20-MINUTE READ SUMMARY

The Forty Rules of Love — 20-Minute Read Summary

Elif Shafak



> *"Try not to resist the changes that come your way. Instead let life live through you."*

Some books give you information; this one gives you a practice. Elif Shafak's novel is two love stories eight centuries apart — a Massachusetts housewife reading her way toward a new life, and a thirteenth-century mystic poet remade by a wandering dervish — stitched together by forty rules for loving without ego. This summary walks through both stories, unpacks the rules that matter most, maps the Sufi psychology underneath them, and offers a way to read the book as what it secretly is: a forty-day retreat in novel form. Read it as a story first and a manual second, and let the rules do their slow work.

The book in 60 seconds

A bored Massachusetts housewife named Ella Rubinstein takes a job reading manuscripts and is assigned an odd novel called *Sweet Blasphemy*, about the thirteenth-century friendship between the Persian mystic poet Rumi and a wandering dervish named Shams of Tabriz. As Ella reads, she starts emailing the manuscript's author, a gentle Sufi traveler named Aziz. The two stories — Ella's in 2008, Rumi's in 1240s Konya — begin to rhyme. Rumi's comfortable scholarly life is upended by Shams, who teaches him forty rules of love: a spiritual operating system for dismantling the ego. Ella's comfortable suburban life is upended by Aziz's manuscript, and she must decide whether to keep reading about transformation or undergo one herself. The book's claim is large and simple: love is not a feeling to be consumed but a discipline for getting the ego out of the way, and practiced seriously, it is a path to God. It became one of the best-selling novels in Turkish history and introduced millions of readers to Rumi and Shams.



Konya — Rumi's city in the 1240s, where a scholar's orderly life met a wandering dervish.

The story

The novel runs on two tracks, and the pleasure of the book is watching them converge.

Northampton, Massachusetts, 2008. Ella Rubinstein is forty, married to a successful dentist, mother of three teenagers, and quietly drowning. The marriage is a politely managed disappointment; the children are leaving; her own ambitions were shelved decades ago. She takes freelance work as a reader for a literary agent, and the first manuscript in her pile is *Sweet Blasphemy* by an unknown writer, Aziz Zahara. Her job is to write a reader's report. Instead she falls into the book, then into correspondence with its author, who lives in Amsterdam and answers her emails with disarming honesty. Aziz is a photographer and traveler in the Sufi spirit. He is also living with HIV, which he carries without self-pity. His gentleness does something to Ella: she begins to see her own life clearly for the first time in years, and what she sees is a woman who has been performing happiness rather than living.

Konya, Anatolia, 1244. Jalaluddin Rumi — born in 1207 in Balkh, in what is now Afghanistan, his family having fled the Mongol invasions — is by his late thirties a pillar of the community: a respected Islamic scholar, preacher, teacher, family man. He has the medieval equivalent of Ella's good life. Then a rough, sunburned wandering dervish named Shams of Tabriz walks into town and, in the middle of the marketplace, asks Rumi a question designed to be unanswerable: who was greater, the Prophet Muhammad, or the mystic Bayazid Bastami, who once exclaimed, "Glory be to me, how great is my majesty"? Rumi answers that the Prophet was greater, because Bayazid was satisfied with a single sip of divine love while the Prophet's thirst could never be quenched. Shams cries out and collapses at Rumi's feet. The two men recognize each other instantly, and withdraw into a cell for forty days of uninterrupted companionship and conversation.

They emerge transformed, and Rumi is never the same. He abandons his sermons, whirls in ecstasy in the marketplace, and begins pouring out poetry. His disciples — who had signed up for a respectable scholar — are furious at the disreputable drifter who has stolen their master. The hostility drives Shams to flee to Damascus in 1246; Rumi's son Sultan Walad brings him back; but in 1248 Shams vanishes permanently. Murdered, some say, possibly with the knowledge of one of Rumi's sons. Walked away into the night, say others. The historical record goes silent, and the silence is the point: Rumi's grief pours out as the *Divan of Shams* and the *Masnavi*, among the supreme achievements of mystical poetry in any language.

