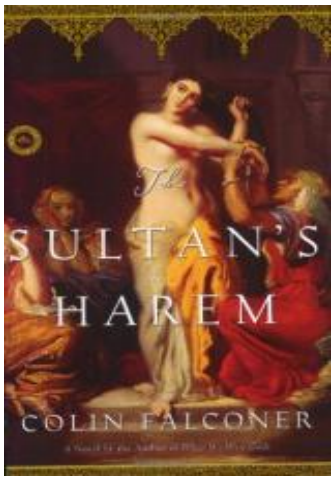
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Sultan's Harem

by Colin Falconer



About the Book

From the author of the critically acclaimed **When We Were Gods** comes a dramatic, unforgettable novel of cruelty and passion, set in the great Harem of the Ottoman Empire.

In Constantinople there is only one ruler: Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, Lord of Lords of this World, Possessor of Men's Necks, Allah's Deputy, absolute ruler of the mighty Ottoman Empire. And at the heart of his palace is the Sultan's vast Harem, the domain of hundreds of scented, pampered women --- some wives, some concubines, some merely slaves. Among them is Gülbehar, the Sultan's submissive favorite and mother of his heir; Julia, the daughter of an Italian lord, kidnapped when she attempted to flee Venice with her lover; and Hürrem, a Tartar girl from the Russian steppes, sold into slavery.

All three women are beautiful, but Hürrem is the most dangerous --- ruthless in her desire to rule the Harem and, ultimately, Süleyman himself. Endlessly manipulative and clever, she carefully arranges the downfall of her rivals and endears herself to the Sultan, who places her at the center of the Empire's power. It is his obsession with Hürrem --- not his enemies --- that in the end costs Süleyman his allies, his sons, and finally his dynasty.

Bestselling author Colin Falconer offers an irresistible glimpse into a world of intrigue, sensuality, and violence, where an empire can be controlled not by the might of its king but by the women hidden behind the Harem walls.

Discussion Guide

1. When Meylissa becomes pregnant with the Kapi Aga's baby, why does Hürrem rush to her aid? Is there any kindness involved in the act? Do you think that the kernel of Hürrem's plot sprouts this early in the novel, or does she improvise as she goes along, only arriving at her master plan later?

2. The Kapi Aga is driven to suicidal recklessness and even madness by the temptation to reclaim a lost part of himself through forbidden sex: "It was the confirmation of a manhood he thought he had lost, the rediscovery of potency that was at once irresistible and irreversible." What reclamation projects of their own obsess Gülbehar, Ibrahim, and Süleyman? Discuss how Abbas, Julia, and Hürrem, on the other hand, cut their losses early in the game.

3. Rüstem, nicknamed "The Man Who Never Smiled," is the most mysterious character in the novel. A consummate self-promoter, he is wealthy and corrupt, utterly self-reliant, unfazed by bribery and blackmail attempts, and detached from the histrionics of the court. Yet, against his better judgment, he questions Süleyman's motives for warring with Bayezid. When his protests fail to sway Süleyman, Rüstem's sense of personal defeat is profound. "The final bookkeeping of his life vindicated everything and demonstrated his worth. He waited for the sense of elation to overtake him but now, with death beckoning him with one crooked finger, he struggled with the lingering sensation that perhaps there was something he had missed." What is the significance of this complex, minor character and his eleventh-hour qualms? Is the author moralizing about the crossroads of money, power, and happiness?

4. When Gülbehar urges Mustapha to dispose of Hürrem, he literally washes his hands of the concept, Pontius Pilate-style. Where else in the novel do you find biblical or mythological references?

5. Julia's only source of human connection and emotional survival in the Harem?her relationship with Sirhane?smacks of sin, according to the dictates of her Roman Catholic background. Thus, her only joy is tainted with guilt and alienation: "She knew she was slipping further from Venice, and from God." Discuss loss of faith as a theme in the novel.

