

# FEAST *of* SORROW

## READING GROUP GUIDE

On a burning hot day during the twenty-sixth year of the reign of Augustus Caesar, Rome's famous gourmand Marcus Gavius Apicius hands over an exorbitant amount of money to purchase Thrasius, a young slave who has turned heads as Flavius Maximus's cook. The slave master promises that Thrasius will make Apicius famous with cooking that will attract throngs of people to his feasts, but the priest that Apicius visits after the purchase foretells a different fate: one of success mingled with failure and darkness. Thrasius shares the story of his time with Apicius and his family.

As Apicius grows more obsessed with his legacy, Thrasius falls madly in love with the handmaiden Passia and dreams of their future together. But as Apicius goes to greater and greater lengths to garner the attention that will allow him to take the coveted spot as Caesar's gastronomic adviser, he grows careless and erratic, taking actions that put his family and his slaves in grave danger. Thrasius's tale of the man whose name graces the world's oldest known cookbook gives readers an intimate look at the dark politics and mystical mythology of ancient Rome while posing the timeless question: Is man really the master of his own fate?

### TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The story begins with Thrasius's account of the day he was purchased by Apicius in Baiae. Why do you think the author chose to make Thrasius the narrator of the story? How might the story be different if it was told from another point of view or from multiple points of view?
2. What significance do birds have in the novel? Why do the characters in the story pay them such attention?
3. What role does food play in ancient Roman culture? Why is Apicius so obsessed with having only the best food at his lavish dinners? What position does he hope to secure through his reputation as Rome's best gourmand? Is he successful? Why or why not? What effect do these ambitions have on the rest of his life?
4. Consider the motif of betrayal and sabotage. Who betrays or sabotages another character in the book and what is their motivation for doing so? Would you say that their actions are justified? Why or why not? Are they ever brought to justice?
5. Examine the treatment of women in the novel. What do the female characters reveal about the role of women in ancient Roman culture? What do they tell us about marriage, motherhood, and love? Alternatively, what role do they play in Roman politics, culture, and religion?
6. Evaluate the representation of the master-slave relationship in the novel. Why is Thrasius surprised by Sotas's feelings about his master? How does this relationship compare to Thrasius's own relationship with Apicius? How does the relationship between Apicius and Thrasius change over the course of the story and what causes this? Why do you think Thrasius stays with Apicius even after Apicius frees him?
7. Many of the characters in the novel rely on prophecies and signs to foretell their future. However, in Chapter 6, Rúan says that he believes man controls his own fate. Does the book ultimately support Rúan's point of view or does it support the view that fate is beyond our control? Discuss.
8. Evaluate the theme of fidelity. To what are the characters faithful? Alternatively, what causes them to be unfaithful?



9. How is love characterized or defined within the novel? What kinds of love are represented therein? What does Aelia tell her daughter about the role of love in the lives of the wealthy?
10. What role does marriage play in ancient Roman culture? How does the author characterize Apicius's marriage to Aelia? Why does Apicius refuse to give his permission for Thrasius to marry Passia? Why does Apicius change his mind about allowing Apicata to marry Casca and instead betroth her to Sejanus?
11. What does the book indicate about social mobility during this time period? Are any of the characters able to move beyond the class they are born into? If so, how do they accomplish this? Likewise, is it possible for people of this time to lose their status? If so, how does this happen?
12. What does Apicius want his legacy to be? Is he successful? Why is he so concerned with Pliny, the young boy who attends one of his dinners? What effect does the future historian have on Apicius? Are Apicius's actions that follow surprising? Why or why not?
13. While Apicius is a character drawn from real life, some of the characters are the product of her own invention. What elements were fictionalized and what purpose might they serve? How might the book be different without these fictionalized elements?
14. Throughout the centuries, food has been a marker of social distinction between the haves and have-nots, even in today's society. What are the similarities between food/foodie culture of yesteryear and today? How does Apicius or Thrasius compare to today's celebrity chefs?

## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Research ancient Roman culture during the time period represented in *Feast of Sorrow*. How does King's account fit in with other historical accounts of this time? What rituals and mythology are represented in King's novel? Choose a few examples and research them in greater depth, considering why they were important within ancient Roman culture.
2. Use the novel as a starting place to examine the complex role of women in ancient Roman culture. How are the female characters treated in the book? What roles do they play in politics, family life, and religion? Consider how they were both repressed and revered.
3. Have an Apicius-themed dinner party with your book club. Invite your guests to bring dishes inspired by Apicius's own cookbook or make a few dishes together. Use the recipes printed in *Feast of Sorrow* as a place to begin or refer to the following books. You can also visit the author's website and view additional recipes at [CrystalKing.com/culinary-delights](http://CrystalKing.com/culinary-delights).
  - *Cooking with Apicius* by Sally Grainger (London, England: Marion Boyars, 2006)
  - *The Classical Cookbook* by Andrew Dalby and Sally Grainger, revised edition (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012)
  - *A Taste of Ancient Rome* by Ilaria Gozzini Giacosa, trans. Anna Herklotz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)
  - *Roman Cookery: Ancient Recipes for Modern Kitchens* by Mark Grant (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing, 2008)
  - *The Philosopher's Kitchen: Recipes from Ancient Greece and Rome for the Modern Cook* by Francine Segan (New York: Random House, 2004)
  - *Around the Roman Table* by Patrick Faas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
4. Imagine that you are writing your own cookbook. What recipes would you include in the book to be a part of your legacy and why? Have you chosen these dishes because of their impressive gastronomic qualities or because of something you feel that they represent personally or culturally?