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How a Grandmother's Unfulfilled Destiny Inspired a Captivating Novel

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My path has crossed with Talia Carner's for quite some time. She first introduced herself to me when I worked as a national event specialist for Borders Books when the company was still viable. A few years later, we were both panelists for the International Women's Writing Guild. Then, our paths would occasionally cross at book events and we'd share our publishing journey, telling each other about the books we were working on. So when her novel, *Jerusalem Maiden* (Harper) was recently published I was thrilled for her, but, admittedly, a bit hesitant to read it. What if it missed the mark? What if I found it boring -- or worse? For this reason I don't usually review friends' books, but with a sigh of relief, I can report that this novel is one of the few books that I can rave about and recommend without hesitation.

Even though I could relate to Esther Kaminsky's yearnings and spiritual questions, *Jerusalem Maiden* pulled me into unfamiliar territory, into the world of Jerusalem's Orthodox Jews. From very young, it was apparent that the protagonist's purpose in life was to marry once she was able to conceive so that she could begin giving birth, hopefully to sons, which was to help bring about the Messiah's arrival. Never mind that young Esther showed an impressive artistic talent; her role, as was all the Orthodox Jewish women's, was already preordained. The problem was that even though most everyone in her community accepted their lot in life, Esther was trying to figure out why God would give her such an insatiable desire to make "graven images" if she was never allowed to express it.

Early on, Esther's French teacher from a far different culture gently planted a budding seed in the young girl's mind:

It is very difficult to come up with a new way of thinking when you are forever exposed to your God's scrutiny -- or what you believe is your God's scrutiny. He sits in judgment inside your head, reading every errant thought, making you obsessed with following what you've been told are His decrees. And so you are confined --

Anyone who reads my posts knows that I have issues with extremism in religion. Yes, for years I was neck-deep in a Bible-believing church, one that interpreted "God's Word" for the congregation and made any one of us who expressed doubts to what was being taught feel that those doubts were inspired by the devil himself. Fortunately, I finally extricated myself from that church, but was inspired to write about that world in my yet-to-be published novel. Like Talia's protagonist, my protagonist, too, has desires that went against the fundamental, Bible-believing lifestyle in which she was raised. Therefore, with each page I turned in Carner's gripping tale, I witnessed similarities between those who are waiting for the Messiah to those who believe he's already arrived while the belief systems fueled by tradition and rules go hand in hand with oppression and ignoring the innate passions of its people.

Without a doubt, novelists' works are often inspired by the need to expose certain society failings and like Esther in *Jerusalem Maiden*, Carner's very real grandmother was not allowed to develop her artistic talent. Because of this, Carner explored what it was like to be a young girl in Jerusalem in the early 1900s. What she ended up with is a story that shows how these rigid beliefs often make a mockery out of the need to express oneself. With such profound sadness those who struggle to please his or her God often must deny themselves any sort of pleasure. The senses are forbidden to appreciate art in any form while the body is for procreating and laboring. Any distraction is considered a sin. With each page I turned, I kept asking, who'd want to serve that kind of God?

However, instead of preaching, Carner shows the hypocrisy through how a young woman's desire to please her God didn't agree with her yearning to express her handiwork on canvas. My heart ached for Esther as I watched her go through life suppressing her dream in order to do what she was told by the men who studied and interpreted the Torah, since she, a woman, was forbidden to do so. Sadly, even though this is a work of fiction that takes place many years ago, the story of religious oppression is all too familiar. Brava to Talia Carner, who lectures at international women's economic forums, for writing such a provocative novel, one that is bound to stir much discussion.