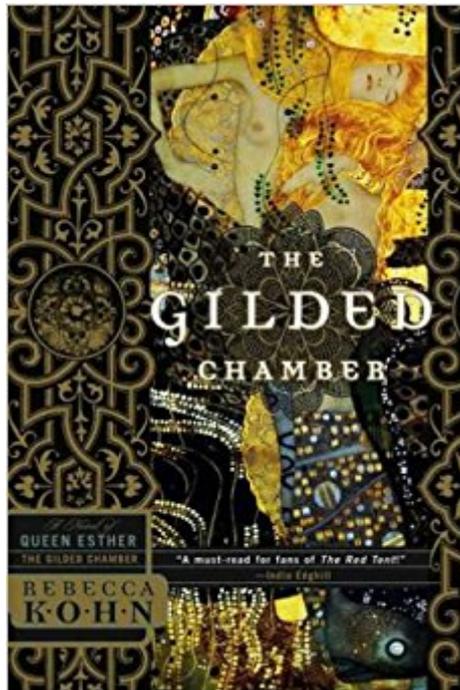


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The Gilded Chamber: A Novel Of Queen Esther



Synopsis

In the Bestselling tradition of *The Red Tent*, a dazzling novel of the extraordinary biblical heroine who ascended to the position of queen and sacrificed love in exchange for the lives of her people. The story of Esther-- whose mesmerizing beauty was matched only by her clear-eyed wisdom-- has inspired women for centuries. Now her suspenseful tale comes to life through the eyes of a contemporary woman, debut novelist Rebecca Kohn. Capturing the passionate longings and political danger that have made Esther's legacy so timeless, *The Gilded Chamber* blends meticulous research with gripping storytelling to transport us to an ancient time in the far-flung Persian Empire. Orphaned and terrified, Esther journeys across the River Tigris to start a new life with her cousin-- a man well positioned in the court, and to whom she is betrothed. Her transformation from girl to woman unfolds against a lavish backdrop of the royal court and harem, rife with intrigue and daring alliances. Esther wins much of what she seeks: the heart of a king, and the deliverance of her people. But her rise to the role of queen is not without a price; she must turn her back on all that she ever wanted, and give her body to a man she can never love. In a haunting, unflinching voice, *The Gilded Chamber* illuminates an epic dilemma between the yearnings of a woman's heart and the obligations imposed on her by fate. In Esther's case, choice makes history-- and unforgettable reading

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Customer Reviews

What *The Red Tent* did for Dinah, *The Gilded Chamber*, a first novel by Rebecca Kohn, might do for

Esther, the woman who wielded power over a King. The story follows the Book of Esther very closely: Xerxes banishes his wife Vashti and sets about finding a new wife by claiming all the young virgins in the kingdom of Persia for his perusal and delectation. Esther, born Hadassah, is a young Jewish orphan, remanded to the custody of her cousin Mordechai, to whom she is betrothed. Mordechai attends to the King at the Palace, but no one knows that he is a Jew. He warns Hadassah to take the name Esther when she is swept up by the King's edict, and not to reveal her heritage. After a year of being pampered by court slaves, Esther is presented to the King. He is instantly smitten and makes her his Queen. Esther longs for Mordechai but succumbs to the blandishments of the King to save herself from being sent to the soldiers--a horrible fate. In the course of Palace intrigue, Haman, a truly evil man who is viewed as a trusted servant of the King, plots to kill Mordechai, who will not bow to him, and ultimately to kill all the Jews in the Kingdom. King Xerxes, a bit of a buffoon both in the Bible and in Kohn's book, is languishing under the effects of idleness and too much wine. He gives Haman his signet ring; Haman drafts the edict which will result in the death of the Jews and seals it with the King's ring. Now, Esther must save her people. The portent of this book is found not in the story alone, but in the meticulous research that Kohn has done into the time: Palace life, social customs, history, sexual practices, the place of women, war and politics. Descriptions of the care given to Esther before she meets the King are detailed: her trips to the hairdressers, her hennaed hands, the pungent oils rubbed all over her body, the gold-trimmed clothing she wears. She describes her dinner with a eunuch: "Golden cups in the shape of tulip blossoms were filled with sweet spiced wine from Hodu, and shining silver platters were piled high with meat stews and succulent birds I could not identify. A plate of sugared almonds and pistachios ... and a sweet of sesame, dates and honey..." She is willing to sacrifice all creature comforts to save her people; her success is celebrated to this day in the Jewish feast of Purim.

