

FORBIDDEN NOTEBOOK

READING GUIDE

CLASSICS



ABOUT

In this modern translation by acclaimed Elena Ferrante translator Ann Goldstein, *Forbidden Notebook* centres on the inner life of a dissatisfied housewife living in postwar Rome.

Valeria Cossati never suspected how unhappy she had become with the shabby gentility of her bourgeois life—until she begins to jot down her thoughts and feelings in a little black book she keeps hidden in a closet. This new secret activity leads her to scrutinize herself and her life more closely, and she soon realizes that her individuality is being stifled by her devotion and sense of duty toward her husband, daughter, and son. As the conflicts between parents and children, husband and wife, and friends and lovers intensify, what goes on behind the Cossatis' facade of middle-class respectability gradually comes to light, tearing the family's fragile fabric apart.



An exquisitely crafted portrayal of domestic life, *Forbidden Notebook* recognises the universality of human aspirations.

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

- 1 The novel opens with Valeria Cossati buying a notebook illegally from a tobacconist. What does this act—and the need to hide the notebook from her immediate family—suddenly reveal to Valeria about her own life?
- 2 Valeria notes that her husband, Michele, was the only one who still called her by her first name. So that when he started to call her “mamma,” her identity as an individual, adult woman was lost. What does the novel reveal about Alba de Céspedes’ opinions on wifehood and motherhood?
- 3 In her diary, Valeria observes the women in her life—her aging, conservative mother, her successful and independent school friend Clara, her strong-willed daughter Mirella, as if considering and marveling at their life choices while at the same time feeling uncomfortable—as if none of them are quite right as role models. And yet, her own choices no longer seem to suit her either. What does this dichotomy say about her sense of self?
- 4 The male characters in *Forbidden Notebook* are all struggling with a major life change—Valeria’s father is retired and bored, her husband aspires to be a writer, her son gets his girlfriend pregnant, her boss is falling in love with her, and Mirella’s beau, Cantoni, is divorcing his wife. How do the men handle these challenges? How do they express their concerns and desires? How do their travails affect Valeria and her choices / decisions?
- 5 Of her daughter Mirella, Valeria writes: “I wonder if there is not more compassion in the coldness with which she protects her life than in the weakness with which I agree to let mine be devoured.” Valeria is accused of being jealous of Mirella. Do you think this is true? How does the relationship between mother and daughter evolve over the course of the novel? What do they learn from each other?
- 6 The economic hardships of Italians during and after WWII play a key role in this novel—from the laws restricting the sale of paper goods to housewives like Valeria having to work outside the home. How do these financial constraints affect Valeria’s marriage? How do they affect her perception of her boss’s advances and of Mirella’s relationship with the well-off Cantoni?
- 7 Toward the end of the book, Valeria writes: “Although I’ve always given myself to others, completely, it seems to me that I still have everything to give.” How is this emblematic of Valeria’s choices and the choices of so many women? And does Mirella’s boundary-setting save her from her mother’s fate?
- 8 For so many of us, writing, keeping a journal is a way to process our thoughts, the events of the day, our trauma. But for Valeria, the act of keeping a journal turns out to be much more complicated—even dangerous. Can you explore why that is?

