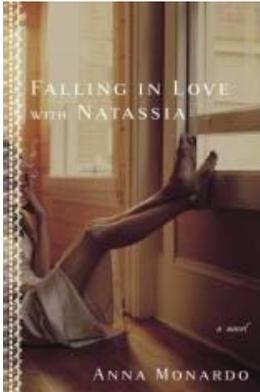


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## *Falling in Love with Natassia*

Anna Monardo



### Reading Group Companion

1. There is much discussion throughout the novel about parenting. Mary, in particular, is concerned with whether or not she is a “good mother.” Her mistakes are fairly obvious, but are there moments when Mary truly is a good mother? Do other characters demonstrate moments of good parenting? If so, what qualities do they demonstrate in those moments? In your mind, what is good parenting? Good mothering? Are “moments” enough?
2. The novel is an interweaving of several different love relationships: Mary and Ross, Nora and Christopher, Natassia and the B.F., Lotte and David, Christopher and Denise, Denise and her late husband. Are there others? Which are the true love stories? What makes a love story? There are conventional and unconventional couplings throughout the book. Compare them. What does the conventional offer that the unconventional does not, and vice versa?
3. Natassia grows up with several adults invested in her well-being, and yet she slips through the cracks. Her guardians fail her in many different ways, but do they manage to redeem themselves? If so, how? If not, where is their redemption incomplete or insufficient?
4. Natassia is described as being exceptional. Do you think she is? What makes for an exceptional child?
5. Natassia must repeatedly accommodate herself to the needs and demands of the adults around her. Talk about the tension between a child’s needs and a parent’s needs. Is there a balance? How can balance be achieved?
6. How would you assess Natassia’s situation at the end of this story? What is her prognosis for a successful adulthood? What kind of success do you imagine for her future? What kind of future do you imagine for Natassia?
7. Mary describes Christopher and Nora as “the best married people we know, except for Lotte and David.” Both marriages are long-standing, but would you call them successful? Whether you believe these marriages are “good” or not, what factors do you feel make them “work”?

8. These characters make some difficult choices: Mary's decision to let Natassia be raised by Lotte and David. Christopher's choice to call Denise, Denise's choice to accept Christopher, Nora's choice at the end of the novel to try to accept Donby. Do you see these choices as inevitable? What do you think drives each character to make the choice he or she makes? When in your own life have you made a choice that was difficult and that now seems inevitable?
9. The course of Mary's life is determined largely by her involvement in dance. In fact, "dance was and had always been Mary's only mother, the thing that took care of her, body and soul." To your mind, does that statement describe the relationship between the artist and her or his art, or is Mary's situation particular, given the circumstances of her life? And consider Abe—when he's with Nora, he's *there*, and not there. Would you call this absorption a form of *self*-absorption? Is it selfishness? How do you imagine it feels for the artist to live "inside" her or his art? How do you imagine it feels to their loved ones who may live "outside"?
10. For many years, Mary reveres Lotte. Mary feels Lotte is a safe and wise and loving mother figure. How do you see Lotte as a mother and a grandmother? As a wife? How does Mary's perception of Lotte change? Why?
11. Nora is presented as "the Model." In what ways does she fit that role; in what ways is the label ironic?
12. Both Mary and Nora suffer tragic events in the early parts of their lives; how are their later lives shaped by these events? In what ways are their adult lives a response to these early events?
13. Is Ross's derailment inevitable?
14. Natassia falls in love for the first time, and then she falls apart. Consider the various adults around her: in what ways does each adult fall with her?
15. Christopher's actions with baby Natassia shape much of the emotional life of Christopher and Nora's marriage. Do you feel she forgives him? Is it possible for her to forgive him? Do you forgive him?

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