



The Last Jew: A Novel of The Spanish Inquisition

By Noah Gordon

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The Last Jew: A Novel of The Spanish Inquisition By Noah Gordon

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.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Set in Spain under the Inquisition, this latest big historical novel from Gordon (*Shaman*; *The Rabbi*) follows the adventures of young Yonah Helkias as he stays true to his Jewish faith, escapes from misadventures and finds love. In Toledo, in 1489, a precious reliquary of a Christian saint, crafted by Yonah's silversmith father, disappears; Yonah's older brother, who was delivering the relic, is found dead; and compassionate physician Bernardo Espina begins to investigate the theft and murder. Meanwhile, the Inquisition starts to target Jews, including conversos like Espina (Jews by birth who have entered the Catholic church). The bulk of the novel takes place three years later, when the deadline for all Jews to leave Spain has arrived. Yonah, aged 13, joins thousands of his co-religionists headed for Spanish borders and ports, but instead of departing, Yonah remains behind. After witnessing Espina's death in an auto-da-fé, Yonah leads a fugitive existence as a farmer, a shepherd, a cathedral laborer, a pot repairer, a seaman and, finally, as an apprentice armorer under the demanding master Manuel Fierro. Delivering armor, he returns to Toledo, where he bargains with his family's persecutors to escape a dangerous rendezvous with relic smugglers. Then Yonah's master is fatally double-crossed; after avenging him, Yonah heads to Saragossa, where Fierro's brother trains him to become like the heroes of Gordon's *The Physician* and *Shaman* a doctor. Yonah changes his name to Ramon Callico, marries a woman who knows his secret, but never gives up his desire to restore Espina's honor to his son, the stolen relic to the Church or his own soul to Judaism. Gordon has earned an international audience for his impressively documented historical narratives, his compassion for the trials of immigrants and his intricate descriptions of Renaissance crafts. Through a crowded landscape of characters and incidents, he illuminates the choices history forces on individuals and, not incidentally, creates a grand, informative adventure and a completely engaging, unsentimental portrait of a turbulent time. (Aug.)

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From School Library Journal

YA—During the Spanish Inquisition, a Jew had only two choices: flee the country or convert to Catholicism. The Toledano family decides to flee, but before they can leave, their home is burned by a mob, and only 16-year-old Yonah is left in Toledo. Persuaded that his father's death and that of his older brother three years earlier were caused by the same man, the teen flees on the family's burro and begins the life of a wanderer, a fugitive who changes his name and pretends to be converted. He works as a shepherd in the hills, as a deckhand on ships trading along the Spanish coast, and finally as an apprentice to a physician in Saragossa. After the death of his mentor, Yonah takes over the practice and becomes well-known and respected. On a trip north, he stumbles on a remote and beautiful valley settled by conversos like himself. There he falls in love with a young widow and the two return to Saragossa and make a life together, ostensibly Christians, but secretly Jews. Finally confronting the cleric responsible for the murder of his father and brother, the wandering Jew finds peace at last. This exciting tale of 16th-century Spain has a mystery involving a stolen reliquary, a sinister Inquisitor, and a host of colorful characters. Most of all, though, it is the story of a resourceful and courageous young man determined to remain faithful to his religion.

Molly Connally, Kings Park Library, Fairfax County, VA

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From Library Journal

The impact of the Inquisition and the Catholic Church on the lives of Spanish Jews in the late 15th and early 16th centuries is the subject of this latest novel from Gordon (*Matters of Choice*). Young Yonah ben Helikes, son of a Toledo silversmith, watches in horror as hundreds of thousands of Jews are given the options of converting to Christianity, leaving Spain, or facing the murderous violence of a population inspired to hatred

by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. After his father and younger brother is killed, Yonah wanders through Spain, eluding agents of the Inquisition while trying to keep his Jewish faith intact. He puts his silversmith talents to good use by working at an armory and later gains the knowledge and skill of a physician. As Yonah matures, falls in love, and marries, he gradually puts together the missing pieces of his life and confronts the deaths of his relatives. Gordon is a natural storyteller, and, given the novel's fascinating setting and a more-than-likable hero, this superior historical novel should have a place in all libraries.

Nancy Pearl, Washington Ctr. For the Book, Seattle

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Nancy Wiersma:

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