6. Süleyman's agony stems largely from his desire to live the life of a normal man, unfettered by his responsibility to his empire. Repeatedly, he attempts and fails to carve out some private space for himself: "I will do my duty. I will lay the foundations of my Empire in the kanuns, the written law. I will send my armies to the walls of Christendom and tear them down and I will feed and clothe my Empire. But there must be something left for Süleyman!" Is this a reasonable wish? Discuss this statesman's dilemma as it pertains to modern leaders.

7. Discuss Abbas' act of revenge against Gonzaga. Do you consider his choice merciful? Did it surprise you? Why does Abbas experience vengeance as a loss?

8. What technicality does Hürrem cite to convince Süleyman that his oath to Ibrahim is null and void in certain circumstances?

9. Süleyman views the yeniceris as a bloodthirsty bunch of lunatics. But there's a specific reason for their hunger for war. What is it? Why does it never occur to Süleyman that rewriting the law could tame the yeniceris' fixation with battle?

10. What happens between Julia and Süleyman that transforms Julia into an enemy of the state? What causes the incident? How does her sentence change her life forever? If their meeting had gone well, what would have happened to Julia instead? Would her lot in life have been better or worse?

11. A hovering, all-seeing hawk is mentioned several times in the novel: as Hürrem contemplates her incarceration; as she meditates on her first pregnancy; when Süleyman places Ibrahim at the head of the army; as Bayezid trudges toward defeat at his father's hands; etc. What does the hawk symbolize? What are other recurring symbols in the novel? How does the author incorporate nature into his storytelling?

12. Muomi is a survivor of genital mutilation at her family's hands; Hürrem is sold into slavery by her own father; Julia is the product of an absent mother and a tyrannical father. Discuss parental betrayal as a driving force in the novel.

13. Although Julia's tenure in the Harem is short, she is used as a bargaining chip in nearly all the major blackmail transactions in the Harem for years after she leaves. What is the source of her potency as a weapon?

14. How does Hürrem subtly build a case against Ibrahim? How and why does Süleyman believe it?

15. Bayezid is keenly aware of the horrible limitations of his position: "The Fatih's law allowed for a Sultan to kill all his brothers and their children to protect his succession and the stability of the Empire. That was his own future, he knew. He would one day be Sultan, or he would one day be dead." How is this utter lack of self-determination reflected in the lives of all the main characters in the novel? Is anyone exempt from it?

16. The novel slowly builds to the crescendo of Abbas' and Hürrem's final act of revenge on the Ottoman empire: the destruction of the Osmanli line and the crowning of an imbecilic pretender. Terrible tension is wired into the story by the fact that the two main protagonists are also the two main sources of destruction. Do you pity Süleyman here? Why or why not? By the end of the novel, who are you routing for? How does the author play with the reader's sense of satisfaction amidst tragedy?

17. As Hürrem watches a Muslim prayer gathering, it occurs to her that she might harness the very power of Islam. "What a vast energy it was to tap! Perhaps, she thought, a velvet fist I have overlooked in my contempt?. She would use the will of God to bend [Süleyman] to the will of his woman." In what concrete way does she achieve this lofty goal? What role does Abu Sa'ad play in her charade?

18. Süleyman tells Hürrem, "You are such a comfort to me. I live my life among snakes and vipers. Yours is the only voice of reason and moderation." How do you explain his severe naiveté in this relationship? Do you read Süleyman as a tragic hero, misunderstood and maligned, who simply wants "to build, not to destroy"? If not, why not? Does he ever discover the "Beast in his own soul" that he fears so much?

19. How does Süleyman explain his total lack of interest in his own Harem?

20. The control of "whispers" is a major strategic tactic in the politics of Süleyman's court. What measures does Süleyman take to monitor public opinion? How do Abbas and Hürrem exploit local gossip to contribute to Ibrahim's downfall?

Author Bio

Colin Falconer was born in North London. He is a former journalist and the author of three previous historical novels,

which have been published in many languages throughout the world. He travels widely to research his novels but now lives in a small coastal town in western Australia.

Critical Praise

"A page-turner . . . This peek behind the walls of the seraglio will seduce lovers of large-scale historical fiction."

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