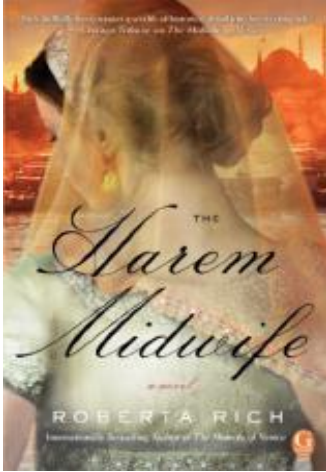


# The Harem Midwife

by Roberta Rich

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## About the Book

Hannah and Isaac Levi, Venetians in exile, have set up a new life for themselves in Constantinople. Isaac runs a newly established business in the growing silk trade, while Hannah, the best midwife in all of Constantinople, tends to the harem of Sultan Murat III.

But one night, when Hannah is unexpectedly summoned to the palace, she's confronted with Zofia, a poor Jewish peasant girl who has been abducted and sold into the sultan's harem --- favored as his next conquest to produce an heir. Will Hannah risk her life and livelihood to protect Zofia and return her safely home, or will she prioritize her high esteem in the eye of the sultan?

## Discussion Guide

1. The book opens with Leah's point-of-view, as she watches her entire life burn before her eyes. How did this introduction to Constantinople alter your perspective on Hannah and Isaac's new home?
2. Hannah has left behind her dark past in Venice to start a new life in Constantinople. She's particularly homesick when she is reminded of the tulips that used to bloom there. How do you think she is adjusting? How would you feel in a strange city?
3. How do you think Jewish culture differs between Venice and Constantinople? Are Jews really more welcome in Constantinople? Or is it all a façade?
4. Discuss the sense of foreboding that Hannah experiences when she is called into the palace to contain Leah. Do you think Hannah is able to gain her trust simply through their shared culture? Or is there something more going on?

5. Cesca is an incredibly shrewd and manipulative woman. How do you think her circumstances have influenced her harsh opinion of the Jewish culture? How much of her prejudice can she be held responsible for?
6. On page 104, Hannah considers the prejudices that exist even within Jewish culture, between the Sephardics and the Ashkenazis. Discuss this hypocrisy.
7. Isaac is livid when he finds out that Hannah has lied to the Valide about Leah's virginity. He believes family should always come before moral duty. Do you agree? How would you have acted?
8. There are inevitable jealousies that occur within the Sultan's harem. The Safiye must bear the pain of seeing her husband take on a new lover in Leah. Hannah also must face this possibility when Cesca (a.k.a Grazia) invokes an old Jewish law. In both cases, men have all the power. How do you think that's changed in modern day?
9. On page 204, Cesca must question her deeply ingrained biases when she experiences anti-Semitism for the first time as Grazia. Do you think this has a lasting effect on her?
10. Ezther and Tova are wholly selfless in helping Leah escape the harem right under the Valide's nose. How does this kind of charity subvert the clashing of religions?
11. Hannah still has trouble coming to terms with her infertility, especially because of the deep love that she and Isaac share. How do you think she feels about bringing new life into the world when she can't do the same? Do you think you would be able to do the same?
12. Discuss Leah's death --- how does she operate as the only true victim within the novel?
13. The Valide is one of the strongest and most complex characters in the novel. She operates within a world run by men and often appears harsh and unyielding. And yet her generosity towards Hannah saves the day. How do you think she is able to walk that line?
14. In the thrilling final scene, Grazia and Foscari try to make off with Hannah's child and end up being foiled. How do you think almost losing everything sheds new light on Hannah and Isaac's marriage? How do you see their family evolving in the years to come?

#### ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Explore the Jewish Virtual Library at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org> to explore more about Jewish history in both Venice and Constantinople. Discuss what it must have been like to live in a time where religious persecution ran unchecked. How have attitudes towards religious tolerance progressed?
2. Hannah's son has a blanket that he is deeply attached to. Did you have a similar object (stuffed animal, doll, blanket, etc?) growing up? Share stories about your favorite childhood items and note how they are both similar and different.
3. Modern day Turkey still carries on a tradition of rich and delicious cuisine. Plan to immerse yourself in the culture by

experimenting with some of the most popular Turkish recipes at <http://www.food.com/recipes/turkish>.

## Author Bio

Roberta Rich divides her time between Vancouver, British Columbia and Colima, Mexico.

## Critical Praise

Rich embellishes her tale with graphic descriptions of life and death in Venetia and Constantinople during this era, and although her depictions are sometimes unpleasant to imagine, they add to the intrigue. This earthy account will please Rich fans.

*Kirkus Reviews*

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