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Jerusalem Maiden: A Novel



Synopsis

“Talia Carner is a skillful and heartfelt storyteller who takes the reader on a journey of the senses, into a world long forgotten.” —Jennifer Lauck, author of *Blackbird*

“Exquisitely told, with details so vivid you can almost taste the food and hear the voices.” —A moving and utterly captivating novel that I will be thinking about for a long, long time.” —Tess Gerritsen, author of *The Silent Girl*

“Talia Carner’s story captivates at every level, heart and mind.” —Jacquelyn Mitchard, author of *The Deep End of the Ocean*

The poignant, colorful, and unforgettable story of a young woman in early 20th-century Jerusalem who must choose between her faith and her passion, *Jerusalem Maiden* heralds the arrival of a magnificent new literary voice, Talia Carner. In the bestselling vein of *The Red Tent*, *The Kite Runner*, and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, *Jerusalem Maiden* brilliantly evokes the sights and sounds of the Middle East during the final days of the Ottoman Empire. Historical fiction and Bible lovers will be captivated by this thrilling tale of a young Jewish woman during a fascinating era, her inner struggle with breaking the Second Commandment, and her ultimate transcendence through self-discovery.

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Customer Reviews

“A fascinating look at a little-known culture and time . . . Tuck *JERUSALEM MAIDEN* in your beach bag.” —(Minneapolis Star Tribune)

“Talia Carner uses beautiful language, exquisite storytelling, and detailed research to transport the reader into the world of old Jerusalem . .

. This is a book to savor and discuss. (Jewish Book World) "A welcome glimpse into a little-understood world. (Kirkus Reviews) "Engaging . . . Carner renders Esther's world with great authority and detail, revealing intimate familial rituals within the larger political and socioeconomic context. (Publishers Weekly) "JERUSALEM MAIDEN is a page-turning and thought-provoking novel. Extraordinary sensory detail vividly conjures another time and place; heroine Esther Kaminsky's poignant struggle transcends time and place. The ultimate revelation here: for many women, if not most, 2011 is no different than 1911, but triumph is nonetheless possible. (Binnie Kirshenbaum, author of The Scenic Route) "Talia Carner is a skillful and heartfelt storyteller who takes the reader on journey of the senses, into a world long forgotten. Her story of a woman who struggles and seeks the light is universal and inspiring. Read this book and savor. (Jennifer Lauck, author of the New York Times bestseller Blackbird and the newly released Found: A Memoir) "JERUSALEM MAIDEN won me over from the first moment I began reading it...meticulously researched, and steeped in thorough knowledge, no less than deep understanding, of both this community and of the world of art in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century... I could not put it down. (Eva Etzioni-Halevy, author of The Triumph of Deborah, The Song of Hannah and The Garden of Ruth) "JERUSALEM MAIDEN is a novel but the reader feels that she has entered living, lost history. Once engaged, you cannot put this book down . . . [H]eartbreakingly real. (Phyllis Chesler, author of Women and Madness and Women of the Wall) "[A]n exquisitely explosive journey . . . [JERUSALEM MAIDEN] immerses us in a provocative and astonishingly realized world filled with evil spirits, arranged marriages, prayer, poverty, and the pain of breaking free. (Michelle Cameron, author of The Fruit of Her Hands) "Exquisitely told...a moving and utterly captivating novel that I will be thinking about for a long, long time. (Tess Gerritsen, New York Times bestselling author of THE SILENT GIRL) "Esther Kaminsky is a true heroine . . . The truly marvellous thing about JERUSALEM MAIDEN is how deeply Talia Carner is able to evoke Esther's faith and the complexity of the choices she faces. A beautiful and timely novel. (Margot Livesey, author of The House on Fortune Street and Eva Moves the Furniture) "As bold and fragile as its main character, JERUSALEM MAIDEN is at heart a story of revolution. . . Captivates at every level, heart and mind. (Jacquelyn Mitchard, author of The Deep End of the Ocean and Second Nature) "Compelling ... vividly examines the grinding poverty and oppressive religious domination the heroine suffers in pre-World War I Mea Shearim, and then compares it with the seductive nonconformity she enjoys in the Parisian art world ten years later. (Maggie Anton, author of Rashi's Daughters) "[A] fascinating story of

how a talented, artistic woman from a conservative faith must balance the responsibilities of her heritage against her passions for love and art ... [JERUSALEM MAIDEN] brings an elusive time and place to life and makes you question the strengths of your own beliefs. (Vanitha Sankaran, author of *Watermark*) "A tale spun by a natural storyteller...what is striking is the timelessness and dreamlike quality of her worlds. We are drawn into the saga of Esther Kaminsky, the Jerusalem maiden, and stay under her story's spell until the ambiguously happy end." (Hassadah Magazine)

In the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, a young Orthodox Jewish woman in the holy city of Jerusalem is expected to marry and produce many sons to help hasten the Messiah's arrival. While the feisty Esther Kaminsky understands her obligations, her artistic talent inspires her to secretly explore worlds outside her religion, to dream of studying in Paris and to believe that God has a special destiny for her. When tragedy strikes her family, Esther views it as a warning from an angry God and suppresses her desires in order to become an obedient "Jerusalem maiden." But when a surprising opportunity forces itself on to her preordained path, Esther finds her beliefs clashing dangerously with the passions she has staved off her entire life forcing her to confront the most difficult and damning question of all: To whom must she be true, God or herself?

