



The Rose of Sebastopol

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In 1855 Rosa Barr, a headstrong young woman, travels to the Crimea, against the wishes of her family, determined to work as a nurse. She does not return. Three people have been intimately connected with her. One, her brother, a soldier and adventurer; the second a doctor, traumatized by the war, and harbouring a secret passion, and the third, Mariella, her cousin and childhood friend, who must now uncover the truth about what has happened to the missing nurse. Mariella's epic journey takes her from the domestic quiet of London to the foothills of Italy, and on to the ravaged Russian landscape of the Crimea, where she must discover what has happened to her captivating and mysterious cousin and uncover the secrets of those who loved her..

The Rose of Sebastopol Details

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Author : Katharine McMahon

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From Reader Review The Rose of Sebastopol for online ebook

Lyn (Readinghearts) says

This book is set in both England and Russia during the time of the Crimean War. The central character is Mariella, a pampered English maiden from a "connected" family. This book caught my eye for a number of reasons. First, it is Historical Fiction, which is probably my favorite genre overall, second, it fit a category in a challenge that I was participating in (you had to pick a random HF book off of the library shelves) and third, the book jacket hinted the Miss Florence Nightingale made an appearance in the book. She is an historical figure that has always intrigued me. What I found was an interesting tale of love and betrayal woven among the backdrop of Victorian England and the Crimean War. The two main characters, Mariella and her cousin Rosa, are as different as night and day. Mariella has always led a quiet existence, paying special attention to the social rules for women in the Victorian era. She is quiet, demur, shy, and spends her time sewing all manner of items for charity. Rosa, on the other hand, is headstrong, untraditional, artistic, wants to be a doctor, and considers Mariella the most important person in her life. Since women cannot become doctors, she is determined to become a nurse, like Miss Nightingale, and eventually follows her to the battlefields of the Crimean War to nurse the wounded. When she disappears, Mariella takes off for the same battlefields in an effort to find her.

I gave this book 4 stars. The story was really enjoyable, and kept me interested from the beginning. It was especially interesting to read about medical practices in the 1850s, which were actually more primitive than I expected. Although the book hinted at involving Florence Nightingale, I was disappointed to find that her character was only anecdotal in the story. My disappointment was offset, though, by the unconventional view of Miss Nightingale that the author presented. It made me want to study this historical figure more, to see what her personality was actually like. My only other disappointment came at about the halfway point in the story, where a potential love triangle appeared that I felt was not necessary to include.

Michele says

I loved this book. Really loved it. But what led to my enjoyment of it was the knowledge I already have regarding the Crimean War (thanks to author Emma Drummond). If you don't have a good working knowledge of this war, your enjoyment will fall far short of mine.

That said, the story revolves around Mariella and Rosa, two pampered cousins from England who, although close, couldn't be more different from each other. While Mariella conforms to the English ideal of a proper young woman and longs for nothing more than to marry her doctor paramour Henry, it's Rosa who longs for social change. Influenced by her family friend Florence Nightingale, Rosa dreams of nursing the war victims.

While Henry leaves for the Crimean, Mariella is left behind and Rosa finally kicks off her traces and heads off to become a nurse. Mariella's world is sent into a tailspin when she receives a letter from her very-ill fiance. Impetuously (very unlike her) rushing off to Henry's side, Mariella discovers she has been betrayed by Henry and Rosa. Worse yet, Rosa has gone missing.

And so it is that Mariella finds herself smack in the middle of the Crimean War. The novel deftly (and brutally) covers everything from the horrors of the wounded, the lack of medical care and the brutality of the fighting itself, all the while the mystery of what happened to Rosa intensifies throughout.

Without a good working knowledge of the Crimean War, much of the novel is apt to bore. The author doesn't waste pages explaining too much of the background. But if you have that general knowledge, this novel is simply riveting. I couldn't put it down.

If you'd like to gain a better understanding of the war, search GR for historical fiction author Emma Drummond and read some of her books first....it's a great introduction to that travesty of a war.

