



A HOWARD READING GROUP GUIDE

ESTHER

This reading group guide, for Esther, includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Rebecca Kanner. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

Renowned author Rebecca Kanner transports readers to the glittering and treacherous Persian Empire in this retelling of the story of Queen Esther.

Before becoming a legend, Esther was a poor peasant girl, kidnapped in the darkness and forced to walk across the desert to join the harem of King Xerxes, the most powerful man in the world.

Blessed with incomparable beauty and an unbreakable spirit, Esther rises from hundreds of other women to entrance the king and become his queen. But once crowned, her troubles are far from over. For a grave threat is growing inside the palace walls, one that could lead to the destruction of the Jewish people as well as Esther herself.

Will she stand up and save her people, or be crushed by the weight of the crown she bears?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Esther's given name is Hadassah, which means, "'myrtle,' a plant that only gave off its sweet fragrance when crushed" (page 9). In order to conceal her Jewish identity, she chooses a new name, Esther, which means "star" in Persian and is also derived from Ishtar, goddess of love, fertility, war, and sex. How is this change symbolic? In what ways does Esther embody the characteristics of both names?
2. When the Immortals come to kidnap Esther, she describes them as "the night itself" (page 1). Discuss how night and darkness become Esther's enemies throughout the novel.
3. Do you agree with Erez when he tells Esther, "There is only one way to truly tame anything wild" (page 22)? What did you interpret his statement to mean? How does Esther's "wild" nature both help and hurt her in the palace?
4. In the palace, physical beauty is often equated with goodness. How is this perception proven wrong throughout the novel?
5. Discuss Esther's relationships with other female characters in the novel, such as Cyra, Ruti, and Opi. How are these bonds different from the ones that she has with the novel's male characters?
6. Esther undergoes many transformations throughout the story, first from village girl to harem concubine, and then from harem concubine to Queen of Persia. How does she change with each role? In what ways does she remain the same?

7. Discuss the importance of scars in the novel. What do they represent? Do you agree with Xerxes when he says, “The best soldiers bear scars. They are badges of honor” (page 177)?
8. Esther loses her virginity to Xerxes and repeatedly surrenders her entire body to him. Yet she feels a stronger physical and emotional connection with Erez, whom she has never known intimately. Why do you think this is?
9. Discuss how the loss of her child impacts Esther. How do you think her story might have been different if her child had lived?
10. Esther says, “I knew I could not trust the men who write history to write my story. I had to write it myself” (page 305). How does writing empower Esther?
11. Do you think Esther was justified in hiding her Judaism for so long? Why or why not?
12. Discuss Kanner’s use of poetic justice in the novel, especially in regard to the character of Haman.
13. When Esther is kidnapped at the age of fourteen, she mourns for the life she might have had outside the palace walls. At the end of the novel, she is preparing to start that existence anew. How do you think she will adapt to life as a “normal” person after serving as queen? Do you believe her when she says, “Yes, I am ready” (page 377)?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. The characters in *Esther* consume many tasty delicacies, including dates, honey, plums, sugared almonds, sweet oranges, and, of course, wine! Prepare a spread containing some of the treats mentioned in the text to munch on while you discuss the book.
2. With your book club, read “The Book of Esther,” located in the Jewish Tanakh or the Christian Old Testament. Then, compare and contrast Rebecca Kanner’s novel with the biblical version. How does the character of Esther differ between the two versions?
3. Have your book club read Kanner’s first novel, *Sinners and the Sea*, which is a retelling of the story of Noah’s Ark from the point of view of his often overlooked wife. Discuss the differences and similarities between the two books, especially in the portrayal of their female main characters.
4. Use the Cast of Characters in the beginning of the book to create your dream cast for a movie adaptation of the book. Who would you like to see play Esther, the girl whose beauty captivated a king and an empire? What about the rest of the characters?

A CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA KANNER

This is your second novel. How did the writing process differ the second time around? Did you find it easier or were there new challenges?

In some ways the process was the same for both novels. My writing process is basically just to drink a bunch of caffeine and see what happens.

There were a few new challenges but also certain advantages to writing a second novel. I wrote *Sinners and the Sea: The Untold Story of Noah's Wife*, unsure if anyone other than friends and family would read it. That afforded me a lot of freedom and the writing came easily, but at times, I thought *People rarely get their novels accepted for publication. What am I doing devoting so much time to something so impractical?*

With *Esther*, I knew my publisher was going to look at it. This kept me from worrying about devoting so much time to it (in fact it took three times as long to write as *Sinners and the Sea*). But also, because I'd read lots of reviews of *Sinners and the Sea*, it was challenging not to let what others might think influence me. I was definitely harder on myself. Also, there's so much more research material available about the time period *Esther* takes place in (the story begins in 480 BCE) that research became an integral part of the writing process.

