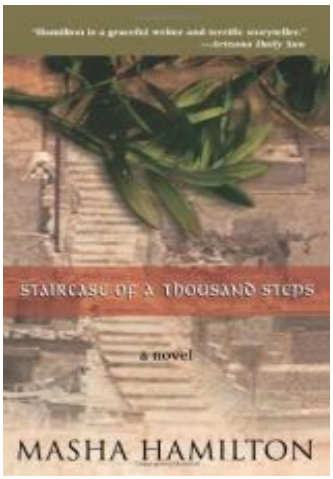
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Staircase of a Thousand Steps

by Masha Hamilton



About the Book

In a remote desert village of storytellers and seers, the accidental revelation of long-held secrets, including a forbidden love affair, unravels a young girl's world.

Staircase of a Thousand Steps lifts the veil from a mystical land, where jasmine and dung mix and the inconceivable is embraced as commonplace.

In a Middle Eastern village that traces its history back to Abraham, the men gather nightly beneath a tree named Moses' Finger, and the women meet at a place where "the earth breathes."

But the midwife Faridah possesses transcendent wisdom and a dangerous scorn for tradition. And the shepherd Harif, seer and village outsider, weaves stories in an effort to protect his fragile status. While Harif's granddaughter, Jammana, struggles between the allure of the ancient world and the tensions of a modern age.

Through an ancestral gift, Jammana experiences the memories of those closest to her-Faridah, Harif, and her mother, Rafa. But as she unwittingly uncovers the village's secrets, old grudges move like a slow burn across the fields and ignite.

Set in Transjordan just before the 1967 war with Israel, **Staircase of a Thousand Steps** braids a chorus of voices into a poetic, haunting tale of loyalty, longing, and accidental betrayal.

Discussion Guide

1). Although the book is set in a highly politicized region, the novel isn't political. What does Hamilton gain be focussing her book on character and plot rather than politics? How would you define a "political novel"?

2). Medicine plays a critical role in this novel, as does the theme of healing. What wounds run throughout this community, and what, in the end, is the source of (and the process through which) the characters find ways to heal?

3). Hamilton weaves many themes and threads into this novel: old versus new, tradition versus modernity, individuality versus community. What themes emerge as primary?

4). How is this novel similar to other books about traditional communities facing the rising tide of modernism? How is it unique?

5). Staircase of a Thousand Steps addresses gender conflicts in a variety of sub-plots. What are these sub-plots, and how do they work together to move the novel forward? Were you surprised to see traditional male roles questioned in the story? Where do the village women ultimately gain their power and voice?

6). Is this novel a loose re-telling of Romeo & Juliet?

7). At times the novel reads like a fable. Magical elements pepper the book, and Hamilton's use of time is somewhat fluid, though the story definitely takes place in 1967. How does this affect one's reading of the story? Do you feel that in a sense the story is timeless? What makes it so?

8). Harif is a shepherd. Faridah is a midwife. How do characters roles and/or jobs illuminate the story?

Author Bio

Masha Hamilton is the author of five acclaimed novels, most recently WHAT CHANGES EVERYTHING, which the *Washington Post* praised for its "elegantly wrought prose (which) conveys terror as well as tenderness" and 31 HOURS, which the *Washington Post* called one of the best novels of 2009. In October 2013, she finished 16 months working in Afghanistan as Director of Communications and Public Diplomacy at the US Embassy.

She is currently working as Communications Director for Concern Worldwide. She also founded two world literacy projects, the Camel Book Drive and the Afghan Women's Writing Project. She is the winner of the 2010 Women's National Book Association award, presented "to a living American woman who derives part or all of her income from books and allied arts, and who has done meritorious work in the world of books beyond the duties or responsibilities of her profession or occupation."

She began her career as a fulltime journalist, working in Maine, Indiana and New York City before being sent by the Associated Press to the Middle East, where she was news editor for five years, including the period of the first intefadeh, and then moving to Moscow, where she worked for five years during the collapse of Communism, reporting for the Los Angeles Times and NBC-Mutual Radio and writing a monthly column, "Postcards from Moscow." She also reported from Kenya in 2006, and from Afghanistan in 2004 and 2008.

Critical Praise

" . . . [an] engaging first novel. . . . Hamilton is a natural storyteller. . . ."

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