Megan says

I liked this book more than I thought I would, if I'm honest. Primarily I enjoyed the fact that the heroine, Mariella, is incredibly unlikeable. She is a perfect picture of someone who doesn't realize at all her own ignorance and so has no problem behaving appallingly and petulantly insisting that her position in society gives her a pass. I also thoroughly enjoyed that she is a stereotypically weak woman, or she has trained herself to be one (I think the latter is implied) in order to flatter men and catch herself a husband. Sparky and adventurous she is not.

What I enjoyed most of all was the fact that I managed to really empathize with her when she got out of her depth and resorted to her old fortress of class to defend herself, even in ridiculously irrelevant situations. Don't we all do that? Don't we all put up familiar walls and drag out tired old defenses when we aren't sure of our moral footing? Seeing it in print makes me squirm with embarrassment for Mariella, and discomfort for myself.

In the end, Mariella again does what we all do. She doesn't rush headlong into danger with vim and vigor like most more one-dimensional heroines. She finds herself coping with difficult situations as and when they arise, and then looking back and wondering where she found the ability to do so. She grows incrementally into a decent human being, much like a teenager transforms into an adult, never thinking about the changes at the time, but by the end of the book we have a character who sees shades of gray where before there was only black and white.

Anne says

The Rose of Sebastopol proved to be a more interesting read than I initially thought it would be. The first couple hundred pages were slow, but things began to pick up as the questions multiplied.

At first, I didn't care for Mariella -- I thought her mindset was too narrow, and she was wasting a good bit of intellect by deliberately shutting out anything that she wasn't told by an older male, either a father or fiance. But as the Crimean conflict grew, and as her role in the conflict grew, I began to like her more. She began to challenge her assumptions about how the world was supposed to work, and instead to make her own decisions about what was right and what was wrong.

Rose, on the other hand, I found myself respecting less and less as the book continued. I thought she ended up wasting her considerable talent possibilities because she refused to submit to any kind of order or regulation.

Rose and Mariella are a unique pair of foils to each other. Mariella learns to step outside the proscribed realm of female activism from Rose, yet Rose doesn't seem to learn any value of regulation and diligence from Mariella.

You are left hanging at the end -- you've found out the "truth" as much as it can be found out, and Mariella is left there in the Crimean, with no hint of her next step. Will she remain there, nursing soldiers? Now that she knows Rose's fate, will she return to England? What about Henry? Will she reconcile with him? What about Max?

There are so many unanswered questions, so many possible courses of actions she could take, that it's a frustrating ending. By the end, I cared what decision she made. I cared what happened when she returned home, if she did. I cared how the changes in Mariella had affected her mother and the society she came from in London, and I wanted to see more of how her changes played out after. Instead, I was left in the midst of the full horror of the Crimean war, with great loss on all sides, and a faint ray of hope for the future.

Judy says

This is an historical novel set during the Crimean War, about two women, cousins, one of whom goes to nurse at the front - I read the first chapter at the lovereading site and pre-ordered it from the library. I was especially interested to read a novel set in this period after reading Mary Seacole's autobiography. I enjoyed the book but found the way it is written slightly confusing - it keeps jumping to and fro between several different periods in Mariella's life, so that you have to remember to look at the dates in the chapter headings. I think I would probably have got more caught up in it if it had just carried straight on. Having said that, it is beautifully written, with a strong romance element which is something out of the ordinary.

Pragya says

3.5 stars

Sharon says

Without going off into spoilers, I have to say that the main thing that kept me from giving this book five stars was the ending. It left me saying "And then what happened," because it was so anticlimactic.

The plot concerns Mariella Lingwood, a well-to-do and very proper Victorian English lady, who leaves her family home in England to go to the Crimea -- not as one of Florence Nightingale's nurses, but find her missing cousin Rosa. Rosa has gone to the Crimea to nurse, but disappears without a trace; Mariella's fiance, Henry, asks that she find the missing girl.

Over the course of the book, Mariella learns a great deal about life and herself; exposure to a war zone that is being glamorized in the press at home (in direct opposition to the situation's reality) makes her re-think many of her ingrained mores.

The book is exceedingly well researched, with great attention to detail in terms of clothing, social strata, the miseries of the hospital at Scutari (Eskudar) and so on. Those interested in learning more about the era could do worse than reading this book.

