



# Sold for Endless Rue

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## **Sold for Endless Rue** Madeleine E. Robins

This captivating historical answers the question, "Why did Rapunzel's mother lock her in the tower?"

After a blighted childhood, young Laura finds peace and purpose in the home of a midwife and healer. Later, she enrolls in Salerno's famed medical school—the first in the world to admit women. Laura and her adoptive mother hope that Laura can build a bridge between women's herbal healing and the new science of medicine developing in thirteenth century Italy.

The hardest lessons are those of love; Laura falls hard for a fellow student who abandons her for a wealthy wife. Worse, her mother rejects her as "impure." Shattered, Laura devotes herself to her work, becoming a respected medico. But her heart is still bitter, and when she sees a chance for revenge, she grabs it—and takes for her own Bieta, the newborn daughter of a woman whose husband regularly raided the physician's garden for bitter herbs to satisfy his pregnant wife's cravings.

Determined to protect her adored daughter from the ravages of the world, Laura isolates the young woman in a tower. Bieta, as determined as her mother, escapes, and finds adventure—and love—on the streets of Salerno.

Bieta's betrayal of her mother's love comes at a terrible price as lives are ruined and families are torn apart. Laura's medical knowledge cannot heal her broken heart; only a great act of love can bring everyone forgiveness and peace.

## **Sold for Endless Rue Details**

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# From Reader Review Sold for Endless Rue for online ebook

## Stacey says

A masterful blend of historical fiction and the familiar "Rapunzel" fairy tale, *Sold for Endless Rue* enchants readers with stories about the three women central to the original fairy tale.

In the first story, Laura, a young girl running from captivity, hides in the home of a mountainside healer named Crescia. She becomes the healer's apprentice, studying and working hard to continue Crescia's good works. Eventually, her tale brings her to Salerno, where she studies to be the first female physician in her lifetime. In the second, Agnesa, young wife of a merchant family scion, moves in next door to the *medica*, and they become friendly neighbors. In the third and final story, Laura's young daughter struggles between doing her duty to her adoptive mother and following her heart.

The novel is so thoroughly detailed and firmly grounded in historical fiction, I found it hard to remember that it follows the fairy tale. It is true to the fairy tale, as true as it can be set in a historical novel, without the magic of the fairy tale. While the fairy tale focuses on Rapunzel, the majority of this story is told by Laura, the "witch."

The women and their relationships are so real, so different, that each one stands out and each one is sympathetic, though they each have their own troubles and character flaws, and by far the young daughter is the most likeable. Being more interested in Rapunzel's story (especially when I read she walks about town dressed as a boy when she is fifteen), I thought I would find Laura's story uninteresting. Yet, it was captivating. She is more than just a cruel witch. By turns I was happy for Laura, disliked her, and felt pity for her. Perhaps the most skillful aspect here is that the author is able to make her readers feel pity for the witch.

Less space is given to Agnesa to tell her tale, but that suited me fine. The young daughter's story, her struggle to meet parental expectations, her need for adventure and freedom, the love that she finds with her friend the fisherman's son, and the resolution of the story were captivating, and I couldn't put the book down after getting to the third part of the book.

This fairy tale, set in historical Salerno in Italy, told by the three women whose lives are turned about in the original fairy tale, retains the fairy tale crispness of language and adds the historical novel's wealth of detail and evocation of a different time. Recommended for all fans of fairy tale retellings and historical fiction.

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## Efrat says

Loved the way this book was written, loved the discussions of stereotypes about women in medicine, but upset about the plot/ending, in that both women in the book gave up their dreams/part of their dreams for love. Laura gave up her dream of having a child or having a family, and resorted to 2 horrible things in the book, while Bieta gave up medicine for it. So, lesson I took out- if you want to go into medicine, you can't have a family. Which was HORRIBLE (speaking as a married medical professional myself). But, well written interesting book.

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## Jeffrey Grant says

This book does take its story from the Rapunzel fairy tale, but only in broad strokes. This is nothing like Mercedes Lackey's 500 Kingdoms novels or Spindle's End; all of the magic and fantastical elements have been excised to turn this into a pure historical fiction tale.

The story itself is still a good one. The author does a very good job writing about the women involved, from the driven, intelligent, bitter medicia Laura to the naïve housewife Agnesa to the willful girl Bieta. All of them are real characters, fully developed and entertaining to read about. I commented in my review of Touch of the Demon that I enjoyed that story even more for the “daily life” segments than for the magic and action, and this book is all well-written “daily life”.

