

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

# *The* BOOK *of* ESTHER

BY EMILY BARTON



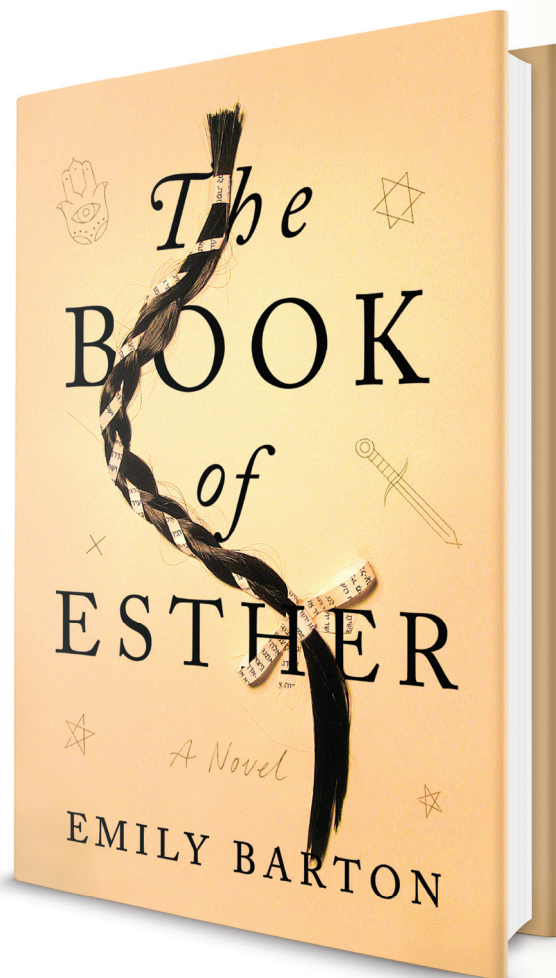
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WHAT IF AN EMPIRE OF JEWISH WARRIORS THAT REALLY EXISTED IN THE MIDDLE AGES HAD NEVER FALLEN—AND WAS THE ONLY THING STANDING BETWEEN HITLER AND HIS CONQUEST OF RUSSIA?

Eastern Europe, August 1942. After years of Jewish refugees streaming across the border from Europa, fleeing the war, Germania launches its siege of Khazaria. Only Esther, the daughter of the nation's chief policy adviser, sees the ominous implications of Germania's disregard for Jewish lives. Only she realizes that this isn't just another war but an existential threat.

Before daybreak one fateful morning, Esther embarks on a perilous journey across the open steppe to seek a fabled village of kabbalists who may hold the key to her destiny . . . and Khazaria's existence.

*The Book of Esther* is a profound saga of war, technology, mysticism, power, and faith. This novel—simultaneously a steampunk Joan of Arc and a genre-bending tale of a counterfactual Jewish state—is a stunning achievement. Reminiscent of Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, *The Book of Esther* reaffirms Barton's place as one of her generation's most gifted storytellers.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *The Book of Esther* creatively blends a reimagined WWII political backdrop, a steampunk (or dieselpunk) fantasy landscape, a Joan of Arc character, commentary on the role of women in Judaism, historical Khazars brought forward into the twentieth century, and the bones of the story of Esther from the Bible. What did you make of the result? Did this book remind you of other recent novels that reimagine history?
2. Before reading *The Book of Esther*, were you familiar with the biblical story of Esther and the Jewish festival of Purim? If not, what have you learned since reading this book? In what ways does this Esther remind you of her biblical counterpart, and in what ways does she surprise you?

3. When Esther's father refuses to allow her a say in planning Khazaria's defense, Esther disobeys him and runs away from home with Itakh. Do you think she was right to follow her own moral compass, even though it meant defying her father? What would you have done in her shoes?
4. Amit reveals a secret to Esther and Itakh about his past. How do you think *The Book of Esther* contributes to our contemporary conversation surrounding LGBTQ issues?
5. Both Amit and Esther take very different paths to achieving goals that seemed out of reach because of their gender. Who do you think is more successful? More transgressive? And were you surprised that Amit is often inflexible about "the way things are done" in light of his secret?
6. How do you feel about the love triangle between Esther, Shimon, and Amit? What do you make of the nature of Esther's relationship with Amit?
7. What significance does Esther's encounter with the *volkelake* hold? Why does it sway other characters' opinions of her?
8. Seleme and the golems display wills of their own although they are manmade. Esther struggles with understanding their roles in the world, as well as their relationships to herself, to her fellow humans, and to God. How did you feel about her empathy toward the golems and mechanical horses? Did you, like Esther, wonder whether they might have souls or spirits of some kind?
9. Itakh is a slave and has far fewer opportunities than Esther, even though he is considered a "son" of the household. Over time, Esther comes to believe that Khazaria's system of slavery (which differs from more typical ways we understand slavery in our world) is unfair. Do you think that she will act on this new realization after the war ends? Do you think she will be able to make a difference?
10. Is it important that Esther and the other principal characters in this story are young people? Why or why not? If you think their age is important, what role do you think it plays in shaping the narrative?
11. Esther and Shimon break tradition by working on the Sabbath, saying that war makes it necessary and therefore allowable. Others, like some of the refugees, strongly disagree. Who would you side with? Can you think of any moral codes or religious observances you would bend or break in extreme circumstances?
12. If you are at all familiar with contemporary Jewish religious practices, what differences do you notice between those and what the various Jewish characters practice in the book? How does this fictional Judaism reflect on the real world? In writing about a somewhat different form of Judaism, is Barton engaged in a sort of modern-day midrash (traditionally, the body of texts that explicate Torah)?
13. Why do you think Barton chose to end this book where it does? Do you think this choice affects the novel's thematic meaning?