Back in 2008, Ella finishes the manuscript and makes her decision. She will go to Amsterdam to meet Aziz — leaving the flat marriage, taking the risk the rules demand. Aziz dies of a heart attack before they ever meet in person. She goes anyway. She stands in his empty apartment, looks at his photographs, and instead of collapsing, becomes a writer and traveler herself. The novel's thesis in narrative form: love is not possession. It is transformation. Ella doesn't get Aziz. She gets herself.



Ella's turn begins with a manuscript read as a mirror rather than a job.

The four central figures

Ella Rubinstein is the novel's most quietly radical creation, because she is so ordinary. She is not a heroine in the romantic sense; she is a woman who did everything right — marriage, children, a nice house in Northampton — and woke up at forty to find the life felt like someone else's. Her particular disease is judgment. She judges her husband's dull infidelity, her children's ingratitude, the manuscript on her desk, and eventually Aziz himself. Judgment is the ego's favorite pastime because it costs nothing and feels like discernment. Ella's arc is the slow surrender of the gavel. By the end she can see her husband not as a villain but as a fellow unhappy person, and she can read Aziz's manuscript not as a job but as a mirror. Her transformation is undramatic and therefore believable: no lightning bolt, just a woman who stops performing happiness and starts pursuing it.

Aziz Zahara is the novel's ghost — present mostly through his manuscript and his emails, dying before Ella ever meets him. A Scottish photographer turned Sufi traveler, he writes with a honesty that has no self-pity in it, including about his HIV diagnosis. He never preaches at Ella; he simply tells the truth about his own life, and the truth does the work. He is the modern Shams to her modern Rumi, except the genders are reversed and the desert is email. His function in the novel is to prove that the rules work outside the thirteenth century: here is a man living with dying who is freer than the healthy people around him, because he has stopped resisting the current.

Rumi enters as the establishment: the respected scholar, the good son of a good family, the man with answers. What makes his story moving is how completely he lets the answers go. The novel is honest about the cost — his disciples' fury, his family's confusion, the town's gossip — and about the fact that transformation looks like madness from the outside. Rumi whirling in the marketplace while respectable citizens stare is the whole book in one image: ecstasy, in public, without apology.

Shams of Tabriz is the catalyst and the mystery. In Shafak's telling he is rough-tongued, funny, tender, and impossible — a man who refuses every social script and pays for it. The novel leans into the historical enigma of his disappearance rather than resolving it, which is the right choice: Shams works as a person precisely because he remains partly unknowable, a mirror in which Rumi (and the reader) sees what they need to see. The risk, which the criticisms section takes up, is that he becomes too lovable — a holy fool with perfect one-liners rather than the difficult, abrasive figure the historical record suggests.

The central argument

Underneath the two love stories, the novel is making a philosophical claim with Sufi roots: **the obstacle between a person and a full life is the ego, and love is the discipline that dismantles it.**

The Sufis call the ego the *nafs*, and they map it through stages — from the commanding self that wants everything for itself, down through the regretful and inspired selves, to the purified self that wants nothing for itself. The forty rules of Shams are a ladder down those stages. Every rule is a small death of the ego: stop judging, stop calculating, stop despairing, stop clinging, stop resisting change. What remains when the ego gets out of the way is love — and Shafak's daring move is to treat human love and divine love not as two different things but as one thing wearing different clothes.

This is why the book pairs Rumi's story with Ella's. Rumi's ego is scholarly pride and respectability; Ella's is judgment and the performance of contentment. Different costumes, same obstacle. The rules work on both.

A second, quieter argument runs beneath the first: **your inner state writes your outer world.** The mirror rule — that how we see God reflects how we see ourselves — makes theology into autobiography. If your God is mostly fear and blame, the problem is not God. This turns every complaint about other people into a diagnostic about yourself, which is why the rules sting. They are designed to.

