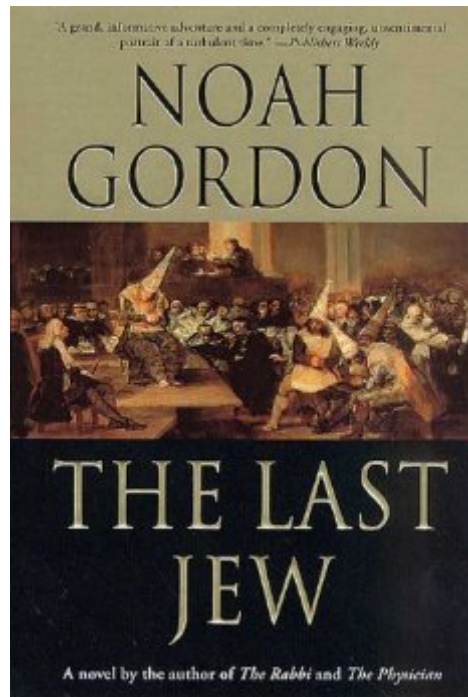


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The Last Jew



Synopsis

In the year 1492, the Inquisition has all of Spain in its grip. After centuries of pogrom-like riots encouraged by the Church, the Jews - who have been an important part of Spanish life since the days of the Romans - are expelled from the country by royal edict. Many who wish to remain are intimidated by Church and Crown and become Catholics, but several hundred thousand choose to retain their religion and depart; given little time to flee, some perish even before they can escape from Spain. Yonah Toledano, the 15-year-old son of a celebrated Spanish silversmith, has seen his father and brother die during these terrible days - victims whose murders go almost unnoticed in a time of mass upheaval. Trapped in Spain by circumstances, he is determined to honor the memory of his family by remaining a Jew. On a donkey named Moise, Yonah begins a meandering journey, a young fugitive zigzagging across the vastness of Spain. Toiling at manual labor, he desperately tries to cling to his memories of a vanished culture. As a lonely shepherd on a mountaintop he hurls snatches of almost forgotten Hebrew at the stars, as an apprentice armorer he learns to fight like a Christian knight. Finally, as a man living in a time and land where danger from the Inquisition is everywhere, he deals with the questions that mark his past. How he discovers the answers, how he finds his way to a singular and strong Marrano woman, how he achieves a life with the outer persona of a respected Old Christian physician and the inner life of a secret Jew, is the fabric of this novel. The Last Jew is a glimpse of the past, an authentic tale of high adventure, and a tender and unforgettable love story. In it, Noah Gordon utilizes his greatest strengths, and the result is remarkable and moving.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Noah Gordon's "The Last Jew" describes the wrenching experience of the Jewish communities in Spain and Portugal who suffered horribly during the infamous Inquisition. As the book opens in 1489, the Toledano family, famous for its expertise in metalworking, is central to the story. Meir, one of the Toledano sons, is found dead in the process of delivering a sacred silver and gold object to a priest, and his death leads to an investigation which has far ranging implications for Jews and Catholics alike. Subsequently, Yonah Toledano, Meir's brother, suffers through the death and expulsion of his fellow Jews as the Inquisition heats up. He decides not to flee Spain, nor does he undergo a false conversion to Catholicism as so many others do. He travels the country pretending to be an "Old Christian" and he silently mouths the Jewish prayers that he remembers from his youth. "The Lost Jew" is a "road story" as Yonah wanders from place to place, taking up migrant labor, work in an armory and medicine. He befriends a number of people, including women, as he tries to find a purpose in life. At the back of his mind, he wants to take revenge on those who killed his brother. Unfortunately, the novel loses its way for several reasons. Yonah's character remains a cipher. He seems to care about Judaism occasionally, but most of the time he scarcely gives it a thought. He seems a little too nimble with everything that comes his way. He is equally adept at forging steel and performing surgery! The book does not have a strong central theme that carries it along. It meanders along slowly with Yonah as he travels from place to place, and the large cast of characters tends to become confusing after a while.

This book traces the wanderings of a Spanish Jew towards the end of the 15th century. Forced to leave his native city of Toledo after the mysterious death of first his brother, then his father, Yonah finds that he exists in limbo. He can no longer be a Jew because the King has expelled them from the country and the Inquisition has forcibly converted, or burned, those who did not leave. He cannot renounce Judaism because in his heart, he knows he must hold fast to the religion of his father. He cannot even pretend to have become a Christian, because converts are treated as second-class citizens by all--and often burned by the Inquisition as 'backsliding Jews'. On this basis,

Yonah runs from town to town, taking on jobs and even apprenticeships, but leaving as soon as he fears that his secret will be found out. Over the course of years, we see him learn and grow, from a scared kid with vengeance in his heart to a man who has had to accept his enemies as human beings, even to respect them, as he does his duty as a physician. He meets up with characters that illuminate their time and place: the gypsy dwarf who uses his gift for comedy to influence kings, the daughter of a silk merchant whose father won't let her marry a shepherd, the master armorer whose labor of love is a set of scalpels for his surgeon brother, and the inquisitor whose irrational rage turns out to have an organic cause. The main character remains true to his religious ideals, while changing with each phase of his travels, and it is a joy to witness his growth and marvel at the variety in his life. As a member of the SCA...

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