--Valerie Ryan

In this measured, eloquent retelling of Jewish heroine Esther's rise from orphanhood to queen of the Persian empire, Kohn brings psychological nuance and stately elegance to the ancient biblical tale that is the basis for the Jewish holiday of Purim. Narrating in the first person, Esther (born Hadassah) tells how she is forcibly taken from her home to the royal harem of King Xerxes in Babylon. Her uncle Mordechai, a high-ranking treasury official in the king's service, warns her, "Do not reveal your people or your kindred.... Let yourself be known only as Esther, foster daughter of Marduka the Babylonian." The novel is by and large faithful to the biblical account and often quotes from it verbatim. Yet Kohn deftly fills the gaps and resolves the ambiguities in the Book of Esther

with creative storytelling and historical research. As Esther recognizes her strengths and responsibilities and learns the ways of the palace, so do we; the oppressive closeness of the harem ("the lingering odors of perfume, food, and lamp oil"), the pervasive abuse, the fragile alliances and deadly schemes all come to life. Kohn's Esther has a will of steel and knows how to manipulate lusty, impetuous Xerxes, but she longs for a simpler life. Her sacrifices are finally rewarded when the king's trusted courtier Haman issues a decree ordering the slaughter of the Jews, and Esther is in a position to be able to save her people. Though the novel's pace slows at times, Kohn paints a convincing, complex picture of Esther, and her descriptions of the palace and its secrets will hold readers spellbound. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Rebecca Kohn hasn't exactly created a masterpiece in *The Gilded Chamber*, with an unsatisfying climax and a style that seems to strain its first-person capabilities, but she has written a solid work that pretty well taps into an incredibly powerful narrative tradition behind the Bible. Kohn's prose vacillates between poetry and cringe-inducing -- Esther refers to her sexuality as "her flower," for God's sake, on multiple occasions, and it doesn't matter that this is the kind of modest metaphor Esther would've actually used, it's still jarring and embarrassing enough that Kohn should've at least tried to find a workaround. And it's pretty easy to see how a different kind of reader wouldn't see the poetry there at all, but put it down to purple prose; the seemingly endless descriptions of the extravagance of palace life can, after the nineteenth iteration, feel just a touch repetitive. There are definitely places, notably the stretches of time between Esther's arrival at the harem and her marriage, and her marriage and her miscarriage, that are hugely underutilized in the book. Kohn mainly fills the time with anecdotes about the major events in Esther's friends' lives, but by skipping over how Esther and her friends pass time in the day-to-day vagaries of palace life, Kohn misses a huge opportunity to make Esther more relatable and likable. What we get instead are a few paragraphs about boredom and depression that, while probably accurate to the lives of harem women in Persia 2500 years ago, don't exactly make for thrilling reading. But what I think leaves me the most dissatisfied about this book is the way her ultimate triumph -- turning the beauty that has trapped her into a life of decadence and excess into a weapon for the good of her people -- doesn't quite strike the reader as the thrilling triumph of good over evil that it ought to be, that it definitely is in the Biblical Book of Esther. There's no sense of climactic resolution when Esther gets Haman sentenced to death. In fact, it doesn't even seem a result of her actions, as it's made pretty explicit that the official reason is Haman's threats towards Esther's life, not Esther's accusations of Haman.

