

"An insightful and timely tale of female power."

—NIKKI MARMERY, author of *Lilith*

A NOVEL

NEFERURA

THE PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER



MALAYNA EVANS

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. At the beginning of the story, Neferura learns that her half brother, Thutmose, is returning to court. What happened between Neferura and Thutmose to make her wary of his return? Then, discuss the political reasons for why Hatshepsut and Neferura don't want Thutmose back.
2. Neferura holds many responsibilities as the daughter of a pharaoh. What specific roles does she play within her society, and how do they give her power? Did you learn anything about women's roles in ancient Egypt while reading?
3. Neferura has a tumultuous relationship with her mother, Hatshepsut. Discuss their mother-daughter dynamic and some events that showcase their relationship. How did this relationship make you feel?
4. What reasons does Thutmose give for his return to Kemet, and how does this affect Neferura? Do you think his reasons were justified?

5. Neferura learns of an old wisewoman and her network of spies while she is digging for information on Thutmose. Who is Hathor, and how does she wield power throughout Kemet? Then, discuss how her relationship with Neferura evolves throughout the story.
6. When Thutmose learns the truth of how his father was killed, he doesn't hesitate to use this knowledge to his advantage. What ultimatum does Thutmose give Hatshepsut, and what is her reaction? How are Neferura, Senenmut, and the people of Kemet affected by the decision these two pharaohs make?
7. How does Neferura's character evolve throughout the story? Do you think she changed by the end of the novel? Why or why not?
8. An important lesson that Neferura learns is that there is more than one way for a woman to hold power. Who does she learn this lesson from, and what does it mean? Then, compare the ways in which the women of the novel (Neferura, Hathor, Hatshepsut, Iset, and Satiah) all hold different forms of power and how they might choose to wield it.
9. Near the end of the story, a terrible event takes place. What happened to Iset, and what did Thutmose have to do with it? How would you have felt if you were in Neferura's position?
10. Thutmose is the main antagonist of the novel, but his character is quite complex. What were your feelings toward Thutmose? Do you think the events of the story were entirely his fault? If not, who might have also been a villain? Why?

11. Compare and contrast Neferura's and Satiah's views on bodily autonomy and sexuality. How do these views lead them to the decisions they make in the end, and how did these actions make you feel?
12. After Iset's death, Neferura realizes that she cannot stay at court. Describe the plan that she makes with Hathor and Satiah. Were you surprised by this ending? Do you think Neferura had any other options?
13. Discuss the epilogue. Where do each of the characters end up after the final events of the story? Did you find this ending to be satisfying?
14. *Neferura* is a historical novel inspired by real people who ruled in ancient Egypt. Were you familiar with any of these historical figures, practices, or places? How did you like reading a retelling from this part of history?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

You hold a PhD in Egyptology. How did your academic background help you in writing this novel?

I couldn't have written this book, at least not in the way I did, if I hadn't spent so many years in academia studying the language and artifacts, traditions and beliefs, of ancient Egypt. As a historian by training who's learning how to write fiction, the knowledge those years embedded in my brain freed me up to focus on the fictional aspects of the story. And I needed that. My early drafts read a bit like a dissertation—not a lot of fun to read. Finding a balance between history and storytelling didn't come easily, but having a background in the history of the period helped me imagine the building blocks of the story. The setting, conflicts, characters, plot points, and even the themes my tale explores were influenced and animated by my understanding of the ancient world and the Eighteenth Dynasty in particular.

Why Neferura? What about her life inspired you to write a story about her?

Even for one looking to write a novel about a formidable ancient Egyptian woman, Neferura is not the most obvious choice, in part because so little is known of her life and in part because

she's overshadowed by so many other fascinating women, including a number of intriguing women from the same dynasty. And still, she called to me for years before I tried putting pen to paper. Her mother, Hatshepsut, would have been seen as remarkable even in her own time. Queen regents were common enough, but Hatshepsut set herself apart when she chose to declare herself pharaoh. And she dragged her daughter along for the ride. It doesn't take much imagination to envision the daughter of such a woman having mixed feelings about, or a fraught relationship with, her inimitable mother. And while I suspect some may not appreciate my unflattering depiction of Hatshepsut, it's worth remembering that much of what we believe about the rulers of ancient Egypt is the result of what was, in their own time, pure propaganda. It's not terribly difficult to envision the powerful ruler of an authoritarian country in narcissistic terms, even if such a depiction may make her modern-day fans, including me, a bit uncomfortable. And while there's certainly no reason to suspect Neferura would have been opposed to her mother or the propaganda she perpetuated—Neferura benefited from it, after all—it's more interesting to imagine what it might have been like if she were aware of, and at times even at odds with, the privilege she was born to and the hype that surround her. Did she see her mother's claim to divine parentage as disinformation, or did she believe it was true? Surely plenty of accomplished people today have children who aren't as impressed with them as the outside world is. Could that have been true then as well? How would the belief that her family was anointed by the gods color her relationships with others? Would she have given any thought to the fact that, in a world where many women were free to choose their own partners, her choice of romantic partners was dictated by her position? What might she have made of the irony that in some ways she was disempowered by

the very power she alone inherited? These questions and others made Neferura an appealing protagonist. And although her story eventually took me to very different places than I first imagined it would, I enjoyed the ride, and I like to think she did too. After all, ancient Egyptians believed they were made stronger in the afterworld when their names were spoken. It pleases me to imagine that somewhere, somehow, Neferura revels in a bit of extra strength every time I type her name.

Historical fiction is always a fine line between fact and fiction. How did you achieve this balance? What are some events in the story that are more fiction than fact?

