



The Gilded Chamber: A Novel of Queen Esther

By *Rebecca Kohn*



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For centuries her name has been a byword for feminine beauty, guile, and wisdom. This sweeping, meticulously researched novel restores Esther to her full, complex humanity while reanimating the glittering Persian empire in which her story unfolded. Esther comes to that land as a terrified Jewish orphan betrothed to her cousin, a well-connected courtier. She finds a world racked by intrigue and unfathomable hatreds and realizes that the only way to survive is to win the heart of its king. Passionate, suspenseful, and historically authentic, **The Gilded Chamber** illuminates the dilemma of a woman torn between her heart and her sense of duty, resulting in pure narrative enchantment.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

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

From Publishers Weekly

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.

From Booklist

With the success of *The Red Tent* (1997), the women of the Bible became fair game for writers of historical fiction. This novel about Esther is grounded in its biblical source material even as it twists a tale all its own. Esther's story is evocatively and sensuously told. Adhering closely in outline to the biblical book of Esther, the basis for the Jewish holiday of Purim, first-novelist Kohn embellishes the material with plenty of erotic detail from Esther's life in the chamber of concubines, where she awaits her moment to be deflowered by King Xerxes. This seems like a well-crafted embellishment of a familiar story. Kohn makes the most of the inherent drama and romance in the Esther saga: a young woman sacrificing herself to save her people, complete with plenty of palace intrigue and decadence. There's a little bit of every genre here, from suspense to adventure to romance to women's fiction. *Ilene Cooper*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Josie Garcia:

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