It's a huge letdown. We've been watching Esther spiral downwards into being the simplistic ornamentation women were meant to be at that time, and in the pivotal moment where she summons up the force of her sexuality and becomes a warrior instead of a weapon, she...doesn't manage to do much at all, or at least it's not portrayed that way. Kohn's Esther does some pretty impressive things: she saves her friends, she saves her people, she overcomes the circumstances that have been forced upon her by her beauty. But when she, as the narrator, fails to recognize the importance of what she's done, the reader isn't quite convinced, either, and as a result Esther's entire character arc falls flat on its face. That's not to say that Kohn's book isn't strong, even stunning, in other areas. The snapshots of life she conjures up of Persia, circa 500 BCE, are overflowing with life -- you can practically feel the historical accuracy dripping off the tiles. And in spite of the way that Esther, one of the Bible's iconic seductresses, is reduced to a vapid girl bordering on the unlikable at times whose greatest success isn't even hers, Kohn has done an incredible job revealing what life was like for the women of the ancient world -- from Freni, freed and charged with backbreaking work to ensure her family's survival, to Puah, aged and trapped into servitude, to Esther herself, *The Gilded Chamber* is thick with stories of the secret lives of women, and the secret horrors of being a woman in a time when the king's law is absolute and women are occasionally less than property. At times -- especially when Kohn taps into a Biblical narrative tradition that calls for the repetition of these stories through millennia -- Kohn's writing can be shiveringly lovely. When Esther describes herself as "a blessing to [Puah] in her old age," for example, the almost thoughtless reminder of Abraham and Isaac is a punch to the gut with the weight of cultural history. And *The Gilded Chamber's* take on the role of the faith in the lives of Mordechai and Esther is surprising and intriguing; for a story ripped from the pages of the Hebrew Bible, it's almost startling to imagine Mordechai as an unobservant Jew, or Esther as a girl who doesn't know a single Hebrew prayer; the transformations of Mordechai and Esther, and the unwavering faith of Puah and Freni, is one character arc that definitely doesn't fall flat. In summary: worth reading, but definitely wouldn't read again, and would recommend with caution.

The historical descriptions were very enlightening. Ms. Kohn created a very creditable story from the few verses in the Bible.

i finished this book in a day and a half. interesting to read about how the harems were back in the day

Having seen all the comparisons with Anita Diamant's *THE RED TENT*, I knew that I had to read this book. I can't say that the comparisons were valid. While the story and topic were interesting and the writing fast and easy to follow, I can't say that I ever felt captivated or motivated to continue. Although I did finally finish the book, it never had that "can't wait to get to the next page" feel. And the ending was so anti-climactic! One question bothered me throughout: Why was Esther so head-over-heels in love with her cousin and unwilling to let go of an impossible dream of being with him? She barely knew him and he showed no signs of returning any of her affections. Enough said..I won't blow the whole story for you.

A quote on the front of my copy of this book compares this novel to *The Red Tent* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Thankfully, I found it more like the latter than the former. It is like *The Red Tent* in that the underlying story is found in the Old Testament, but while *The Gilded Chamber* does take a few liberties with the Old Testament account (particularly the apocryphal account if you are familiar with that) the essence of the biblical account remains mostly intact. In other words, Esther and Mordecai remain at their core monotheistic Jews trying to survive in a hostile religious environment. Yes, they make compromises but in the end they remain religious Jews. In contrast, *The Red Tent* completely changes the religion of the main characters and turns the lives of the Jewish patriarchs into pagans or blithering monotheistic idiots. Yes, there is a lot of sex and sexual politics in all of the novels mentioned but it is not gratuitous. These are essential elements for understanding the lives and politics of a world that is unlike anything most sheltered American women would ever have to endure. Like *Memoirs* does for the closed Japanese world of the *Geisha*, *The Gilded Chamber* does for the life of women in an ancient Persian harem with a rich tapestry of cultural details. It speculates on what Esther might have had to endure to simply survive in a world where one's worth rested solely on the king's favor. In a way, Esther faced choices similar to that of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*....how much can you compromise and remain true to what you believe? Too often, we view the story of Esther through our modern western eyes as a kind of ancient Cinderella tale. The truth was probably far from a happy-ending-type fairy tale. I particularly liked that the narrative did not end with the events told about in the Bible but speculated on Esther's life to the time of Xerxes' death and her escape from the harem as Vashti's son was crowned king. I learned something from the notes at the end of the book. Apparently there is a tomb in Iran called *The Tomb of Mordecai and Esther*. Wouldn't it be something if the two were reunited at the end?

No review - it's a gift.

Emotionally evocative account of the Esther Purim story heavily spiced with ancient Persian culture.

Love this book. Growing up and hearing the megillah, this book gave a nice spin to it with dialog and imagery.

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