

The Fatal Touch

By Conor Fitzgerald

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *The Fatal Touch*, a mystery of murder, art forgery, and decades-old secrets that Commissioner Alec Blume must solve.

About this book

Inspector Caterina Mattioli is about to take on her first murder case. A recent transfer to the homicide department of the Roman police force, she is the first investigator on the scene when Henry Treacy, an Irish artist and skilled art forger, is found dead. But her boss, Commissioner Alec Blume, is warned to treat Treacy's death as accidental. The Carabinieri, Rome's military police, are taking over the investigation, led by Colonel Farinelli, who seems more interested in selling Treacy's forgeries than finding his killer.

Blume and Caterina discover a manuscript that Treacy was writing in his last days, which hints that the artist had discovered a valuable Velázquez sketch. Treacy's partner, John Nightingale, knows nothing about the Velázquez—he and Treacy sold numerous forgeries on the art market, but nothing as priceless as a work by the Spanish master. But Nightingale and Treacy had more in common than just business: they fell for the same woman, Angela, and each is convinced that Angela's beautiful daughter, Emma, is his own child. As Blume and Caterina try to protect Angela and Emma from Colonel Farinelli, they find themselves hot on the trail of the hidden Velázquez, a treasure that could change the course of their careers and their budding romance.

For discussion

1. Commissioner Alec Blume is in charge of three cases in *The Fatal Touch*: the death of Henry Treacy, a rash of tourist muggings, and a mob-related hit-and-run. How does he manage to juggle these three cases? Which of them does he solve most effectively, and where does he make mistakes?
2. Describe Caterina's first impressions of the crime scene at Piazza de' Renzi, when she first sees the body of Henry Treacy. What assumptions does Caterina make about Treacy? Which of her impressions are proven wrong?
3. Throughout *The Fatal Touch*, parents try to protect their children: Caterina compromises her case to shield Elia, Angela keeps Emma's true father hidden from her, Krishnamachari dies protecting his children from a mob-driven Jeep, and Conte Alfonso Corsi shields his son Agnolo from the mugging investigation. Why do these parents go to such great lengths to protect their children? Which parents succeed in their efforts, and which fail?
4. Consider some of the officers who work under Commissioner Blume: Sovrintendente Grattapaglia, Inspector Panebianco, and Assistente Capo Rospo. What kind of relationship does Blume have with each of these officers? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working for Blume?

5. Discuss Henry Treacy's skill as an artist. Is forgery really "an art form, a getting into the mind of an artist," as Treacy writes in his manuscript (127)? Does Treacy judge his own talents fairly, or is he "an immensely gifted second-rate artist," as Nightingale calls him (194)?
6. Consider the love triangle of Angela, Treacy, and Nightingale. Who does Angela seem to love more: the artist Treacy or the art dealer Nightingale? How does each man express his love for Angela?
7. Discuss the villain of *The Fatal Touch*: Colonel Orazio Farinelli, the former director of the Carabinieri Art Forgery and Heritage Division. What motivates Farinelli to track down Treacy's manuscripts and paintings? How does he handle the people who stand in his way—Blume, Caterina, Nightingale, and Angela?
8. Consider Blume's process of mourning his parents. Why does he still live in their apartment and maintain their office, twenty years after their deaths? How do they live on in Blume's memories and attitudes?
9. Discuss Caterina's instincts as a homicide detective. How does she quietly judge the people she interviews? How does her natural intuition help her solve cases?
10. Many of the characters in *The Fatal Touch* are not native to Rome: Blume is American, Treacy is Irish, and Nightingale is British. How has each of these foreigners made his way to Rome? What attracts each of them to this city? What do Roman citizens seem to think of the foreigners in their midst?
11. Although Henry Treacy is dead when *The Fatal Touch* opens, we learn a lot about his personality from his manuscripts and from his friends. What kind of person was Treacy? Is he a likable character? Why or why not? What illusions did he have about his life and his talents? How did he try to make amends for his regrets?
12. Consider the setting of *The Fatal Touch*. What details does the author use to bring the city of Rome to life? How does the past live on in the present in this ancient, bustling city?
13. Blume says of the robbery he staged with Beppe Paoloni, "That was the point I stopped being a proper policeman and began playing a game that led to my friend's death" (350). What could Blume have done differently? Is Blume responsible for Paoloni's murder? Why or why not?
14. "People believe what they want to believe," according to John Nightingale's attorney (201) If buyers want to think that a forgery is authentic, should dealers like Nightingale be able to profit from their beliefs? Explain.

15. Review how Henry Treacy successfully hid a Velázquez for Angela to discover. How did he expect Angela to solve the riddle of her inheritance? Would she have found it herself if Blume and Caterina hadn't found his manuscripts first? Does she owe them a reward? Why or why not?
16. Consider the relationship between Blume and Caterina. How close do they seem at the beginning of the novel? Which scenes reveal their growing attraction to each other? How is their relationship as lovers and co-workers likely to change in the future?

Suggested reading

Conor Fitzgerald, *The Dogs of Rome*; Michael Dibdin, *Ratking*; William Boyd, *Ordinary Thunderstorms*; Andrea Camilleri, *The Shape of Water*; Donna Leon, *Death at La Fenice*; Martin Walker, *Bruno, Chief of Police*; Kate Atkinson, *Case Histories*; Louise Penny, *Still Life*; Alan Bradley, *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*; Grace Brophy, *Last Enemy*; Jacqueline Winspear, *Maisie Dobbs*; Henning Mankell, *Faceless Killers*; Cara Black, *Murder in the Marais*; Ann Cleeves, *Raven Black*; Ruth Downie, *Medicus*

Conor Fitzgerald is the author of *The Dogs of Rome*, also featuring Commissario Alec Blume. He has lived in Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Italy. He has produced a current affairs journal for foreign embassies based in Rome, and founded a successful translation company. He is married with two children and lives in Rome.