published by New Rivers Press. She has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller, Bush, McKnight, and Jerome Foundations and has been artist in residence at the MacDowell Colony, the Anderson Center and the Rockefeller Foundation Center at Bellagio. She has served as guest faculty at Carleton, Macalester and Augsburg colleges, at Hamline University, the University of Minnesota, and at Uniwersytet Marie Curie Skłodowskiej in Poland. She lives with her family in Hastings, Minnesota and is at work on her second novel, and on the libretto for an opera, *Propeller*, with music by Mary Ellen Childs.