The only complaint I really have is that there isn't very much closure with the Laura character. (view spoiler)

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## Bethany says

This book, Sold For Endless Rue by Madeleine E. Robins, is a version of Rapunzel. It is told mostly through the perspective of the "witch". She is not a witch, but their version of a doctor. There isn't a lot of action in this book, but it is well thought out. It gave me an idea of what it might have been like for a woman in that time, especially one who isn't married and doing something as unusual as practicing medicine, not as a midwife but as a physician. The whole story is a believable version of the classic fairy tale. I recommend it.

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## Wendopolis says

Engrossing read. A retelling of Rapunzel but much more satisfying and detailed than the fairy tale we are all familiar with. Has the feel of a YA book but is not classified as such.

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## Allison says

4.5 stars.

A unique take on the fairy tale Rapunzel, magic-less and tower-less and set firmly in a historical time and place. However, anyone looking for a novel-length retelling is in for a bit of a surprise, as the story starts at the *very* beginning, with the childhood of the "witch" (here named Laura), then moving on to how adult Laura met Rapunzel's birth parents. Rapunzel herself (here named Bieta, suitable for the setting in late medieval Italy) does not appear until more than halfway through the book.

Robins has crafted a believable story in a rich setting, the cosmopolitan city of Salerno. People from all over the world come to trade and learn from its famous medical school. After her family was murdered and she was taken as a slave, survivor Laura escapes and is adopted by a country midwife outside Salerno. Raised to take the midwife's place, Laura is sent to study at the medical school when she displays a talent for scholarship. Laura finds solace in her calling to heal any who come to her and in the rigid order of her book learning. However, her life's plan is set awry when she is seduced by a handsome fellow student, who then leaves her to marry someone of his own station. Laura is forced to abort their unborn child in order to

maintain her reputation and standing at the school. In one of the parts of this book that made me truly angry, Laura's foster mother then sees fit to inform her that she can no longer continue to be her apprentice and foster-daughter because virginity was a hitherto-unmentioned requirement. Laura understandably walks out in a fury, and makes her own life in the city as a credentialed doctor at the medical school. Years later a newlywed couple moves in next door. It is here the Rapunzel plot begins, as Laura's desire for justice and to have someone to give all the opportunities she had to fight for overrides her reason. As in the fairy tale, she bargains for the couple's unborn daughter. To my disappointment, we never learn what became of Bieta's birth parents after they handed over their firstborn to be raised by someone else. They were very much in love, but I don't know whether they'll ever be able to forgive each other or themselves for giving up their daughter because of some pregnancy cravings.

Bieta and Laura have an age-old tale of their own, though this plot is usually given to fathers and sons: the parent wants to give the child everything they never had growing up, assuming the child is exactly like them and will want the same things. However the child, being a different person, slowly realizes that what they want and what their parent wants for them are different, and feel terrible pressure to become someone they know deep down they're not. Bieta enjoys healing, but she is not the scholar that Laura is and finds the nonpractical learning that comes with preparing for medical school a trial. She begins sneaking into the city disguised as a boy looking to escape her mother's oppressive expectations for a time, and meets two fisherman brothers. Though her sex is discovered quickly, they remain friends and eventually she and the elder brother Tibalt fall in love. When Laura proves intractable about her dream of Bieta attending medical school, Bieta decides to risk everything to make her own choices. The fallout brings Laura's old damage and insecurities to the forefront, with devastating consequences for everyone. Laura's reaction reminds me of the outrage of 60s feminists when their daughters, whose potential careers outside the home they fought so hard for, chose to become wives and mothers. So I do think that this story resonates excellently with modern readers, who can identify both with Laura's struggle to find out where she belongs and with Bieta's desire to become her own person after having been raised by a strong and independent woman herself. She did learn her mother's lessons, just not in the way Laura expected or wanted.

I feel that the fewer expectations you have about this story going into it, the more enjoyable it is.

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## **Sara says**

"The world was all sound: the crack of brush underfoot, her own harsh panting, the whip of the branches as she pushed her way through them, and behind her somewhere a man's guttural cursing."

If you think this book is going to get better from here, you're sadly mistaken.

TRIGGER WARNING throughout for sexual violence, racism, anti-Semitism, and ableism. And spoiler warning too, although considering how incredibly predictable this book is, there isn't much to spoil.

