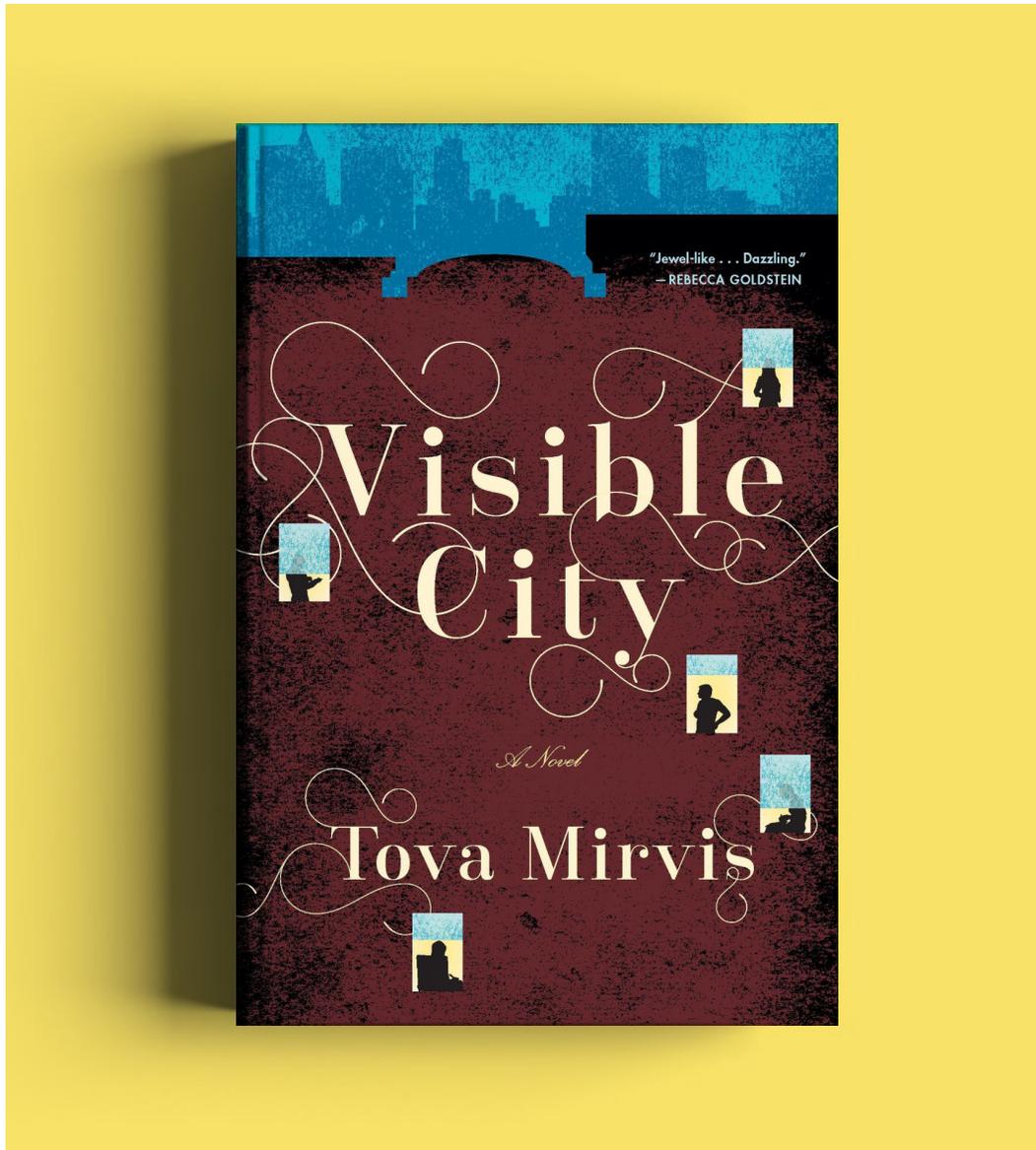


JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

Created in partnership with Tova Mirvis
Jewishbookcouncil.org



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JBC Book Clubs

Discussion Questions

These questions were created by JBC Book Clubs as a supplement to those in Tova Mirvis's own reading group guide, which can be found on her website www.tovamirvis.com.