Sara says

It is the time of The Crimean War, and passionate though impetuous Rosa Barr abandons her stale London life to nurse the wounded. When Rosa vanishes, her cousin and our narrator, Mariella takes it upon herself to find her. Only Mariella is Rosa's opposite; dutiful, loyal and dull. Mariella finds she is completely unprepared for life on the brink of battlefield. And as all the clues to Rosa's disappearance point to Mariella's fiancé, now mad with fever, Mariella is heartbroken. Forced to rise to the occasion, Mariella learns of betrayal, sacrifice and love.

The book has its aggravations. The story awkwardly jumps between decades and settings. McMahon also waits until late in the game to give us genuine reasons to care for any of her characters. Also be prepared for many stitching references and detailed clothing descriptions that do support the character, but are very distracting. Its abrupt ending is also unsatisfying, but perhaps because I was finally engrossed in McMahon's tale.

Overall, I'm obliged to admit I did enjoy it. The descriptions of the war's battles, conditions, and Londoner's reactions are undeniably engaging. The layers of suspense and brisk pace McMahon builds cement this unexpected treat. I wouldn't have put this book down during its final fifty pages for anything.

Sharon Bolton says

Mariella, a young Victorian lady, spends her days sewing and writing to her surgeon fiancé, Henry, who has left England to serve in the Crimean War. Rosa, (as unlike her cousin Mariella in character as she is similar in appearance) also has ambitions to serve, as one of Florence Nightingale's new breed of nurses. Moustache twirling lothario, Max (Rosa's step brother) is a soldier (probably leading the charge of the Light Brigade, I forget the details) and appears to despise the Victorian primness of Mariella.

When Rosa disappears and Henry becomes ill, Mariella begs to be allowed to go the Crimea herself to nurse her fiancé and find her cousin. To her (and our) astonishment, she is given permission to make the journey and the four characters play out their story against the backdrop of one of the bloodiest conflicts in our history.

The plot is full of surprises and the historical detail is fascinating. But what I love most about this book is that, by the end of the story, each of the four characters has undergone an almost complete transformation. Each seems to have become almost the polar opposite of what we believed them to be in the beginning. This achievement by Katherine McMahon is all the more remarkable because it almost passes unnoticed. How did A, so smoothly and effortlessly, turn into B? How could we not have seen that about C? And who would have guessed D felt like that about A? The character development in this book is little short of masterful.

This is easily one of my favourite books of the last decade.

Misfit says

This is clearly not the book I need to get me out of a reading slump of mega proportions. Try again another day. Maybe.

Marguerite Kaye says

This is the second time I've read this and I enjoyed it even more than the first. At first, you have very little sympathy for the maleable Mariella, who seems to lack any personality or any desire other than to sew her way complacently through life. I wanted to give her a good shake. Her cousin Rosa by comparison is vibrant and instantly likeable. And yet very slowly and subtly your empathies switch. Rosa is selfish, overbearing, and Mariella is repressed, you wonder what she will do if she'll just loosen her tightly-laced corsets a little. And that's what circumstances make her do.

I loved this. The ending was not at all clear cut and those who like all the t's crossed will find fault with it, but the imagery of the last scene was so stark and vivid I didn't think you needed any more. The atmosphere in the Crimea was horrific and vividly drawn, the pointlessness of the war, the tragedy of the needless suffering made me angry and at the same time fascinated. And the exploding of the myths around Nightingale, Cardigan and the Charge of the Light Brigade were so subtly done that you had no cause to question them.

I would highly recommend this, and I'm very surprised it hasn't been turned into a film, it would make an excellent one.

Zoella says

The Rose of Sebastopol is a fantastic read. Don't be fooled by those who can't read between the lines. The protagonist, Mariella, is one of those great unreliable narrators (Lockwood in *Wuthering Heights*) that you just love to tut at whilst you are reading. Enjoy her transformation. What McMahon does is depict Mariella's coming of age in a convincing way. Mariella is the archetypal Victorian lady; who happens to be thrown into the Crimean war. It's so engrossing that you will feel like you've packed your sturdiest petticoats in your portmanteau and are heading off to bandage some poor soldier in the siege of Sebastopol yourself! Now that's great writing...

Meagan says

I've had to back-burner this book so many times that I'm not sure I can see it clearly anymore. At least I'm left feeling confused, because a lot of what I liked is also what I found problematic.

