



Lady's Maid: A Novel

By Margaret Forster

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“Fascinating . . . The reader is treated to a revealing account of the passionate romance between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning through the eyes of an intimate observer.”

–Booklist

Young and timid but full of sturdy good sense and awakening sophistication, Lily Wilson arrives in London in 1844, becoming a lady’s maid to the fragile, housebound Elizabeth Barrett. Lily is quickly drawn to her mistress’s gaiety and sharp intelligence, the power of her poetry, and her deep emotional need. It is a strange intimacy that will last sixteen years.

It is Lily who smuggles Miss Barrett out of the gloomy Wimpole Street house, witnesses her secret wedding to Robert Browning in an empty church, and flees with them to threadbare lodgings and the heat, light, and colors of Italy. As housekeeper, nursemaid, companion, and confidante, Lily is with Elizabeth in every crisis—birth, bereavement, travel, literary triumph. As her devotion turns almost to obsession, Lily forgets her own fleeting loneliness. But when Lily’s own affairs take a dramatic turn, she comes to expect the loyalty from Elizabeth that she herself has always given.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

British novelist Forster (*Georgy Girl*), whose biographies include Elizabeth Barrett Browning, lures the reader into the attic of the famous house on Wimpole Street, where Barrett's maid, Elizabeth Wilson, composes copious letters to her mother in the North Country. Her correspondence, the fulcrum of the novel, describes her daily experiences, her impressions of the large household and, especially, her sickly but charismatic mistress. Wilson's devotion is such that she forsakes her homeland, her family, a suitor and even her own reputation in order to aid Miss Elizabeth and her suitor Mr. Browning when they elope to Europe. At this point, the novel falters; Forster is not quite capable of juggling the glamorous settings, Wilson's frustrations (the Brownings, though generous in their affection, cannot see Wilson as other than a servant), her difficult marriage and family life. Wilson's ambivalence about Miss Elizabeth, whom she loves and resents, is the most interesting aspect of the novel, but despite otherwise sensitive handling, it is almost glibly resolved in the conclusion. On the whole, however, this is top-drawer historical fiction, akin to the TV series *Upstairs, Downstairs* in its appeal and its overtures toward discussions of class. 50,000 first printing; \$50,000 ad/promo.

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From Library Journal

Until Wilson appeared, it seemed impossible to the agonizingly sensitive and delicate Elizabeth Barrett that anyone could replace the beloved Crow, who had deserted her mistress to marry a baker. As retiring as her new mistress and adept at ministering to the sick, the new maid soon establishes herself as the invalid poetess's defender and companion, even accompanying her in her elopement with Robert Browning. Thus begins an intense relationship that is to become the burden and support of each of their lives. Forster brilliantly explores the uneasy intimacy between mistress and servant, working-class girl and educated lady of leisure to produce a compelling character study and an engrossing novel of the colorful Browning menage. This London Times best seller is highly recommended. --Cynthia Johnson Whealler, Cary Memorial Lib., Lexington, Mass.

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Review

"From the viewpoint of Elizabeth Wilson -- lady's maid, Margaret Forster retells the love story of Robert and Elizabeth Browning -- enthralling."

—*Daily Telegraph*

"Passion, melodrama, pathos -- and a happy ending. What more can you ask for?"

—*Daily Mail*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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