How/why did you choose Queen Esther as the focus for this novel?

I've always been intrigued by the feat that Esther carried off—saving her people—and the intelligence that must have taken. I've been dissatisfied with interpretations of *The Book of Esther* which credit her beauty and the prodding of her cousin Mordecai for her achievements. I retold the story so that beauty and obedience weren't her most important characteristics. I was inspired by looking at paintings of Anne Boleyn and reading descriptions of Cleopatra. While these women are widely believed to have been gorgeous, they were not actually pictures of traditional physical perfection.

Their personalities, including both wit and charm, are what I believe accounted for much of their attractiveness. We have continued to mythologize their beauty as an explanation for their success (however short-lived it was for Anne Boleyn), instead of focusing on their intellects.

What was the research process like for *Esther*?

I read some books from start to finish (*The Book of Esther* and *Purim and the Persian Empire*) but for the most part, reading and researching were interspersed. Sometimes the best way to figure out what research you need to do is to start writing.

The characters of Ruti, Halannah, and Erez do not exist in the biblical version of the story. Why did you choose to add them?

Ruti serves as a feminine moral compass and a feminine connection to Judaism. It's Ruti who tells Esther: "Our matriarch Sarah lived for one hundred and twenty-seven years, and you rule over one hundred twenty-seven provinces. Surely this is no coincidence. . . . Our God has not deserted us."

Halannah is the female equivalent of Haman. She's reckless, greedy, and ambitious. She exemplifies the jealousies and cruelty that result from so many women vying for the attention of one man. Ironically, it's Hegai whose favor they should be currying. Upon first seeing Hegai, Esther understands that his support is vital. It's one way that she's smarter than some of the other women in the harem.

Erez arose organically as I was writing *Esther*. I think it would be unusual for a fourteen-year-old girl not to have any interest in love or her own budding sexuality. After being kidnapped and finding herself completely alone in the world, Esther is in that vulnerable state where connections can form very quickly. When Erez hears her praying in Hebrew and gives her a symbol of the Zoroastrian religion in an effort to protect her by disguising her as a non-Jew, she realizes she trusts him. That trust is the genesis of her feelings for him.

She eventually has to weigh her feelings for Erez against all she has to

lose by following them. This is the sort of inner struggle many of us have as we make our way to adulthood. Exploring Esther's struggle was one way of making her human.

Does your religion influence the stories that you tell and the ways in which you tell them? If so, how?

Jews have a tradition of seeking out answers and offering various explanations for things that are mysterious or unclear. This study is called midrash. My first book, *Sinners and the Sea: The Untold Story of Noah's Wife*, offers a midrashic explanation for why Noah's wife isn't named in Genesis. In *Esther*, I offer my own explanation for why Esther delayed in telling the king she was Jewish. After reading some midrash in *Torah of the Mothers: Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts*, I was inspired to include what I think could have been Esther's very dangerous initial plan to turn the king against Haman.

The events of *Esther* took place thousands of years ago, yet the story as you tell it feels fresh and relevant. How were you able to accomplish this?

Thank you. The more I inhabited the world of 480 BCE the more vivid it became. I came to see that many issues are timeless.

What was the most challenging part of writing this story?

Finishing it! And after finishing it, having to cut 40,000 words.

What would you like readers to take away from the story of *Esther*? What do you consider to be the most important message?

I hope that Esther will give people the courage to do things they fear. I really like the Georgia O'Keeffe quote "I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing that I wanted to do."

What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

Read as much as possible. The best writers I know are widely read. I also recommend that once you start writing you join or form a writing group. Without a deadline, it's sometimes hard to keep being productive, and other people can help you with any blind spots you might have as a writer.

When you submit your work for publication, know that you are likely to receive lots of rejections before you become successful. I kept reminding myself that Kathryn Stockett received sixty rejections before finding a publisher for *The Help*, which went on to be a bestseller and major motion picture. When your work is accepted for publication, all the hard work you put in will feel so very worth it.

What was the last book that you read and loved?

I've been reading a lot of mysteries because that's what I'm writing now. When Lori and Julia of Twin Cities myTalk 107.1 interviewed me about *Esther* it was clear that they were very well read. I asked Lori for recommendations. One of the books she suggested was *Luckiest Girl Alive*. I'd actually looked at it before, but because the Amazon reviews were mixed I didn't add it to my TBR list. It turned out to be a good character study and it was full of fashion, which is something that comes up in the novel I'm working on. I guess the lesson is not to judge a book solely based upon Amazon reviews.

What's next for you?

I'm working on a thriller set in St. Louis, Missouri, and various parts of Minnesota. The cold is a factor, and it's not hard to write about as there have been several bouts of ridiculously cold weather here in Minnesota the last few winters. Or, what I call "perfect writing weather."