This book is dedicated to the author's grandmother, "whose genius went untapped." In the author's promotional video, she speculates that if born in a different time or place, the real Esther would have lived an unconventional, bohemian creative life. This story begins almost in what feels like the stone age -- bare unwashed feet, superstitious imprecations, women as chattel -- and ends in the modern world of 1968. I also have a Grandmother of the same generation, about whom we always said "What if?", who chafed at the constricts that kept women in their place a hundred years ago, but who likewise embraced the traditions that gave meaning and structure to family life. What interested me about Esther is how she, to an extent, embraces her chains. She loves the traditions of the Haredi, the prayers, the meals, keeping house, feeding the family. The reader sees she's actually lucky in the match her father made for her - but she doesn't see it that way, even though it was a peaceful marriage by the standards of the time. I was surprised at how sensible some of the rules were -- how many Catholic wives would have loved to be barred their husbands for a week a month! And the mikvah cleansing bath sounds almost like a spa. I appreciated that this book turned out not to have the stupid wish fulfillment ending I find in so many women's novels. Nor was it a complete downer. It was realistic and resisted the current literary trend of forcing a politically correct sensibility

on a grim time. Without anything heavy handed, the creation of the State of Israel is woven into the story, without being the story. For me, this book was moving on many levels.

Good novel, perhaps even great, ...with a very poor ending. And I have to say that I've never read another novel where the ending was so bad as to ruin the whole story (okay, ...perhaps " ...almost ruin the whole story."). Perhaps a 3.5 rating if there was such a thing. As much as I enjoyed reading the first part, as I continued to read the remaining 10 percent or so, I kept telling myself to stop reading, to just enjoy what I'd read and let it go at that. I didn't, and that last part just ruined it all for me. Damn!! I would also comment that near the end, the sex scenes were excessive for the style and type story, and had almost no place in the narrative. Thankfully there were few such scenes. Implied sex would have been more than enough. The epilogue was good and fit the main storyline quite well. I just wish the author had used it in place of the last 10 percent or so of the story. Patrick

Many in the modern world believe that Muslim females are abused by virtue of the requirement that they wear clothing that totally covers them, while the women who wear the garb insist that they are just honoring their religion and do not feel oppressed. The issue is whether or not these women have been indoctrinated during their childhood so as to believe that doing or not doing things they were taught meant something significant under the religious rules they were taught they had little or no choice but to accept and honor. I mention this as this book has minimal value in its text save for the very clear reinforcement of the argument that religion, when carried to an extreme, indoctrinates and actually denies its followers the utilization of the very self will that, if there is a god, he/she granted them. I found it hard to read the book after about 18% completion at which point I was ready to quit reading as I felt so sorry for the youthful female children of the Jewish family (yes orthodox religious Jews and ultra religious Muslims are very much the same in many respects, and certainly as to how women are treated (mistreated)). Perhaps the book has other messages that I missed out of inability to remove from my mind how sorry I felt for Esther, a young girl, who was frustrated in her attempt to draw (she having the talent to draw and paint) and understand why it was that daddy told her that her role in life was not to draw as only god can create, and that her job was to be a wife to whomever he chose for her to marry. So in conclusion reading this book will not enable the reader to justify any form of prejudice or disdain of those who choose to live in accordance with their religion, no matter how silly so much of it may seem in the modern age, but it does make one think about the impact it has upon women and how much of a better world we would have if the women who were indoctrinated as children had the ability to exercise their self will and create, speak up, and engage

the world and its occupants, male and female, as they saw fit. The best part of the book, which is well written and easy to read, and is enjoyable as well as educational, was that the woman heroine who was so indoctrinated found her way to real life through love of a man who bought her such pleasure that she simply assumed that her God had delivered him and her artistic talent to her and that enabled her to overcome the restraints organized religion had imposed. The lesson from the book is that we are humans who have emotions, physical needs, and desires that do not always fit together with the stringent often seemingly ridiculous rules imposed by church leaders who contend the rules came not from them but from God, and the sad part is how many people accept that as factual and miss out on life's pleasures and the freedom that comes from self-will if allowed to be exercised.

Jerusalem Maiden took me back in time to a place in history and a sect of people that I had a hard time understanding. As a reform Jew, the regiments and rituals, superstitions and rigid gender roles of ultra Orthodox Judaism in the early 1900's was both surprising and upsetting. But Ms. Carner did a wonderful job setting the stage and wrapping me up in the story with authentic, vivid detail. I did identify with Esther's crisis of self, her struggle with following the rules of her God and her society against her inner self. This was a fascinating glimpse into the world of a culture few people understand or know. And into the heart of a young girl trying to find herself in a place where she isn't allowed to be herself but must become what has already been determined for her. It is a great book club selection, as there is lots to discuss!

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