

Dating Da Vinci

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The heroine of this romance, Ramona, is a thirty-six-year-old widow with two young sons, a mother and a mother-in-law who are both pillars of a local church, a sister who is the star of a local TV fitness show, and zero *joie de vivre*. She's still a Griever trying to explain to a world of Normals that she's just not ready to move on, but her family and friends are getting very pushy. "If it was time to transition to a Normal," she says, "it had to be on my terms, not taking the scraps of others' sympathy to piece together a life without Joel."

Ramona teaches English as a Second Language in a private school in Austin, Texas. As the fall semester opens, she welcomes the usual students, immigrants who need to learn about life in America. It's when the last student comes to class (late) that her life begins to turn upside-down. This student is Leonardo da Vinci. He's twenty-five years old, six-foot-three, drop-dead gorgeous, endearing—and broke. Taking pity on him, Ramona lets him move into her late husband's studio in her backyard. Pretty soon, da Vinci (note that Dan Brown erred in capitalizing the D in da Vinci) moves into her heart. She helps him with his English and invites him to eat with her and her sons. Pretty soon, he's cooking for her. Pretty soon, they're kissing and petting. Pretty soon, they're making love.

"I could see the way other women looked at him," she writes. "If I were feeling poetic, I could think of him as my savior, my rescue pilot, my wake-up call. Mostly, though, I just thought of him as da Vinci, the man I taught English to who taught me about so much more."

By Christmas, Ramona's life is fuller than she ever imagined. As she's finishing her doctoral dissertation (in record time!) on "the language of love," she's also learning about the permutations of *amore*. She deals with unfinished issues with the woman Joel almost married (who married his best friend) and finds herself irresistibly attracted to the handsome physician her mother tried to fix her up with but who is suddenly "with" her sister. After two years of widowhood, she buys new "funderwear," and a new bed. Ramona cleans out Joel's clothing, and discovers that Christmas can indeed be merry again.

BARBARA ARDINGER (October 13, 2008)

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