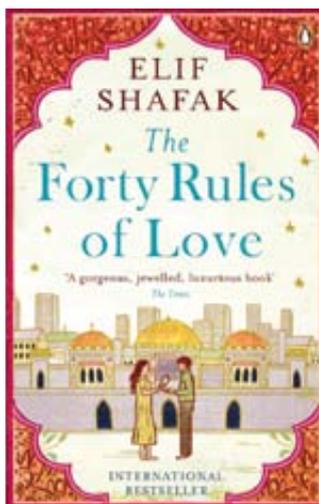


## REVIEW



# The forty rules of love

Paul Gateshill reviews a book by the French born Turkish author Elif Shafak.

**There are some books** that I know I'm going to love by reading the opening paragraph. They draw you into the author's world with the sheer beauty and delight of the language. *The Forty Rules of Love* is one of those books.

Elif Shafak is one of Turkey's most popular authors. She is an activist on women's rights, minority rights and freedom of speech and writes fluently in both Turkish and English. In fact the *Forty Rules of Love* was written first in English before she then translated it into Turkish.

The book is a clever juxtaposition of two narratives. One with a bored housewife Ella Rubinstein, feeling ensnared by her life in New England coping with the trials of rearing her teenage children and relating to her unfaithful husband. Glimpses of a new hope emerge when she receives a manuscript of a new novel to edit: 'Sweet Blasphemy'. This 'other narrative' introduces Ella to the wonders of Sufi mysticism as it tells of the extraordinary meeting of the 13th-century wandering Persian Sufi Dervish, Shams of Tabriz, and his inspirational relationship with Rumi, the greatest poet of the Sufi canon.

The friendship between Jalal ad-Din Rumi and Shams of Tabriz became an extraordinary chemistry. The two men, followers of the mystical Sufi tradition, met in Konya in 1244 – a troubled time in a region where Christian crusaders and Muslim Mongols were ravaging the old empires. Four years of intense spiritual companionship ended in 1248 with Shams' unexplained disappearance. But the experience transformed Rumi, already a respected scholar, into a poet. By evoking the pain that humans suffer when separated from places and people they love, his masterpiece, the *Masnavi*, urges them to the Sufi goal of divine love and union with God.

The narrative of this encounter of Shams and Rumi contained within 'Sweet blasphemy' is a wonderful introduction to Sufi wisdom and particularly to its emphasis on love which transcends every aspect of life including the trappings of organised religion. Gradually Ella becomes immersed in the forty rules of love and begins to fall in love with the mysterious author who goes under the name of Aziz Zahara.

'The forty rules of love' are gradually taught by Shams throughout the narrative. They are exquisite teachings about the nature of love and of the importance of the present moment. They are given as gifts to each of the characters that appear in 'Sweet Blasphemy' – the drunkard, the harlot, the assassin, the beggar and the zealot and more. Here is a taster:

*'The quest for love changes us. There is no seeker among those who search for Love who has not matured on the way. The moment you start looking for Love, you start to change within and without.'* **and:**

*'It's easy to love a perfect God, unblemished and infallible that He is. What is far more difficult is to love fellow human beings with all their imperfections and defects. Remember, one can only know what one is capable of loving. There is no wisdom without love. Unless we learn to love God's creation, we can neither truly love nor truly know God.'*

Unfortunately the main protagonist, Ella, is not a character that I found myself totally sympathetic with. Without giving too much away, I was left puzzled by some of her actions. I can imagine this book would generate some very lively discussion if it was the focus of a local book club.

However, if you are a fan of Rumi or want to know more about his work, this book is an excellent read. 

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