Emotions and relationships are the heart of all stories, and everything about the relationships in this story is pure fiction. To my mind, the most important relationship in the story is the friendship between Neferura and Iset. I knew from the beginning that I wanted to write a story about love. Not about romance but about the kind of love close girlfriends share. So Iset was a key character from the beginning. And everything from her position to the way she addresses Neferura to her duties is pure speculation.

This, of course, is the kind of fabrication any reader of historical fiction expects. But when I first imagined what this story would be like, I faced a more fundamental clash of fact versus fiction—the tension between the most authentic presentation of the past I could muster and speaking as clearly as possible to the audience I was writing for. It was the brain that plagued me early on. Not the brain as we know it, but the brain as they understood it and the many implications their understanding has for the language I share with my audience. Ancient Egyptians imagined the heart as the locus of feeling and thinking. We, on the other hand, see thought (brain)

and feeling (heart) as separate, which creates a kind of dichotomy between emotion and knowledge that's enshrined in our language in countless ways. Thus we say one follows their heart or their brain. The English language is littered with references that would confound ancient Egyptians, who would never have "run over a thought in their mind," or "racked their brain for an answer," or "focused their mind on a problem." At first, I wanted to acknowledge this difference for readers. But if the English language can be adapted to convey that difference in a way that isn't downright clunky, I'm not the writer to manage that hefty task. There came a day that I had to choose—true to thought categories of the past or understandable for today's readers. That day, dear readers, I chose you. (Although, as a nod to this conundrum, I left in a scene where Senenmut taps his chest as he speaks about knowledge and wisdom, a subtle reference to the conflict that appealed me, even though it may be invisible to most readers.)

You retell a piece of ancient history through a feminist perspective. Why do you think this new lens is important?

Hatshepsut has long been a darling of women's history. For those looking for powerful women in our past, she's an excellent example. And of course, intriguing details such as her gender-bending depictions, peaceful reign, and powerful religious position only invite more interest and speculation. Here, I wanted to speak from a woman's perspective, widening the lens to tell the story of three powerful historical actors who ring out across the millennia as unique—Neferura, of course, but also her mother who ruled and her tutor who seemingly used his relationship with the two of them to boost his own status.

I also wanted to explore what it meant to *be* a woman in this

specific time and place by depicting some of the rights, limitations, assumptions, practices, and challenges they faced, some of which resonate still today while others are idiosyncratic and unfamiliar. Contrasting the kind of hard power Hatshepsut, and to a lesser degree Neferura, would have certainly wielded with examples of softer power, like that employed by Hathor and Iset, was a way to explore the invisible ways women impact the world they live in. This kind of influence is particularly hard for historians to capture, in part due to the nature of soft power and also because of the dearth of evidence scholars have to work with. Unlike royals and patricians, ancient Egyptian commoners didn't leave a lot behind to tell us about their lives, and women left less evidence behind for Egyptologists to study than men, in part because they were less likely to be literate. This contrast also depicts a truth I suspect is rather universal: it's easier to achieve a thing if you see others who share the attributes you were born with, such as gender, managing it first. In my story, Neferura can't envision a different way to be powerful in the world until Iset and Hathor model the path. She makes it her own, but the influence of these women, neither of whom were born to power like Neferura herself, showed her—and I dare hope reminds some of us—that we can all make a difference in the world around us and be a positive influence for those who come after us.

What do you hope readers get from your novel?

As a historian, it sometimes frustrates me that history is too often framed as progressive. American history, for example, is often depicted as a straightforward march toward a more inclusive nation, which ignores all the times people won, and then lost, rights. Of course I want to give readers a glimpse into what life was like in this

ancient African civilization and highlight some of the ancient discoveries that influence our life today, not least of which is the alphabet I'm using to write these words. To my mind, ancient Egypt doesn't get the credit it deserves when it comes to understanding the roots of our modern world. But I also hope this view into what life was like thousands of years ago reminds readers that humans have gained and lost personal freedoms again and again throughout history. Women in the Eighteenth Dynasty, for example, wielded more legal authority and autonomy than many women in early American history. (One might argue that in some ways, they had more bodily autonomy than some American women do as I write this.) The social issues we grapple with today are often assumed to be inherently modern somehow. But many of these issues have been faced by humans for millennia. The battles we fight, or ignore, today have already been won, and lost, by those who went before us and can be won, or lost, again now and in the future.

What is your writing process like? Are there any ways you like to get creative inspiration?

I'm a busy single mom, so my writing process is mostly about sneaking in writing hours where I can. I've become adept at writing in short bursts, although I prefer four- or five-hour, uninterrupted windows. For years now, I've woken early on weekend mornings to write while the house is still quiet. And when I need inspiration, dog walks help. Also working with my hands while my mind is free to roam, crocheting or needlepointing, for example, often helps me think through problems. When these tricks don't work, a sleepless night mulling over my protagonist's challenges usually does the trick. It's not the most relaxing way to move forward, but there is a certain kind of pleasure found in going to bed with a problem and waking up with a solution.

What are you reading these days?

Predictably, I love historical fiction, especially stories set in the ancient world. Two recent favorites have been *Kaikeyi* by Vaishnavi Patel and *Clytemnestra* by Costanza Casati. Natalie Haynes's *Stone Blind* is next up in my to-be-read pile. I adored her other books so I have high expectations. I also absolutely love young adult novels. Amanda Joy's *A River of Royal Blood* and its sequel are recent favorites, and I can't wait for Rosaria Munda's *Gods and Gamemasters*, a YA retelling of the Trojan War. I've also been revisiting some classics, especially recently banned old favorites. I've enjoyed rereading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*. I'm reminded of why I loved them both so much the first time I read them. And to my delight, I've discovered some books I didn't know existed. I've never spent much time with graphic novels, so I hadn't run across *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. But I'm glad I found it—it's a powerful tale and well worth a read.