



Maiden voyage

Set in 1920s Jerusalem, this tale of a young woman with artistic leanings is an engaging yet flawed consideration of the meeting point between the observant world and creative urges

• AKIN AJAYI

Twelve-year-old Esther sees beauty all around her; what she wants more than anything else is to capture the transient splendor of the world for all time, by drawing and painting. When she spots a gecko recumbent upon a windowsill, she wonders to herself at the fragile translucence of its skin. How, she wonders, did God capture this fragility?

But this is folly for a prepubescent girl in Jerusalem of the early 20th century, as she is reminded swiftly. To draw and paint is to be guilty of the sin of idleness; if that were not enough, there is the Second Commandment to reinforce the wrongness of her desires: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything."

Yet read this, the world of young, observant women of the age was anchored around a set of reference points much removed from those connected to art and creativity: Piety and poverty, virtue and patience, the first menstrual cycle, an arranged marriage and the uncomplicated mitzva of reproduction as a means of strengthening the community by numbers. Such was the life of a Jerusalem maiden.

Jerusalem Maiden, American-Israeli Talia Carner's third novel, is a sporadically engaging yet frustratingly flawed consideration of the meeting point between the observant world and creative urges. The book revolves around the cloistered world of young women such as Esther inhabiting a city on the cusp of transformation, but with nothing to look forward to but autonomy and femininity denied, the promise of an unfulfilled life.

Esther belongs to small Jerusalem *Mai*, a community preoccupied with the imminent arrival of the Messiah to the exclusion of all else. Poverty is a way of life. Boys aspire to become *yeshiva bochers*, talimudic scholars who

within; but the guilt at betraying herself and her community is a constant reminder of the impossibility of her dreams.

Despite efforts to the contrary, marriage eventually arrives – to Nathan, a wealthy

what when Esther, married and with children, impulsively decides to visit Paris. Her trip, ostensibly, is to take up her husband's invitation to travel with him on a grand tour of Europe while he goes about his business. But in fact, it is an excuse, an opportunity to satisfy a gnawing hunger

SEEKING BEAUTY
 everywhere, the haredi protagonist is frightened by her desire to paint 'graven images.'
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