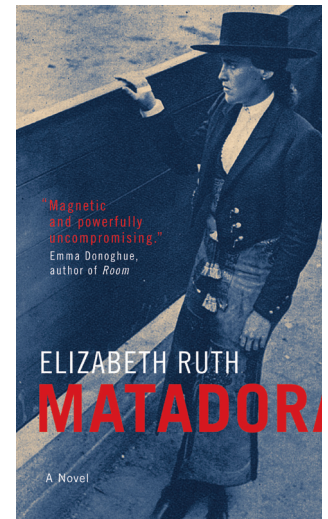


MATADORA

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Try to pinpoint each character's definition of "art"? What makes their "art" art? Would you agree? Why or why not?
- When asked to choose political sides, Luna responds "'I'm only interested in circles,' Luna said. 'Not in lines.'" Besides the bullring, what other circles might have Luna been thinking of?
- What is Luna's greatest desire? What is her greatest fear?
- What was your favourite moment/scene/line in Matadora?
- Who was the most memorable character? Why?
- Why do you think Luna chose the chance to fight on foot over Grace, her "match"? Would you have chosen differently or done the same as Luna?
- How was it that Luna and Marisol were able to overcome their differences and become friends?
- How do you think Don Carlos's death affected Pedro?
- What is your opinion on the idea that the lines between love and ambition were blurred in this novel?
- Why Luna against Manuel being a fighter when her profession is also as violent?
- What causes Manuel to abandon his poetry for violence and bloodshed?
- Do Armando and Paqui's deaths affect Luna in the same way? How or how not?
- Luck is frequently mentioned close to or after the bullfights in the novel. Do you think luck has anything to do with the way Luna and the other characters's lives played out? Was it blind luck, fate, or did the character's create their own destinies? How would you fit the ending of the novel into this belief "luck," good or bad?
- Matadora is a carefully structured novel that has been organized into three acts. Why do you think the author conceived of the novel in this way? How do the three acts relate to the practice of bullfighting?
- At a time when women were forbidden to fight bulls on foot in Spain, what drives the protagonist in Matadora to defy convention and break the law?
- Grace, the Canadian who drives one of Bethune's mobile transfusion units on the front, believes bullfighting to be cruel and that it ought to be banned. How are her objections to the corrida different from the animal rights arguments presented by Spaniard's?
- The scene in Matadora where Luna stands before a mirror in her suit of lights is pivotal. What do you think the thematic significance of costuming and mirrors is to this novel? How has the author used the suit of lights to play with issues of gender and sex expression?
- Why won't Luna publicly ally herself with Manuel and the resistance? What is the author trying to say about ambition and power?
- Despite being set in 1930s Spain and Mexico, Matadora is a novel that strongly appeals to a contemporary reader. Why do you think that is? Did the author create a mirror for our times? If so, in what ways does Spain in the 1930s resemble contemporary life?
- For Luna, love and death are intimately connected. What informs her notion of love, and does this notion shift over the course of the novel? How do we know?
- What does Luna's relationship with Paqui say about mothering? How has the author (re)defined family in



this novel? Can you think of three examples where biology is not the determining factor?

- The author uses the recurring image of a circle – whether it is a white stone wall surrounding a ranch house or the image of a clock to describe the bullring. How does the image of a circle connect to the larger themes being explored in this book?

Q&A with Elizabeth Ruth, author

What inspired you to write about Spain in the 1930s? The tradition of bullfighting?

It all began on Saturday morning six years ago when I was in my kitchen frying eggs. The radio was on, and I heard the broadcaster mention a 16-year-old girl in Mexico who was fighting bulls. Immediately intrigued, I thought, why would a girl want to become a bullfighter? Why would anyone choose to do such a violent and dangerous thing? Having once been a vegetarian for 18 years, I could hardly bring myself to squash a bug let alone imagine publicly killing an animal for entertainment. All at once, a female matador became my next obsession. During that same period in my life I was reading Emma Goldman's, *Anarchism and Other Essays*. Her work made me think about European fascism, resistance, and women's rights. Her politics melded, in my mind, with the notion of a female bullfighter. Suddenly I decided to write a book set in Spain, using the Spanish Civil War as a backdrop for a female bullfighter so that I might explore my own thoughts about passion, politics and art. But when I think about it, the more profound inspiration for *Matadora* began long before. It began when I was 7 or 8 years old and living in South America, becoming fluent in Spanish and most importantly witnessing levels of poverty I had never before seen. In Colombia I had conversations with my mother about why some people didn't have food or a place to live and why some people couldn't get medical care. The seeds of a social justice analysis were planted in me back then and *Matadora* is a book that looks at class issues, class oppression and one woman's attempt to rise out of poverty. It's not an historical novel, but the political divisions within the Left during the 1920's and 1930's, and the rise of the Right, provided me with a wonderful mirror for our times. So, what began in me as a child has had several decades to germinate. I have to think that this book was inspired in stages as I developed my own artistic practice, my own notions of personal freedom.

