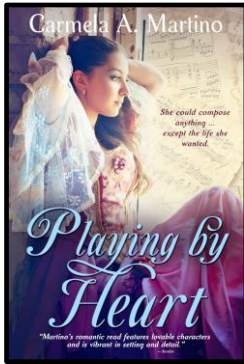

TEACHER'S GUIDE



Playing by Heart

by Carmela A. Martino

Historical Fiction

Ages 12+

Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9994352-1-7

Second edition, includes Book Discussion questions

ABOUT THE BOOK

In this award-winning novel inspired by two amazing sisters who lived in 18th-century Milan, fifteen-year-old Emilia Salvini tries to use her musical talents to win noble status for her family, with unexpected repercussions.

Playing by Heart shows the educational and societal limitations women faced in the past from the point of view of a teen girl with a remarkable gift for music. An Author's Note describes the real people, places, and events that inspired the novel. The book also includes a glossary defining the musical and Italian terms found in the story.

THEMES

- History, especially women's history; 18th-century European Enlightenment
- Sibling rivalry, family, grief
- Coming of Age, discerning a life's vocation
- Social class and marriage customs
- Music composition

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Author Carmela Martino was inspired to write *Playing by Heart* while working on a biography of mathematician Maria Gaetana Agnesi. The novel's narrator, Emilia Salvini, is based on Maria Gaetana Agnesi's younger sister, composer Maria Teresa Agnesi Pinottini.

Martino did extensive research to incorporate realistic details of everyday life and actual historical events into the novel. This attention to detail is reflected in many of the novel's reviews.

REVIEW EXCERPTS FOR *PLAYING BY HEART*

"Martino's romantic read features lovable characters and is vibrant in setting and detail."

—*Booklist*

"Particularly of interest is the description of the lavish balls held in Italy; sumptuous clothes and fancy carriages come alive, as does the hustle and bustle of such events—and the pressure."

—*The Historical Novels Review*

"Authentic, strong character voice, rich and detailed historical setting, and an intriguing plot all come together to create a can't-put-it-down book. The story provides a look into the fascinating world of 18th-century Italy in a way that no history book ever could. The fact that *Playing by Heart* is based on the lives of extraordinary real women who were quite ahead of their time makes it a must-read addition for school libraries everywhere."

—*Roxanne F. Owens, PhD, Chair, Teacher Education, DePaul University*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

NOTE: These questions are included in the 2025 edition of *Playing by Heart*, but not in the original edition.

1. Although Emilia is incredibly gifted, she initially believes she has “meager talent.” Why do you think that is? What makes her begin to suspect that she may be wrong? Have you ever believed something about yourself that you later realized was untrue?
2. Emilia is driven to prove her musical talents valuable to her father out of fear for her future. What, specifically, does she fear? Do you think her fear is valid? How do you think her life would have turned out if she hadn’t tried to prove her talents valuable?
3. Maria is also gifted. What are her gifts and how do they compare to Emilia’s? How do Maria’s specific goals and dreams for her future compare to Emilia’s goals?
4. Maria’s father, Signor Salvini, has plans for Maria that conflict with her own goals. How does she deal with this conflict? What would you have done in her situation?
5. One of the novel’s themes centers on recognizing your gifts and using them to follow your calling. Is the term “calling” still relevant in modern times? If so, what gifts do you have that could be tied to your calling? If the term calling is no longer relevant, why not?
6. The Author’s Note explains how the characters of Emilia and Maria were inspired by two sisters who lived in 18th-century Milan. Before reading the novel, what assumptions did you have about the type of educational and professional opportunities available to girls in Europe at that time? Did the novel change any of your assumptions? If so, how?
7. The Author’s Note also mentions that much more is known about Maria Gaetana Agnesi, the inspiration for the character of Maria Salvini, than about composer Maria Teresa Agnesi, who was the model for Emilia. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from Emilia’s point of view rather than Maria’s? How would the story have been different if told from Maria’s viewpoint?
8. If Emilia and Maria had been born in 21st-century America, how would their lives have been different? Would they have had to face any of the same issues or concerns that they do in the novel?

9. The end of the novel leaves some things unresolved. What do you think will happen to Emilia, Maria, Isabella, and Paola? How much say do you think they’ll have in what the future holds? Will they be happy?

POSSIBLE FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- Create a playlist featuring at least four of the music pieces mentioned in the novel.
- Find online videos of performances of works by Maria Teresa Agnesi, the inspiration for the character of Emilia Salvini, and discuss your responses to her music. (**Note:** A link to a sample playlist of Maria Teresa Agnesi’s compositions can be found at: www.carmelamartino.com/bookclubs.htm)
- Identify at least five other acclaimed female composers who were born before the 20th-century and find online performances of their works.
- Review the website www.MGAgnesi.com. List and discuss at least three common myths about the Agnesi family.
- Maria Gaetana Agnesi would have been the world’s first female professor of mathematics if she hadn’t turned down the position at the University of Bologna. But she would have been the second female professor at the University. Identify that first professor and present a report about her.
- Some readers have called *Playing by Heart* “Austen-esque,” saying it has much in common with Jane Austen’s work, especially *Pride and Prejudice*. Compare and contrast the two novels. In what ways are they similar? How are they different?
- Present a report on the reign of Hapsburg Emperor Charles VI and how his daughter, Archduchess Maria Theresa, succeeded him to become the only female Hapsburg ruler.
- Other research possibilities related to the novel:
 - *commedia dell’arte*
 - Milan’s Ritual of the Holy Nail
 - the history of the Duchy of Milan
 - the history of some of the musical instruments in the novel, such as the harpsichord or the viola d’amore
 - baroque music in general, or the music of one of the specific composers mentioned in the novel

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carmela A. Martino is an author, poet, and writing teacher who lives in the Chicago area. She wrote the middle-grade novel, *Rosa, Sola*, while working on her MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults at Vermont College. The novel went on to be named a *Booklist* “Top Ten First Novel for Youth.” Her young-adult historical, *Playing by Heart*, has won numerous awards, including the Independent Author Network Book of the Year Award for Outstanding Young Adult Fiction and the Catholic Arts and Letters Award (CALA) for Children’s/Young Adult Fiction.

Martino’s credits for children and teens also include short stories and poems in magazines and anthologies. Her articles for adults have appeared in such publications as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Catholic Parent*, *Writer’s Digest*, *Children’s Writer’s and Illustrator’s Market*, and multiple *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books. She taught writing courses for both children and adults at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, for over twenty years. Martino blogs about teaching and writing at www.TeachingAuthors.com, a website she founded with five other authors who are also writing teachers. You can read more about her at www.carmelamartino.com.

Teachers and readers are invited to subscribe to **Carmela’s Creativity Newsletter** containing publishing news, event info, creativity tips, and more at: [//subscribepage.io/cmartino](https://subscribepage.io/cmartino) . As a thank you gift, you'll receive access to a deleted scene from an early draft of the novel.