1. Within *Visible Cities* one of the main characters, Jeremy, addresses his decision to leave his Orthodox upbringing at various points within the book. The other characters bear "Jewish" last names (e.g., Claudia Stein, Barbara Kaufman) and embody a New York, specifically Upper West Side, Jewish intellectual experience; however, they don't specifically address their Jewishness. Why do you think the author chose to, on the one hand, specifically mark her characters as Jewish in that way, but, on the other hand, leave most of their Jewish backstories to the imagination?
2. Does a character's Jewish backstory need to be discussed for it to truly feel like a Jewish character or novel to you? Why or why not? And what makes a character "Jewish" without overt mentions of their Jewish background?
3. Jeremy had been raised in an Orthodox Jewish family but no longer was observant. How do you think his past influenced his decisions in this book?
4. "...He no longer was observant; a part of him stilled believed that he could bargain his way to safety." (p. 31) How did Jeremy's fears affect him in this book (e.g., his participation with Magellan's secret group and his anxieties around his boss, Richard)?
5. "His father often talked of those who left Orthodoxy in anger, forging fiery trail of rebellion as they wondered foolishly, recklessly from the path." (p. 31) Jeremy had the realization that he became one of those people his father was speaking about. How does he deal with this realization?
6. While Jeremy struggles with his law career and the taxing hours and days he has devoted to the firm, he says: "There was never an end; the rest of their working lives would be measured by billable hours. At least his father had the Sabbath; in the last few minutes before sundown, he'd walk into the house, emptying his pockets of his wallet, his keys, his cell phone. The world was divided by this impenetrable line. The phone and fax machine might ring, but for that one day, he belonged solely to them. Now Jeremy had no mandated break. It was one of the few things about Orthodoxy that Jeremy regretted giving up, the chance to become unreachable." (p. 88) How does this affect Jeremy's family life? What does he do to create divisions in his life throughout the course of the book? Is he successful? Is he fulfilled by his decisions in the end? What role does the Sabbath play in your own life? How do you choose to divide the Sabbath from the rest of your week?
7. Given the intersecting lives of the characters in *Visible City* the words fate and beshert (soulmate) come to mind. Do you believe in either of these concepts and what role do you think they play in the book, if any?
8. There is an obsession within the book with windows and glass. In Judaism, when we think of glass, we typically think of the glass that is broken during a wedding ceremony, which has various meanings, depending on who you ask, including: a symbol of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the importance of tempering happiness with a reminder of the past; the shattering of your soul and the link between you and your soul mate before you were born; relationships are like glass—once they are broken they are very hard to put back together the

same way; Like broken glass, the promises made by the bride and groom are irrevocable, etc. Contrast that with what you think the author was trying to do with glass in her novel? Think about the various times the author references glass or windows and what it means for glass to be whole versus shattered.

9. In *Visible City*, the author portrays various individuals in struggling relationships. Many of these individuals have accepted certain shortcomings in their relationships and choose not talk about them, rather than do anything to fix their circumstances. By the book's end, the characters are left in various stages of healing their relationship or leaving their significant other. Think about yourself. Does this reflect what you've seen around you?

10. Claudia and Jeremy are both fascinated by the beauty of being in church. What do you think the meaning is behind these two Jewish characters being drawn to that particular space. Do you think it's purely architectural and beauty or do you think there is something more?

Yellow Cupcakes

Yields 12 Cupcakes

Unsurprisingly, reading this book made us hungry for cupcakes! You can frost all of them yourself, or you can pull a Wendy and let your book clubbers frost their own cupcakes when they arrive —just don't be too critical of their creations!

Ingredients

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1 1/4 teaspoons baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 stick unsalted butter, softened
1 cup sugar
2 large eggs, at room temperature
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
2/3 cup whole milk, at room temperature
Different colored frostings

1. Preheat your oven to 350 degrees and line a 12-cup muffin pan with liners.
2. Whisk the flour, baking powder, and salt together in a bowl. Leave to the side until step 5.
3. Beat the butter and sugar in a stand mixer (use the paddle attachment) on medium-high speed until fluffy. This should take about 4 minutes.
4. Beat in the eggs one at a time and scrape down the bowl as you go. Beat in the vanilla. Reduce your mixer speed to medium low.
5. Beat in half the flour mixture from step 1, then add the milk, and then add in the second half of flour mixture until just combined.
6. Divide batter between your muffin caps and fill each one three-quarters of the way full.
7. Bake until a toothpick can be inserted into the middle of the cupcake and come out clean. This should take about 18-20 minutes. Be sure to rotate the pan halfway through the cooking time.
8. Once your toothpick is clean, remove the pan from the oven and let cool for 5 minutes. Once cool, move cupcakes to a rack to cool completely.
9. Frost away!