If I didn't feel the need to write this review, I wouldn't have gotten past the first chapter of *Sold for Endless Rue*. Frankly, I'm not sure it was worth it even for the blog. Beyond the basic problems of flat characters, boring plot, and mediocre writing, this book was majorly problematic.

Our main character (sort of) is Laura, a young runaway slave girl who gets taken in by an old midwife and healer. Laura's entire character can be summed up in this line: She ate moderately, worked hard, slept deeply, and rose every morning giving thanks for the chance to do it all again. YAWN. Oh, and how she became a slave? Her village was destroyed by bandits and her mother and sister were raped and killed in front of her. You'd think she'd be deeply traumatized by this experience, right? Nope! She only mentions her

mother like, twice, and she helps heal the man who killed her mother and her sister. (Spoiler: she kills him later, but only to save herself once he recognizes her and threatens her again. While I'm all for that, it came a little too late after she had already healed him once and was going to do it AGAIN. There's a limit to how much "good girl" I can take, especially when that's literally the only aspect of the character we ever see.)

And while we're here, let's talk about rape, because boy, Robins sure loves to. Nearly every other sentence is about how dangerous it is for a woman to be alone, because she might get raped! No less than three characters threaten rape to a woman in this book! They're all scary, ~foreign~ men with knives who smell bad, too. Evil, cartoon villains. And yet when a character ACTUALLY GETS RAPED, it's okay because she secretly wanted it!

"“No,” she said again, warring with her body, which said yes.”

Yeah, that's an actual line in the book. So apparently, according to Robins, rape is something that happens when ~foreign~ men accost women in alleys, because they foolishly decided to walk alone, whereas a man deliberately ignoring a woman's repeated “no” is just ~young love~! Even after this asshole abandons a pregnant Laura (after they have sex again, because, y'know, who doesn't want to have sex with their rapist?), she never acknowledges that it was rape, and neither does the narrative. A character struggling to admit to herself that she was the victim of sexual violence? Sure, I can absolutely buy that (hell, I lived it). But when neither the character nor the overall narrative ever even hints that this was assault, especially when like half the book is people talking or thinking about rape!, there's a major problem.

In this case, one of many, many problems. The first half of the book is all about Laura studying to be a healer and then a physician at the boys-only Scuola. The herb lore holds some interest, but sadly not enough to justify the rest of it, and the girl-at-boys'-school plot goes exactly as you'd think: she's smarter than all of them and they all come to respect her and listen to her and love her. Except this one monk who hates women but can't do anything about it because the monk above him is as flatly good as the misogynist monk is flatly evil.

When Laura goes to study at the school, the midwife who took her in sends her to a house in the city to stay with a family she's friends with. This family has a son, Pambo, who is about Laura's age (I think?), with some vaguely described mental disability. The word Robins uses is “simpleton.” Think he gets any development beyond that, at all, ever? Haha, don't be silly! He literally exists to be Laura's ~protection~. At one point he gets scared waiting for her and runs home and his mother slaps him for leaving poor vulnerable Laura on her own. And yes, she does get threatened with rape by scary foreign men walking home alone. She's “rescued” by Matteo, the actual rapist discussed above.

I honestly think Robins was trying to be inclusive with Pambo, but she does it in the worst, most offensive way possible. The most Laura ever feels toward him is either a sort of vaguely amused pity or irritation, despite spending literally years with him. If the narrative did something to indicate that this was a fault of Laura's, and that Pambo deserved better, it miiiight be better, but no— we literally never see any development or engagement with this character, and he has absolutely no agency. All he does is walk Laura around and get slapped.

And now we move on to the second part of the book, which is like, three chapters?, about a woman, Agnesa, who just got married and moves next door to Laura (now a practicing physician). This is where the Rapunzel story actually starts, with Agnesa, who is now our POV character, craving bietola (chard, not rue as the title would suggest). From this point the story plays out exactly as in the tale, with the characters shoehorned in to fill their roles. Spoilers, of course, but: the whole conceit of Laura taking Agnesa's daughter is so poorly

done. Robins tries to justify it by throwing in Matteo (who “seduced” Laura) as Agnesa’s cousin– which of course totally excuses kidnapping her baby– and a frankly stupid plot line about Agnesa’s husband stealing chard from Laura’s garden instead of, you know, just asking her for it. Amusingly, even Agnesa points this out, to which the husband mumbles some excuse about being scared of Laura. Really? That’s the best you can do? And who the hell lets someone steal their goddamn child because they’re afraid of being called a thief? Agnesa and her husband, apparently, that’s who. We’re so past suspension of disbelief at this point that I can’t even remember where I left it.