The stages of the ego

It helps to know the map the rules are walking. The Sufi psychology of the *nafs* — usually translated as ego, self, or soul in its lower state — describes the self ascending through stages. The commanding self (*nafs al-ammara*) wants what it wants and invents reasons afterward; this is Ella judging everyone at the breakfast table and Rumi's disciples plotting against Shams. Above it sits the regretful self, which sees its own behavior and winces; then the inspired self, which catches glimpses of something larger; and finally the purified self, which wants nothing for itself and therefore can love without negotiation.

The forty rules are ordered, loosely, as a climb through these stages. Early rules attack the crudest ego habits — judgment, despair, the demand that life go according to plan. Middle rules retrain perception — the mirror, heaven and hell in the present, patience with thorns. Late rules describe the view from higher up — solitude without loneliness, daily practice, letting life live through you. You don't need to memorize the map. But knowing there is one changes the rules from a pile of quotations into a curriculum: each rule is a rung, and the rungs are in an order for a reason.



The *Divan of Shams* and the *Masnavi* — grief turned, through love, into poetry.

The whirling and the poetry

Two things the novel circles around deserve plain explanation, because they are easy to romanticize and harder to understand.

The *sema* — the whirling dance of the dervishes — is not performance. It is prayer with the body. The dervish turns like the planets turn: one hand open to the sky, receiving; one hand open to the earth, giving; the long skirt fanning out like an orbit. Shams taught Rumi to put grief into motion and motion into worship. When the novel shows Rumi whirling in the Konya marketplace, it is showing the rules made flesh — the ego, which wants to look dignified, surrendered to something larger than dignity.

The poetry matters because it is the evidence. Rumi's grief after Shams's disappearance poured out as the *Divan of Shams* — poems addressed to, or in the voice of, the lost friend — and the *Masnavi*, a six-volume spiritual epic sometimes called "the Koran in Persian." The novel's claim is that this supreme literary achievement was not produced *despite* the loss but *through* it: love, even lost love, rightly metabolized, becomes creation. That is the same alchemy Ella performs on a smaller scale when she becomes a writer. The book insists the mechanism is universal. The scale varies; the chemistry doesn't.

A forty-day practice

The number forty is doing quiet work throughout. Moses spent forty days on the mountain; Jesus spent forty days in the desert; the Sufi *chilla* is a forty-day retreat of seclusion and prayer; Shams and Rumi's own retreat lasted forty days. The forty rules are a retreat in book form, and they can be read that way:

- **Days 1–10: stop the bleeding.** Work the rules against judgment, despair, and resistance to change. Notice how often you reach for the gavel.
- **Days 11–20: retrain perception.** The mirror rule, heaven and hell in the present, speaking your neighbor's language. Catch your inner state authoring your outer world.
- **Days 21–30: practice love as action.** Loving the thorn with the rose, changing how you treat yourself, daily practice. This is the unglamorous middle where most readers quit.
- **Days 31–40: let go.** Solitude without loneliness, not resisting the current, letting life live through you. The rules stop being instructions and start being descriptions of how you already live.

One rule a day, copied into a notebook, with a single honest sentence about where it stings. That is the whole method. The sting is the diagnostic: a rule that doesn't discomfort you is one you haven't understood yet.

The rules, plainly explained

There are forty, one heading each modern chapter. A few carry most of the weight.

Intellect and love are made of different materials. "Intellect ties you in knots and risks nothing, but love dissolves all tangles and risks everything." The head is a brilliant risk manager; it is also a coward. The book's position is not anti-intellectual — Rumi was a scholar — but it insists that analysis cannot do love's work. You cannot think your way past your own selfishness. Decisions that matter are made by the heart and then, at best, ratified by the head.

The path to the Truth is a labor of the heart, not of the head. "Make your heart your primary guide! It will meet, challenge, and ultimately defeat your ego." The ego is fluent in argument; it will win any debate you stage in your head. The heart defeats it on different ground — by caring about something more than the self's comfort.