Black and White Cookies

Yields 2 Dozen Large Cookies

Ingredients

- 1 3/4 cups granulated sugar
- 1 cup unsalted butter (2 sticks), at room temperature
- 4 large eggs, at room temperature
- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/4 teaspoon lemon extract
- 2 1/2 cups cake flour
- 2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 4 cups confectioners' sugar

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Spray 2 baking sheets with nonstick spray, or line with parchment paper.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine sugar and butter. Mix by machine or hand until fluffy. Add eggs, milk, vanilla extract, and lemon extracts. Mix until smooth (and be sure to scrape the edges of your bowl!).

What book club about New York Jewish Upper West Siders would be complete without black and white cookies? You could probably pick up a batch at the store (or online), but it's much more fun (and easy) to make your own!

3. In medium bowl, combine cake flour, all-purpose flour, baking powder and salt. Stir until mixed. Add dry mixture to the wet mixture in batches. Remember to stir well after each addition. Using a spoon (a soup spoon would be best), place heaping spoonfuls of the dough 2 inches apart on the baking sheets. Bake until edges begin to brown, 18 to 20 minutes. Let the cookies cool completely.

4. Pour confectioners' sugar in a large mixing bowl that's heat-safe. Boil a cup or so of water in a small pot and then gradually stir the boiling water into the sugar to make a thick, spreadable mixture. (Note: you would rather have your frosting be too thick than too thin.)

5. Use the frosting to frost a half side of each cookie.

6. Put the rest of the frosting (about half) on top of a double-boiler. (If the bowl you've been using is heat-safe, you can also put that bowl on top of a pot with simmering water to create your own double-boiler affect.) Stir in the chocolate and the light corn syrup until the chocolate has melted. Once the chocolate is melted and frosting is smooth, turn off the heat, but leave the frosting over the hot water so that it remains soft and spreadable.

7. Use a brush to frost the second, unfrosted half of your cookie.

8. Let dry and store in an airtight container.

Visiting Scribe Essays by Tova Mirvis

Jewish Book Council's Visiting Scribe series appears each week on the JBC blog *The ProsenPeople*. Tova Mirvis wrote the following three pieces for the series.

Walls, Windows, Doors

For me, writing fiction always begins with curiosity about other people: what are they really thinking but not saying? What does it feel like to live inside someone else's body?

I trace this curiosity, in part, to my Orthodox upbringing – to the feeling that people (or was it just me?) were thinking things they were not saying, that there existed for many a shadow inner life that did not align with the outer one. There, tucked away under a hat, walled inside the private domain, were the feelings not allowed into the light. So much had to be encased, or run past the internal censor before it could be said. Everywhere, the sense that you were being watched, evaluated, judged. So few places where the inner experience – messy, complicated, impolite – could be revealed.

But in a novel: here, finally, there is freedom and access. The walls give way to windows. Here, what people really think, say, feel. In life, how many of us walk around with no trespassing signs affixed to our bodies? But in a novel we enter into characters who stray and fear and lie and love and seethe and desire, that great messy stew of what it means to be human. Real empathy comes not from concealment but from revealing. We hide out truest selves for fear of what others will say, yet in those messy spaces we are, however ironically, most sympathetic.

This chance to peer into others is what makes me read, and what makes me write. I've always thought of the novelist as a kind of voyeur – a job which requires you to assemble pieces of other people's lives

into a larger whole.

In *Visible City*, my third novel, I started with a young mother who watches her neighbors out the window, catching snippets of their lives. In the city, we live a combination of anonymity and intimacy. We watch but act as though we don't see one another, thus allowing this shadowy dance to continue without becoming overly exposing and invasive. So much around us is packaged and covered. Here, the chance to see one another unrehearsed. To escape our own lonely nights, to pretend as though we occupy other lives.

But at the same time, in all those views out the window, surely we are seeing not just others but ourselves. As I was writing, I was fascinated by the question of whether we can watch and remain unchanged. In my novel, my main character is ultimately not content to just watch. Watching breeds the desire for something more. Doors open and she becomes entangled in the lives of those she watches. But even if we are never caught watching, even if we never walk through our own doors, we are still changed. When we see into other people, we grow wider, more empathic.