What made you want to draw attention to the life, triumphs, and struggles of a female bullfighter?

Matadora is a novel that centres on a female bullfighter, that's true, but like all good books about bullfighting, it's really not about bullfighting at all. This book is about ambition, passion, art and politics. At its heart it asks the question: if you had to choose between your greatest passion – the thing that makes you who you are – and the person you love most in this world, how would you choose? I am always interested in writing and reading about strong female characters that defy or reject social expectations. A female bullfighter, attempting to become a matador-de-toros at a time when it was illegal for her to do so is a fabulously interesting character to follow. It was not the practice of bullfighting, per se, that interested me in writing this book, it was the determination of a girl to do something forbidden. Her struggle mirrors the struggle of anyone who has ever tried to rise above his or her circumstance, and win love.

In *Matadora*, the most complicated form of love is, arguably, familial love. Each member of the Garcia family seemed to suffer from some form of unrequited love with one or multiple members of their family. Why did you choose to make this family so complicated and tragic?

From my perspective, Luna's family and the other families presented are not tragic. To me, family is always a messy, profound, affair. It is within that mess, trying to sort out that mess, that we all find ourselves, define

ourselves, become ourselves. Family for Luna, my protagonist, is both biological and chosen. The question of where she belongs, to whom she belongs, and what love mean for her life, are questions every human being seeks to answer for him or herself. There are secrets and lies in Matadora as there are in many (all?) families. The absence of a biological mother and the question of paternity, allowed me to explore larger questions facing the protagonist around entitlement to wealth and status, class affiliation, inheritance, naming, legitimacy. But it is love, above all else, that defines family in this novel. As in real life, love in Matadora, is, at its best, transformative.

Why does Luna choose her career over stability and wealth from Don Ramon or true love from Grace?

I write in the opening of the novel, “Love is a dark and dangerous animal. For love, you must be prepared to die.” Luna believes this. For a variety of reasons that become apparent as you read the novel, Luna equates love with bullfighting. As a result, she is driven to succeed in the bullring, seeking a sort of love she assumes will fill up the loneliness and longing that she has always known. She comes to experience different forms of love throughout the novel (Armando, Don Ramon, Grace) and in each case is forced to redouble her efforts to prove herself as a bullfighter. Luna does not trust romantic love. Romantic love is dangerous, and in her experience, more dangerous than bullfighting. Her mother, unmarried and in love with a man she shouldn’t have been, died in childbirth. Her father abandoned her mother, his lover. Luna is courageous in the bullring, but not outside of it. She fears any love that cannot be controlled. Also, she refuses to be controlled.

Why did you choose to title the book Matadora instead of the masculine version, “matador”?

There are three good reasons for this book to be titled Matadora. First, because regardless of how skilled Luna became as a bullfighter, how daring and brave she was, and whether she outperformed her male colleagues, the public and her colleagues never let her forget she was a woman. She could not escape her sex. She was always fighting for legitimacy and the right to live and work as she chose. The second reason to call this book Matadora is because there is dignity and value in doing something never before done, thereby challenging tradition. Luna’s fierce determination in the face of opposition deserves recognition and Matadora is the word that best encapsulates that determination. Finally, inherent in the title, Matadora, is Spain.

Can any elements of your previous writings be found in Matadora? What makes Matadora different from anything you have written before?

After having now written three novels I can look at my literary passions with some degree of detachment and say without a doubt that I repeatedly write characters who challenge readers to reconsider basic assumptions. In *Ten Good Seconds of Silence* I used a psychic single mother to look at concepts of sanity and normalcy. In *Smoke* my literary passion was pulling dominant notions about sex and gender apart, allowing a boy on the cusp of manhood to learn what it means to be a man from a man who was born female. In both books played with external appearances, with notions of beauty and with gender presentation. Matadora’s bullfighter continues my interest in exploring the lives of people who cross boundaries, break laws and challenge the dominant assumptions of their time. But, this time I bring the outsider or outlaw into the centre of the story where she can more fully express herself. What makes Matadora distinct from anything I’ve written before is the foreign setting and time period. I deliberately wanted to give readers and myself the experience of being transported to a far away place. Another difference between my previous novels and Matadora is the way I play with words, bringing in a flavour of Spain or Mexico through the actual language used. Finally, no other novel of mine has been as directly political in terms of class.