Don't search for heaven and hell in the future. Both are now present. "Whenever we manage to love without expectations, calculations, negotiations, we are indeed in heaven. Whenever we fight, hate, envy, we are in hell." This collapses eschatology into the present tense. Your eternity is whatever you are doing right now — a bracing thought on an ordinary Tuesday.

The world is a mirror. "How we see God is a direct reflection of how we see ourselves." Extended: if you face the world smiling, it smiles back — not as magical thinking but as perception. The resentful find offenses everywhere because resentment is the lens, not the landscape.

Do not enter the neighborhood of despair. "Whatever happens in your life, no matter how troubling things might seem, do not enter the neighborhood of despair. Even when all doors remain closed, God will open up a new path only for you." Despair is treated not as an emotion but as an address — a place you choose to move into. The rule doesn't deny suffering; it denies suffering the last word.

Patience means loving the thorn along with the rose. Not tolerating the thorn — loving it. The distinction matters. Tolerance keeps score; love doesn't. The rule is aimed at anyone who wants transformation without discomfort, which is to say, everyone.

Change yourself first. "If you want to change the way others treat you, you should first change the way you treat yourself. Unless you learn to love yourself, fully and sincerely, there is no way you can be loved." The modern wellness industry has flattened this into a slogan, but Shams states it with an edge: self-contempt leaks, and other people can smell it.

Speak your neighbor's language. "Most of the world's problems stem from people speaking their own language instead of understanding their neighbor's." In Shafak's hands this is not just spiritual advice but a political program — written in a polarizing Turkey, about figures every faction wanted to claim, insisting they belong to everyone.

Hold truths loosely. "Hunt for your own truths, but don't be afraid to change them." Paired with the previous rule, this is a complete social philosophy: listen across the divide, and hold your convictions loosely enough to learn.

Solitude over loneliness. "Loneliness and solitude are two different things... Solitude is better for us, as it means being alone without feeling lonely." Ella begins lonely in a crowded house and ends solitary in the best sense — at home in her own company.

Submit to a daily practice. "Your love for and trust in God will grow as you become more aware of your own mortality." The least quotable rule and maybe the most important: no fireworks, just showing up every day. Love as a discipline needs a discipline.

Don't resist the current. "Try not to resist the changes that come your way. Instead let life live through you. And do not worry that your life is turning upside down. How do you know that the side you are used to is better than the one to come?" The book's final permission slip.

How to approach it

First, know what it is. This is not a biography of Rumi. Shafak takes real history — the 1244 meeting, the forty-day retreat, the 1248 disappearance — and builds a spiritual romance on top of it. Scholars can show you the seams. Read it as a novel of ideas in historical dress and you won't be disappointed; read it as history and you'll be misled.

Second, read it slowly. The chapters alternate between centuries, and each modern chapter opens with one of the forty rules. Give each rule a day. Copy the ones that sting into a notebook. The sting is the point — a rule that doesn't discomfort you is one you haven't understood yet.

Third, notice the number forty. Moses spent forty days on the mountain; Jesus spent forty days in the desert; the Sufi *chilla* is a forty-day retreat. The forty rules are a retreat in book form: one a day, and you've done a chilla without leaving your kitchen table.

Fourth, pair it with the real thing. If the novel makes you curious about Rumi himself, start with Coleman Barks's *The Essential Rumi* — free-verse renderings that millions of English readers have loved, though scholars note he takes liberties. For the deeper cut, Annemarie Schimmel's *The Triumphal Sun* is the great English study of Rumi and Shams, and Idries Shah's *The Sufis* is the classic doorway into the tradition.

Memorable lines

Short attributed quotes only — the book's power is in lines you can carry:

- "Intellect and love are made of different materials. Intellect ties you in knots and risks nothing, but love dissolves all tangles and risks everything."
- "The path to the Truth is a labor of the heart, not of the head. Make your heart your primary guide!"
- "Don't search for heaven and hell in the future. Both are now present."
- "Whatever happens in your life, no matter how troubling things might seem, do not enter the neighborhood of despair."
- "Patience means loving the thorn along with the rose."
- "Most of the world's problems stem from people speaking their own language instead of understanding their neighbor's."
- "Try not to resist the changes that come your way. Instead let life live through you."