The City Below

I started writing *Visible City* in the weeks after moving from the Upper West Side of Manhattan to the suburbs of Boston. More than anything, I missed walking in the city, down Broadway, up Columbus, where there was always the chance of something interesting happening.

In the suburbs, I felt a kind of sensory deprivation. I still walked, to the library a few blocks away, to the town center that was half a mile from my house, but there was little to look at, no one I might pass: just houses, just cars.

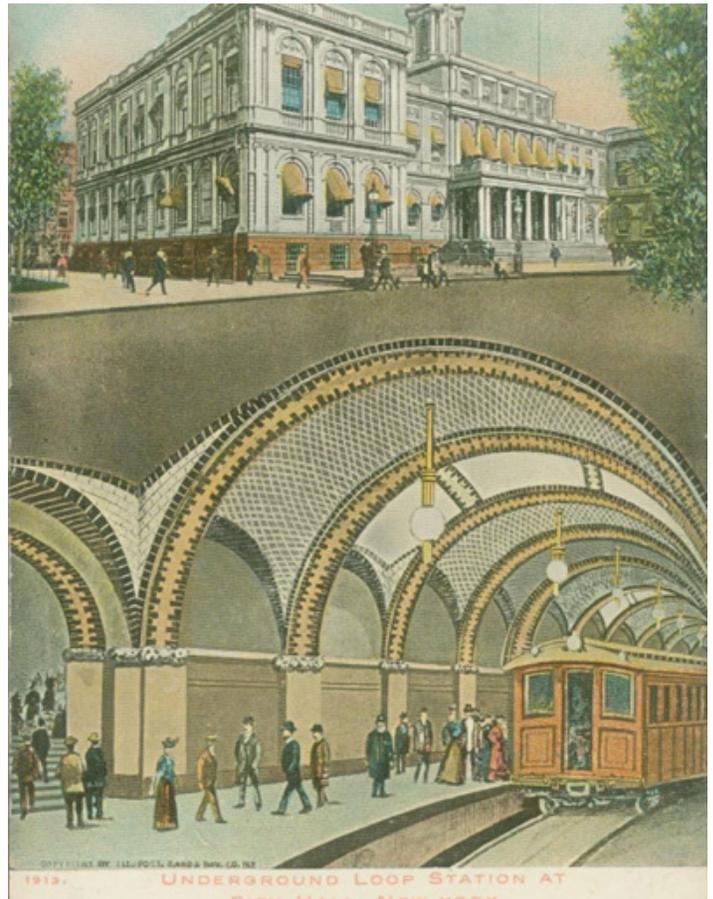
On every visit I made back to New York, I felt my eyes regaining a wider stance. I was like a tourist, always looking up. Once I started writing about the city, my homesickness eased. When I wrote, I could still be on my beloved streets, still walking as I always had.

But as home as I felt, there was no denying the fact that the city I was writing about was changing – new buildings were going up, stores were changing, the people I knew moving away. The city I was writing about was my particular version of a place that comes in millions of versions. Each city dweller occupies a different place. We all navigate our own internal maps. In addition to the sights we see around us, there are parts of the city that exist in our memories: those old buildings that once stood, torn down to make way for something new. The people who occupied our apartments before us, leaving behind tiny traces.

And there are also parts of the city buried out of sight. As I wrote *Visible City*, I became fascinated with the idea of yet another version of the city that lay below, the old “ghost” subway stations which are no longer in use but still intact. The stacks beneath the New York Public Library, what used to be the water system of the Croton Aqueduct. The labyrinths beneath Grand Central. The steam pipes and atomic tunnels beneath Columbia University. The unused Amtrak tunnels under Riverside Park.

As a novelist, the metaphors were inescapable: what parts of ourselves are buried too? Can those closed-off parts ever come above ground, become visible?

There seemed to me too to be something very Jewish about the notion that the past remains a part of who we are, and in this case, physically so. As I wrote, I thought often about the different archaeological sites I'd visited in Israel, the excavations underneath Jerusalem's Old City or in the town of Bet Sha'an. Here



was the Manhattan version of these ancient sites.