And none of this is to mention this lovely little exchange:

“Rubbing shoulders with Jews and Arabs and foreigners. Was it terrifying to know such folk?... But the Arabs, are they frightening? Do they speak like devils?”

Again, I think Robins is actually trying to be inclusive. She just sucks at it. Is it really necessary to have this conversation at all? She doesn’t actually have any characters who are Jewish or Arab, excepting one tutor who shows up for half a page and is referred to as “that heathen.” She really only has this bit in here to show how ~tolerant~ Laura is, and it completely backfires:

“Some of the Arabs are black as night, others might be from Salerno for all the difference I could see. None of them were particularly frightening, and many of them are very clever. Since I don’t know how devils speak, I can’t say. The language they do speak is very quick and harsh to my ears, and they write a strange script like knotted thread. I learned a very little of it.” The Jews too had their own writing, but that Laura couldn’t read. “Only Latin and a little Arabic.” As if that were not enough.

So, “the Jews” and “the Arabs” are devices to make Laura look like she’s ahead of her time, basically. I guess that’s better than having her be outright anti-Semitic, but not by very much. As a Jew, I’m used to reading period pieces that call me all sorts of unpleasant things; it’s not fun, but I’m resigned to it. But period piece or not, this is a book by a modern author who has a responsibility to depict people as people and not as props.

And that’s essentially the entire problem with this book. *Sold for Endless Rue* is full of flat, boring, one-dimensional characters who are never given any room to grow. As a retelling, it’s lackluster; as a story, it’s shoddily constructed; and as a work by a woman living in a world populated by real, diverse people, it’s ignorant and irresponsible at best. I don’t necessarily hate this book, but I would certainly urge you to value yourself and your time enough to read something else.

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### **Alexia Dvorak says**

Its very rare for me to find a book that I can hardly put down, this was one of them. I love how it delves into some of the history of the origins of medicinal medicine practices of the times and not just solely focuses on the retelling of the fairy tale.

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### **Patricia Burroughs says**

A beautifully written, richly detailed story in three parts. The tale largely takes place in and around th Scuola

of Salerno--the school where medicine is taught to men (and less willingly, perhaps) to women, the same school where Ariana Franklin "educated" her character in the Mistress of the Art of Death mystery series. The medieval knowledge of medicine and its influences--astrology, mathematics, herbalism--is fascinating.

But at the heart of this world is a multi-generational tale of women that swept me along from beginning to end. The women vary in personality and their approach to life, each very believably.

I would warn readers not to read the book description. MacMillan/Forge pours spoilers into their description. In my case I bought this book because I wanted to read more from the author, without knowing what it was about. I gasped in the middle--couldn't believe my eyes, what I was reading, that the author had done that!

Had I read the story description not only would I have been robbed of that moment of discovery, but of the ending, as well.

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### **Vanessa says**

Captured as a slave while a child, Laura escapes and finds a new life in the home of a mountain healer and midwife. Clever and industrious, Laura learns her new profession so well that her adoptive mother, Crescia, sends her to Solerno's famed medical school so she can become a physician and bring her worldly learning back to the midwife's humble cottage.

Laura works hard to be accepted among her male peers--this is thirteenth century Italy, after all, so that's no easy task--but her medical brilliance is impossible to ignore. However, having lived a sheltered life with Crescia, Laura finds herself unprepared when she falls in love with another student, and makes a choice that changes the rest of her life.

SOLD FOR ENDLESS RUE is a retelling of the Rapunzel story, but there's no magic. In fact, SOLD treats the fairytale as though it symbolizes the everyday human experience. Let me explain, and even though you know the Rapunzel story, I'll try not to spoil Robins' retelling for you.

Told via the women (and a little by a man), SOLD is the story of women's experience with love, motherhood, profession, and heartache. Laura's family was killed by slavers, but with Crescia's help she overcomes her fears. Not that Laura is weak, she is far from it; in fact she can be rather single-minded, to her detriment. Agnesa is the young, innocent bride of a favorable union of mercer houses. She looks up to the educated medica Laura, and seeks her friendship and medical advice in conceiving a much-wanted child. Beita is Laura's young adopted daughter, willing to please, but also curious about the world around her. Her mother wants her to be accepted into the medical school, but as Beita grows to womanhood she comes to understand that her shortcomings may disappoint her mother.

