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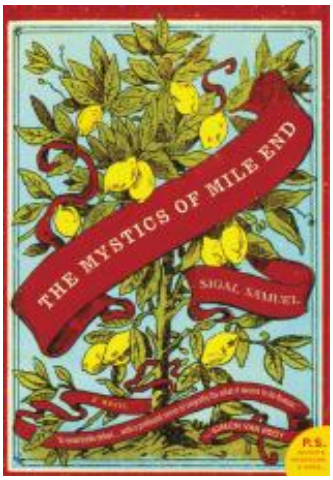
The Mystics of Mile End

by Sigal Samuel



About the Book

?This is not an ordinary tree I am making.

?This,? he said, ?this is the Tree of Knowledge.?

In the half-Hasidic, half-hipster Montreal neighborhood of Mile End, 11-year-old Lev Meyer is discovering that there may be a place for Judaism in his life. As he learns about science in his day school, Lev begins his own extracurricular study of the Bible?s Tree of Knowledge with neighbor Mr. Katz, who is building his own Tree out of trash. Meanwhile his sister Samara is secretly studying for her Bat Mitzvah with next-door neighbor and Holocaust survivor, Mr. Glassman. All the while his father, David, a professor of Jewish mysticism, is a non-believer.

When, years later, David has a heart attack, he begins to believe God is speaking to him. While having an affair with one of his students, he delves into the complexities of Kabbalah. Months later Samara, too, grows obsessed with the Kabbalah?s Tree of Life --- hiding her interest from those who love her most --- and is overcome with reaching the Tree?s highest heights. The neighbors of Mile End have been there all along, but only one of them can catch her when she falls.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think the author set this book in Montreal?s Mile End neighborhood? What does the setting add to the story?

2. David is depicted as a secular professor. Do you think he is a spiritual person, if not a religious one? How does his relationship with religion change after he is diagnosed with the heart murmur?

3. How are Lev and Samara different? How are they alike? Why do they adopt such opposite attitudes toward religion as

they grow up?

4. Is Samara a sympathetic character? Why or why not? Is it important to your experience of the book that you like her?

5. Why do both David and Samara grow obsessed with the Tree of Life? And why is the outcome different for each of them? Can you relate to this sort of obsession?

6. When Samara begins to climb the Tree of Life, she chooses to send letters to Alex. Why him?

7. Mr. Katz?s neighbors see him as deranged. Are there any moments that suggest he may not be so crazy after all? What do you imagine led to his obsession with recreating mystical trees?

8. In one of his stories, Mr. Glassman lists words that don?t exist but should. What do you think he wishes he could say to his wife, and what does he say after the book ends? What are some experiences that you wish you had words for?

9. A Jewish legend quoted in this book tells of four sages who enter a holy garden: one dies, one goes mad, one ?cuts down the plantings,? and one comes out intact. Do you see parallels between them and the characters in this novel?

10. Where do you think Samara and Lev will be in 10 years? What will their relationship be like over that decade? Will Jenny still be in their lives? Will Val?

Author Bio

Sigal Samuel is a writer and editor for The Jewish Daily Forward. She has published fiction and journalism in The Daily Beast, The Rumpus, BuzzFeed, Tablet, The Walrus, Event, Descant, Grain, Prairie Fire, Room and This Magazine, among others. She has been a featured writer at the Blue Metropolis International Literary Festival and a winner of Room?s writing contest. Her plays have been produced in Montreal, Vancouver and New York City, winning Solo Collective Theater?s Emerging Playwrights? Competition and The Cultch?s Young Playwrights? Competition. While pursuing her MFA in creative writing at the University of British Columbia, Sigal won the Laura Fowler Award for outstanding women in the fine arts. She received the Lionel Shapiro Award and the Chester Macnaghten Prize for creative writing from McGill University. Originally from Montreal, she now lives and writes in Brooklyn.

Critical Praise

?Rarely does one encounter a novel as full of charm and heart as Sigal Samuel?s riveting THE MYSTICS OF MILE END.... A novel that takes up enormous questions --- about the very nature of existence --- with both profound intelligence and galloping humor. Before you crack open this book, be forewarned: You will fall in love.?

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