Even in a place so bustling, so modern, the physical remnants of the past were close by.

I researched urban explorers who snuck into these sealed off spaces. I visited City Hall Station – which is fleetingly visible if you stay on the 6 train after the last stop and is accessible by MTA tours a few times a year. Each time I went back to New York, I rode the 6 train, staying on for this glimpse of the grand stairway, the red and green tiles.

What is the allure of gaining entrance to these closed off spaces? What are these urban explorers in search of? A place, amid the crowds and congestion, that we can think of as being all our own. A view we share with no one. A feeling that we alone have discovered something new.

Stained Glass

How is this book different from all your other books?

The most obvious answer: in *Visible City*, there are no description of Shabbat or shul, little grappling with

religion and community. My other novels, *The Ladies Auxiliary* and *The Outside World*, were clearly Jewish novels. My subject matter was steeped in questions of Jewish belonging and identity, belief and doubt. In the ongoing panel discussion debates about who is or isn't a Jewish writer, I always felt comfortable saying I was certainly one. I didn't feel the label as limiting, didn't think it prescribed me in any way, but it did describe the place I was writing from, the world from which my imagination sprung.

There was no clear cut choice then, back when I was writing my first two books, to write a specifically Jewish novel. I wrote from what moved me, preoccupied me, fascinated me. I wrote out of my own grappling with my Orthodox Jewish community, a world which has shaped so much of who I am. My Jewish self has always been inextricable from my writing self.

And then here too, when I started writing *Visible City*, there was no explicit decision to write a different kind of book, no moment when I decided I was going to write a book with less Jewish content. I started *Visible City* without being sure where I was going. Each piece led me to the next, one interest kindling another, one character creating the need for another.

There were Jewish parts that I arrived at along the way – one character was raised Orthodox but no longer is and this leave-taking impacts the choices he makes in the novel. Throughout the book, many of my characters are Jewish, though this isn't mentioned explicitly. (Academics, lawyers and therapists on the Upper West Side. You don't need to tell us that they are Jewish. We know! Said one of my early readers.)

For a time, I thought that the book would round some bend, become more specifically Jewish. But as the months and then the years of writing went by, the book continued to take me in different directions. Every book is a surprise, to the writer as much as to the reader. I arrived at underground explorers, historical preservation. I arrived at stained glass windows, an art form I'd always associated with churches

and which I was little interested in. But now, I fell in love: the abundance of color, the intricacy of the work, the varying colors illuminated depending on how the light shines through.

In a novel too, there are the parts that more easily catch the light, parts that are less clearly evident. Even in a novel that is ostensibly about other things, where my Jewish identity and interests are less prominent, I feel the Jewish part of myself present here as well.

In particular, I see it here in my interest in the way the individual relates to the group, in the way we shape ourselves to match outside expectations. But more than that, on the instinctive gut level from which writers write, my Jewishness is part of everything I write. It's entrenched inside me, a permanent part of my eye even as I look out at other worlds. All of us, we write from the mix of shapes and colors inside us, the mosaic of our personal and family histories, from our own experiences and from the experiences that live in our imaginations. Like the stained glass windows I've come to love, a novel is an assemblage of blazing colors, the individual pieces of who we are visible at different times, depending on the light.

Interview with Tova Mirvis

by Adam Rovner

Adam Rovner: Some reviewers of *Visible City* found the novel to be pessimistic because it depicts failed relationships. Can you discuss your own sense of whether *Visible City* was optimistic or pessimistic?

Tova Mirvis: I wanted to write about real life and I don't think we divide real life into optimistic and pessimistic. Life has its ups and downs. The hard parts and good parts are all intertwined. I felt that the book was about the possibility of change. At the beginning of the book, a lot of the characters are in a state of paralysis, but what I think is amazing about life are those openings—those windows—where we can and do make a change.

AR: Speaking of windows, a central plotline in *Visible City* concerns the search for a lost masterpiece of stained glass by American artist John LaFarge (1835-1910). Stained glass seems to me to be an especially Christian art form. I always associate stained glass windows with churches, even though synagogues have them as well. For a writer who is so steeped in Jewish tradition, why did the motif of stained glass attract you?