The first half of the book reads relatively slowly. Mariella is a pampered, sheltered girl who is a perfectly proper example of a lady in her time. She's a bit naive, she lacks a sense of adventure, and she's consumed with maintaining propriety. Although she's not a girl I'd like to hang with, she fits in her world and is sharply contrasted with her cousin, Rosa, who is strong-willed and impetuous and strains at the bonds of a proper life. The first half of the book, Mariella fits and it's Rosa who's jarring. Despite my belief, as a modern woman, that her impulses to career and education and travel were her absolute right, and despite the fact that I know that I would appreciate Rosa much more were we actually to meet, she comes across as grating and heedless. She doesn't fit this London life, while Mariella does.

Then the second half begins, and the tables are sharply turned. Rosa, who has gone to the Crimea as a nurse, disappears and Mariella goes to find her while also visiting her wounded fiancé. All of the sudden we are on the front in the Crimean War, where Rosa's independence and spirit are not only valuable, but downright necessary. And it's Mariella's focus on propriety and social position, her weakness in every respect, that's jarring. The second half of the book is not only much faster-paced, but is also the point where we get some serious character development from everyone concerned. It's sometimes uncomfortable and can be embarrassing or frustrating to read, but I also found it really satisfying.

This book, even though it exclusively follows Mariella's thoughts and movements, is about Rosa. Rosa is the lens through which we understand everything. Her family, the role of women, the horror of war. And so when she re-enters the story after her disappearance, the story ends. This is kind of a quest novel, and once we learn where Rosa went, the quest is finished. It feels abrupt, and I know a lot of people here didn't like it, but I found it strangely appropriate, and even satisfying. It fulfilled, for me, the Rosa of the first half, who always drew the attention of everyone around her, whether for good or bad. It also fulfills the Mariella of the second half, who for better or worse finally has a complete picture of her cousin. Once that's done, the rest is just details.

So, the slow first half made this book rough going for me, but I also think it's essential to the telling of the story. And the ending feels abrupt, but again... same thing. The very things that feel so unfulfilling also seem perfectly right.

Barb says

I've read several of Katharine McMahon's other books and enjoyed them very much. While the underlying story she created for these characters was interesting the telling of it just didn't work for me.

Once again that annoying tradition/habit/technique that authors are too likely to employ of taking us back and forth in time to reveal the past in proscribed amounts made the flow of the story stop-stutter.

I found myself repeatedly wanting to alternately shake and slap the protagonist, though she did toughen up by the end, thank goodness.

This book was far too plodding and dull for my tastes and there were so many really juicy ingredients that were never explored to my satisfaction.

I listened to this on audio and had it reading at 1.5 time, I would have stepped it up to double time if I could have understood the reader at that rate. I couldn't wait for the story to be over, but I wasn't willing to stop listening because I still wanted to find out what happened to the characters.

Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

Title: The Rose of Sebastopol

Author: Katharine McMahon

Genre: Historical Fiction

Love/Hate?: Love, ohmygod, love.

Rating: 5/5

Did you finish?: Yes. I couldn't stop reading!

One-sentence summary: Proper English woman, Mariella, goes to Crimea in search of her missing cousin Rosa.

Why did you get this book?: Frankly, because it was available in e-book form from the library at a moment when I was between books.

Do you like the cover?: Yes, the cover just grabs me.

First line from book: We arrived in Narni late on a Sunday evening.

Review: This is going to be another breathless, sputtering review as I literally finished this book minutes ago. I'm teary, all caught up in the emotion of the story and my love for the characters, which is the sign of a fantastic book.

I knew absolutely nothing about this book when I got it which meant I had no idea even of the plot, so it was a real delight to try to guess where the story was going. McMahon is a talented writer: she conveys the sense of the Crimean War without bogging the reader down in too much exposition or narrative about the war, and I found all the characters gripping. Her technique of flashing between the present to Mariella and Rosa's childhood years was lovely -- I found myself as in love with Mariella and Rosa as they were with each other.

The ending of the book was pitch perfect, even though I would have loved an Epilogue that neatly wrapped up the story for the characters (especially Mariella and Max). This is the kind of historical novel I adore and I can't rave about it enough.

Tropes?: Beautiful reckless girl that everyone is obsessed with, scoundrel soldiers
