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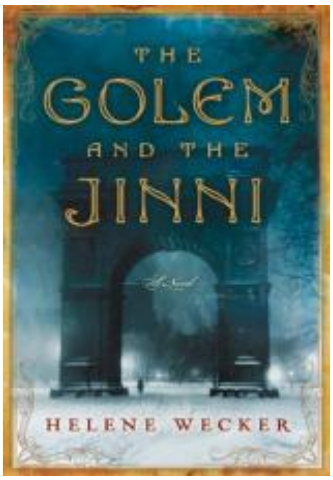
The Golem and the Jinni

by Helene Wecker



About the Book

An immigrant tale that combines elements of Jewish and Arab folk mythology, Helene Wecker?s sparkling debut novel tells the story of two supernatural creatures who arrive separately in New York in 1899. The woman is a golem created out of clay in Poland by an aged dabbler in the dark Kabbalistic arts to be the wife of a man who then dies at sea, leaving her unmoored and adrift as the ship comes into New York harbor; the man is a jinni, a being of fire, who is trapped by a Bedouin wizard in a copper flask and released accidentally by a Syrian tinsmith in lower Manhattan.

The narrative traces their respective journeys, as they explore the strange human city. Chava, as a kindly old rabbi names her, is beset by human desires and wishes, which she can feel tugging at her; Ahmad, baptized by the tinsmith who makes him his apprentice, is aggravated by human dullness. But they both work to make at least a temporary place for themselves in this new world, and develop tentative relationships with the people in their neighborhoods.

In an exciting and fast-paced narrative of adventure and adversity, the golem and the jinni finally meet: it is not exactly a romance, and at first they are hostile and suspicious, but they end up forming a strong bond, since only they can recognize each other for what they truly are. Surrounding them, and crucial to their story, is a colorful cast of supporting characters: the café owner Maryam Faddoul; the solitary Ice Cream Saleh; Rabbi Meyer?s beleaguered nephew Michael whose Sheltering House receives newly arrived Jewish immigrants; the young Fifth Avenue socialite Sophia Winston; and the mysterious Joseph Schall, aka Yehuda Schaalman, with his spells and esoteric wisdom.

A marvelous and compulsively readable work of fiction, THE GOLEM AND THE JINNI is a fresh combination of vivid historical novel and magical fable. With threads from Yiddish and Middle Eastern literature, it belongs in a tradition of contemporary Jewish writing that draws on folk and pop cultural materials, like Michael Chabon?s THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY, different though that book is.

Discussion Guide

1. Compare the Golem and the Jinni?s origins. How are their personalities reflected in their origins? How are the creatures similar, and how do those similarities draw them together? How are they different? What are their individual strengths?and what makes them weak? How do these influence their choices as events unfold? How do the Golem and the Jinni make each other better beings?

2. What are Chava and Ahmad like when we first meet them? What about at the end of the story? How do events impact who they are and what they believe about themselves and each other?

3. Why do you think Helene Wecker chose to set the story in turn-of-the-century New York? How do the experiences of the Golem and the Jinni mirror those of their fellow immigrants? Are their magical powers all that set them apart from their human neighbors? How might the story unfold if it were set today? What would Ahmad and Chava think about modern America? Would it be easier or more difficult for them to adapt and blend in to contemporary urban society?

4. What do we learn about life?about what it means to be human?from Ahmad and Chava? How does each reflect particular aspects of the human character, both our noble inclinations and our flaws?

5. What is your opinion of the characters, the Golem and the Jinni? What do you like best about each of them? If you could have a magical power, what would it be?

6. Describe the Jinni?s relationship with the tinsmith who released him, Arbeely. Why does he keep the Jinni?s secret? What about the relationship between the Golem and Rabbi Meyer? Why doesn?t he destroy her?

7. Numerous secondary characters are central to the Golem and the Jinni?s story: Saleh, Maryam, Anna, Matthew, Sophia, Michael. Choose one or two of them, and show their role in the story and in the lives of Chava and Ahmad. For instance, think about Sophia?s love affair with Ahmad and Michael?s relationship to Chava. How are these humans transformed by their involvement with these supernatural beings? How is Saleh connected to Ahmad? What do we learn about Ahmad from his interactions with young Matthew?

8. Early in the novel Rabbi Meyer and his nephew, Michael, are having a philosophical discussion about faith, tradition, and modernity. Michael tells him, ?As long as we keep to our old beliefs, we?ll never find our place in the modern world.? His uncle replies, ?Of course, this wonderful modern world that has rid us of all ills, of poverty and corruption! What fools we are, not to cast our shackles aside!? Do you agree with Michael? How can we keep our traditions and faith while still embracing change? How is this struggle reflected in both Chava and Ahmad?s

characters?

9. What is Yehuda Schaalman?s role in the story? What drives him? What lessons can we learn from his experiences? What does he want from Chava and Ahmad? Towards the end of the novel, Chava and Ahmad discuss Schaalman?s character and the choices he has made. Are we slaves to our natures? Can we change them?

10. What parallels do you see in this story set a century ago and our own lives today? What elements make the story historical and what makes it modern? What do you think will happen to Chava and Ahmad?

Author Bio

Helene Wecker is the author of the *Golem and the Jinni* trilogy: THE GOLEM AND THE JINNI, which was awarded the Mythopoeic Award for Adult Literature, the VCU Cabell Award for First Novel, and the Harold U. Ribalow Prize, and was nominated for a Nebula Award and a World Fantasy Award; THE HIDDEN PALACE and THE GATES OF MIDNIGHT. A Midwest native, she holds a B.A. in English from Carleton College and an M.F.A. in Fiction Writing from Columbia University. Her work has appeared in literary journals such as *Joyland* and *Catamaran*, as well as the fantasy anthology THE DJINN FALLS IN LOVE AND OTHER STORIES. She currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and children.

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