TM: I have those same associations! Stained glass was probably one of my least favorite areas of art, ironically. I got interested in stained glass because of my ex-husband. That was how I learned about John LaFarge. There are stained glass windows that LaFarge made near Boston that I went to see. They are huge and stunning. You can look at those windows as a whole, but you can also look at each individual piece of glass and get a sense of how they were constructed

to be a part of this massive work. It made me think about novel writing and I said: "That's what I'm trying to do, to put all my little pieces together." And so I developed this love for stained glass.

AR: Jeremy is one of two characters in *Visible City* who searches for the lost LaFarge window. He's intriguing because he has left the Orthodox Jewish world. At one point in the novel there's a lament from Jeremy's perspective about the loss of Shabbat observance. Why was Jeremy's abandonment of tradition so crucial to the novel?

TM: His story felt important to me because I was interested in what happens when we make change. I felt like the idea that we can change our lives doesn't tell the whole story, because of course we bring the past with us. I was writing a book about physical objects that were left behind in the city—stained glass windows that are walled up, or [abandoned] subway stations—and then I thought about the parts of our own past that are sort of emotional ghost stations.

Even when you make a change, even when you want that change, there is still regret and loss. I felt like Shabbat was an example where you view time differently, and having some experience with lawyers myself, every second can be taken up by work. But Shabbat is kept separate. By leaving that behind, Jeremy no longer had the feeling that at least for those twenty-five hours, his time was his own.

AR: Would it be fair to say that *Visible City* may be even more personal a novel than either of your previous books?

TM: *Visible City* was hewn out of my own need for change, my own emotional trajectory. It took ten years [to write], which I can't really believe. [...] It took a lot of time and a lot of soul-searching to figure out how to finish this book. Ultimately, I feel like I had to be willing to unleash the characters and write a book where people make changes. I think I had to come to learn that people do make changes, do take action. I had to be willing to let that happen, both in my own life and for the characters.

AR: Can you let us in on what you're working on next?

TM: I'm working on a memoir, which is new for me. I wrote an essay that was in *The New York Times* about my divorce that will be the first chapter. Writing [that essay] was not the emotional part—putting it out there was.

But I ended up getting a few hundred emails from strangers and it was so nice to have people share their own stories of change, of divorce, and of religion. There was this feeling that I'm telling a story that other people experience also. So now I'm writing a book—the tentative title is *The Book of Separation*, which is a translation from the [biblical] Hebrew term for a divorce document: sefer kritut.

I'm writing about how you make changes after having lived in a certain world, what you leave behind, and what it means to recreate you own sense of community or belonging that's different from what you're accustomed to. I have to turn it in December of 2015. That scares me because I'm used to the ten-year plan, so I'm hard at work.

Adam Rovner is an associate professor of English and Jewish Literature at the University of Denver. He is the author of *In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands before Israel* (NYU Press), a narrative history of efforts to establish Jewish homelands across the globe.

Recommended Reading

Additional Reading

Seize the Day by Saul Bellow

Scribblers on the Roof: Contemporary American Jewish Fiction by Melvin Jules Bukiet; David G. Roskies, eds.

The Museum of Extraordinary Things by Alice Hoffman

You Should Have Known by Jean Hanff Korelitz

Ellington Boulevard: A Novel in A-Flat by Adam Langer

Breakable You and Florence Gordon by Brian Morton

The Hidden of Things: Twelve Stories of Love & Longing by Yael Unterman

Tova Mirvis Reading List

Loved *Visible City* and looking to continue your Tova Mirvis education? Lucky for you, she has two more books for you to add to your reading list! Find all three of her titles below.



Tova Mirvis is the author of three novels, *Visible City*, *The Outside World* and *The Ladies Auxiliary*, which was a national bestseller. Her essays have appeared in various anthologies and newspapers including *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe Magazine*, and *Poets and Writers*, and her fiction has been broadcast on National Public Radio. She lives in Newton, MA with her three children.

JBC Book Clubs, a program of Jewish Book Council, provides resources and support for book clubs interested in reading books of Jewish interest. On the Jewish Book Council website, find thousands of book reviews, discussion questions and discussion guides, thematic reading lists, and more. JBC Book Clubs is a one-stop shop to build and enhance your book club's conversations—let us guide you on your literary journey.

Jewish Book Council, with roots dating back to 1925, is the only nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Jewish-interest literature. For nearly 70 years, we have supported and celebrated Jewish authors and books, and used literature to bring people together for meaningful discussions around Jewish life, identity, and culture.

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