With the limitations of a short book and three distinct PoV characters it was hard to get very deep into their personalities; even if what we were shown was interesting, it still felt like only an introduction. Still, I liked Laura, Agnesa, and Bieta (and token PoV male Tibalt), I only wished there were more.

The setting was well-done, and it was easy to visualize the hills above Solerno, the city itself, and the people who lived there. The dialogue, details of everyday life, and even the people themselves added to the story that made the era come alive for me. The pacing was steady, and even though it doesn't move particularly fast, I found myself quickly engrossed in the story. SOLD is an easy book to read, Robins' prose is flawless



and carries the story from scene to scene with grace and beauty.

Despite the quality of the writing, the novel isn't perfect. Rapunzel is not an easy story to work around, but Robins does her best to make sense of what the fairytale could have meant underneath the drama of long hair, a maiden in the tower, a handsome prince, and an ugly witch. Some readers may be disappointed by the story's simplicity, no magic, and lack of feeling like a fairytale. Despite the inherent tragedy of Rapunzel's story, the retelling has a sweet tone, and ultimately the theme is one of love and forgiveness.

Recommended Age: 17+

Language: None

Violence: Some peril and death, but relatively mild

Sex: Since there are three different love stories sex is referenced fairly frequently; there is one graphic scene and other less-detailed scenes; rape is referenced

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### **Melani says**

Loved this retelling of Rapunzel. It's just amazing. It's set in 13th century Italy in Salerno and the medical school there, and it's so, so perfect. You absolutely sympathize with Laura (the witch) and can see how she became the person who not only stole Bieta, but also became so afraid of losing her she 'locked' her up in the tower. Robins also uses the story to look at women's roles in this very male dominated society and it's not at all preachy or over the top.

My one little quibble with the book is that Bieta never meets her birth parents. After giving her up/having her stolen, in one of the most wrenching chapters in the novel, her mother just sort of disappears, and I wish that had been handled differently.

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### **Louise Marley says**

This was a lovely piece of historical fiction, peppered with utterly convincing thirteenth-century medical and herbal details. The medical school of Salerno has always been a source of fascination, and its presence in this novel was unobtrusive but informative. There is a fairy-tale quality to the story-telling, but it's really about relationships, especially relationships between mothers and daughters, and the drive of women to create their own lives.

The book is beautifully written, with a page-turning story that drives the reader forward to find out what happens. In the end, it's a tale of love and loss and redemption, framed exquisitely in its historical period. I have to search out Robins's earlier work now! She's a writer to savor.

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### **heidi says**

This book ate a couple hours of my evening without me even noticing, which is high praise. Laura's story is

especially compelling, and I thought her toughness was hard-won and believable.

The Rapunzel-retelling was subtly done and did not start right away. This story is 3/4 historical fiction and 1/4 fairy tale, and the fairy tale doesn't really start until halfway through the book. I especially loved the subtlety of the prince-character.

I liked the contrasting mother-figures in this story. They all love their children, but react in different ways to the natural way children break rules as they grow up. Cressia never defines her plans or rules (as a parent, this overprotection-through-ignorance made me flinch.) Laura is attempting to live out her childhood in a better way through her own daughter, and not listening to what the kid wants. And Sibela says, "'And I did not raise a living son to cast him off at the first time of trouble.'" Even the Traveller Nonna, and the companion-sister are mothers of sorts. This book is so full of mothers -- good and bad, present and absent, sympathetic and harsh. I think that may be the best thing about it -- women in so many different ways.

I would happily read more stories set in this world.

Read if: You would love your fairy-tale retellings with more history. You like a multi-generational story. You love period details.

Skip if: You are looking for another book featuring Robins' sassy Regency heroines. This is period-appropriate but less banter-y.

Also read: *The Midwife's Apprentice*

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## **C. Mills says**

This is Rapunzel-like, with the wicked witch as the main character. She doesn't begin as a witchy person, though. She grows into one by her situations and her choices. I don't like stories with wicked characters, which is why I don't read Patricia Highsmith either.

I did read this to the end, though.

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## **Debbie says**

Click the link to Madeleine's interview on The Reading Frenzy-<http://thereadingfrenzy.blogspot.com/...>

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