Amsterdam — where Ella goes anyway, toward a life she will write herself.

Fair criticisms

Shams sometimes reads like a life coach. The sharpest criticism is that the forty rules are so quotable, so ready for social media, that the novel risks turning Sufism into content. There is a fine line between making mysticism accessible and reducing it to self-help, and not every reader thinks Shafak stays on the right side of it. The historical Shams was by many accounts a difficult, abrasive man — not just a lovable holy fool with great one-liners.

The modern story is the weaker half. Many readers find the thirteenth-century thread electric and Ella's story schematic by comparison. The emails with Aziz can read like a novelist demonstrating a thesis rather than two people falling in love. The medieval story is the fire; the modern story is the frame. You need the frame, but you came for the fire.

The history is romanticized. Rumi's relationship with orthodox Islam was more complicated than the novel's warm universalism suggests, and the book's theology — love as the whole of religion — would strike many traditional Muslims as exactly what the inner manuscript's title says: a sweet blasphemy. Shafak is writing a parable, not a fatwa, but readers should know the parable has edges.

The rules can be misread as permission. "Don't judge" curdles easily into "don't discern," and "love dissolves all tangles" can excuse recklessness — including, uncomfortably, the affair-shaped edges of Ella's own awakening. The novel anticipates this: the rules are a discipline, not an excuse, and Ella's transformation is about honesty, not license. But a fast reader can take the slogans and leave the discipline, which is the perennial risk of any wisdom written quotably.

The mysticism is warm to a fault. Shafak's Sufism is almost entirely love and light; the tradition's sterner faces — its ascetic rigors, its historical tensions with orthodox authority, the genuine theological disputes — are softened or offstage. Readers who come to the novel expecting the full complexity of Islamic mysticism will find a beautiful introduction, not the whole picture. That is arguably the right trade for a novel, but it is a trade, and it should be named.

None of these sinks the book. They are the price of what it attempts: taking one of the most esoteric traditions on earth and making it intimate for millions of ordinary readers without dumbing it into nothing.

Why it's on the list

Because it did something rare: it took Sufi mysticism private enough for scholars and made it intimate for airport readers, and it worked. Over a million copies, dozens of translations, and a generation of Western readers who met Rumi through Shafak before they ever opened the *Masnavi*. It is worth remembering the scale of what Rumi already was: in the late nineteen nineties, American newspapers were reporting him as the best-selling poet in the United States, on the strength of Coleman Barks's translations. Shafak gave that phenomenon a story — not just the poems, but the friendship that produced them, and the rules that friendship ran on.

In a Turkey growing more polarized by the year, she wrote a bestseller about an Islam of love, pluralism, and radical openness — and she wrote it knowing the cost of fearless publishing, having been tried (and acquitted) under Turkey's Article 301 for words spoken by her fictional characters. The book's gentleness is not naivety. It is a choice, made by someone who knows the alternative.

And its central claim — that love is a discipline for dismantling the ego rather than a feeling to be consumed — is one of the most useful ideas a person can carry into a marriage, a friendship, or an ordinary Tuesday. Most self-help tells you to optimize the ego. This book tells you to outgrow it, one rule at a time, over forty days. That is a harder promise and a better one.

What to read next

- **Rumi himself:** Coleman Barks's *The Essential Rumi* for the doorway; then the *Masnavi* in a modern translation for the house itself. Read them slowly — a few couplets a day is the traditional pace, and it suits the material.
- **The scholarship:** Annemarie Schimmel's *The Triumphal Sun* on Rumi and Shams; Idries Shah's *The Sufis* on the tradition. Schimmel in particular will show you where Shafak's parable diverges from the history, which deepens rather than diminishes the novel.
- **More Shafak:** *The Island of Missing Trees* and *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize). Both carry the same signature move: intimate human stories set against the fault lines of history.
- **Tomorrow's episode:** *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles — a Russian count sentenced to live out his days inside a hotel, building an entire world within four walls.