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Jerusalem Maiden

by Talia Carner



About the Book

In the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, a young Orthodox Jewish woman in the holy city of Jerusalem is expected to marry and produce many sons to help hasten the Messiah's arrival. While the feisty Esther Kaminsky understands her obligations, her artistic talent inspires her to secretly explore worlds outside her religion, to dream of studying in Paris --- and to believe that God has a special destiny for her. When tragedy strikes her family, Esther views it as a warning from an angry God and suppresses her desires in order to become an obedient "Jerusalem maiden."

But when a surprising opportunity forces itself on to her preordained path, Esther finds her beliefs clashing dangerously with the passions she has staved off her entire life --- forcing her to confront the most difficult and damning question of all: To whom must she be true, God or herself?

Discussion Guide

1. ?The Greenwald girl? represents a concept of a young woman who followed her heart --- and her non-Jewish lover --- and brought a chain of disasters upon her family. Discuss Esther's action in light of this concept. Did she become ?A Greenwald girl??

2. Girls? innocence and purity are sacred in the ultra-Orthodox world of **Jerusalem Maiden**. Even today, many women in religious societies --- Jewish, Christian, Hindu or Islam --- live in even worse oppressive enclaves both in the West and in the Middle East, Asia and Africa. What are the tools used to control them in various places? Do these women share responsibility for their own insulation? Can they change their fate? Should we interfere in their cultural or religious practices?

3. In Esther's ultra-Orthodox society, adherence to all Commandments and decrees is paramount. Discuss the difference with what you know of today?s Jewish Orthodox societies in the USA --- their child-rearing practices, education and the

status of women.

4. Esther does not desert her faith. She only rebels against the religious establishment. Have you experienced that gap?

5. What kind of medical practices were available at the time of the story? Discuss the role of the midwife as a medical practitioner.

6. Discuss the relationship between Esther and her mother during Esther's adolescence --- and her view of that relationship as an adult. What were her mother?s expectations, and what were Esther's?

7. When Aba recites ?Woman of Valor? from the Book of Proverbs, Esther finds the expectations unattainable. What expectations exist today that reflect an unfeasibility similar to that of the ?Woman of Valor? ?

8. Esther felt she never belonged in her world --- neither in Me?ah She?arim, nor in Jaffa. Was there anything she should have done differently? Was it ?her, or them,? as Nathan asks?

9. Twice in the novel Esther physically emerges from a dark place where she connected with her ancestors --- at Rachel?s Tomb and at Hezekiah Tunnel. Discuss the physical and spiritual illumination. Have you had similar experiences?

10. Was Mlle. Thibaux an early feminist, or was she just a ?back-street? mistress? Discuss her character and her life?s choices. Would she have been a different person had she been married?

11. Esther's marriage to Nathan was not a bad one. She was comfortable and safe. Yet she was willing to throw it all away. Discuss her character and her dissatisfaction with what would have been many women?s dream.

12. Esther?s relationship with guilt fluctuates as she ages, accompanying rebellion, acquiescence, indignation and impetuousness. Throughout her life, how do her desires produce guilt, and how does she reconcile it at each step?

13. Chaim Soutine is the one true-to-life character in this novel. Read about him and check out his art --- and if possible travel the Philadelphia-based Barnes Collection.

14. Esther's sojourn in Paris is supposed to be a vacation. Discuss the point at which it turns to abandonment of her children. Also, is her settling in Paris a betrayal of the Holy Land?

15. Even in today?s open, free society, many women do not follow their hearts or their dreams to discover ?The Primordial Light.? Why? Discuss what it takes for a woman to focus and to fully develop her talents.

16. Relationship between sisters can be complex. Discuss Esther and Hanna?s, starting in their childhood and how their different personalities and choices played a role.

17. In the end, Esther gives up the only two things she loves and which let her be who she is. Discuss her double sacrifice. What kind of a woman will she be in Jaffa and what life will she have back there?

Author Bio

Talia Carner is the former publisher of *Savvy Woman* magazine and a lecturer at international women economic forums.

Critical Praise

"Talia Carner is a skillful and heartfelt storyteller who takes the reader on journey of the senses, into a world long forgotten. Her story of a woman who struggles and seeks the light is universal and inspiring. Read this book and savor."

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