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# AN INTERVIEW WITH EMILY BARTON

## AUTHOR OF *THE BOOK OF ESTHER*

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### 1. *The Book of Esther's setting is truly unique. What inspired you to conjure up this vision?*

Years ago, when my husband, Tom, converted to Judaism, he read Rabbi David Max Eichorn's *Conversion to Judaism: A History and Analysis*. The title might not sound so sexy, but the book was full of wonders. I learned about Uganda's Abayudaya, Russian Subbotniks, and Turkic warrior Jews on horseback: the Khazars. I didn't know how much I'd kept thinking about them until a few years later, when Tom dared me to write a 50,000-word potboiler in a month (it's a long story), and my immediate response was basically, "You're on. I'm doing Khazars vs. Nazis." And when I sat down to write, the physical world of Atil and the steppe sprang to life immediately in my mind. I still had research to do, but the genesis felt organic.

### 2. *What inspired you to bring Esther (of Purim fame) to life in such a new way?*

I admire the biblical Esther and the biblical Judith for similar reasons. Although in Caravaggio's painting, Judith looks slightly grossed out as she slices off Holofernes's head; you just know she was a sword-wielding badass. So was Esther. She's smart, and she uses her beauty to get things done, and for the benefit of other people.

I also partly chose this name to honor another woman I greatly admire: my mother, whose Hebrew name was Esther.

### 3. *What is your connection with Judaism and how did it inform the writing of this book?*

As a child, I didn't feel much connection to Judaism. My Hebrew school teacher was cranky, the kind of teacher who shames you for giving a wrong answer; and as a Montessori kid, I felt suspicious of the idea that questions of such magnitude could even have right and wrong answers. Then, in my mid-twenties, my mother died suddenly and unexpectedly. I was completely undone by the loss. One of her Orthodox friends brought a copy of Herman Wouk's *This Is My God* to shivah for me, and I read it. Later, when I moved to New York City, I started attending a lively synagogue that happened to be down the block. For the first time, I realized that there existed a soulful, connected Judaism, self-generated and not dictated by crotchety old men. Eventually I joined a synagogue, began to learn Hebrew, and started lighting candles on Friday nights. So now, Jewish practice feels central to my identity. But it was a long road to get there.

My own practice of Judaism inspired me to think deeply about how the religious practices of *The Book of Esther's* characters might differ from each other and from the forms Judaism takes in our world. Although we know the historical Khazars were Rabbinical Jews, we know little more than that. After more than a thousand years of relative isolation, their Judaism would certainly diverge from ours. For example, I'm not 100% certain that the characters in my book are monotheists. (While contemporary Jews might invoke the Shekhinah, we definitely don't think she sits on a throne in heaven beside the Great Name.) My kind and generous rabbi read the manuscript to help make sure I hadn't unwittingly said anything that a reader might find offensive.

4. *Can you tell us a little bit more about the queer characters and storylines?*

From the beginning, I knew that Esther's quest had to involve becoming a man. At first I wrote her as a character who had always longed to escape being a woman, in part because her sexuality attracted her to women as well as men. Esther's relationships with Rukhl and Ya'el were differently inflected in those drafts, though I've always read both of those characters as straight.

But as I progressed through the novel I began to feel that, from the point of view of plot, Esther's plight would be more interesting if her goals were more at odds with her desires. In many stories of a young woman rebelling against fate, there's a stereotype that she will find fault with her future husband. I thought it could be a lot more interesting if the potential husband (Shimon) was actually a good choice for her, someone she unequivocally liked. Then her desires for herself are at odds with each other; and if you strike that flint against that rock, you get a fire.

So, although I still feel resonances of those earlier, queerer drafts in the final book, Esther ultimately fell out straight. But Amit's gender identity is more complex. I hope he will be perceived as a transpositive character. Lately, our national conversation has been full of vitriol toward trans people. In *The Book of Esther*, I try to strike the opposite note; Amit is a truly human being like us all—beautiful before God, wholly himself, and also imperfect—living out his identity to the best of his ability.

5. *Esther makes many bold and sometimes contentious choices throughout the book. Was this intentional and did you always agree with her choices?*

If Esther were my friend, cousin, or daughter, I would argue against some of her choices, try to convince her to see things in a new way. How could I not? But as a feminist—a person who supports equality and justice for all people—I consider it my duty to write strong female characters who are also imperfect. In a culture in which the “default person” remains male, people generally understand that a male character can be a good person yet have flaws. Female characters, however, are still subject to our culture's (and the patriarchy's) narrow, stereotypical views about women's roles: madonnas and whores, madwomen in the attic, etc. I have gone out of my way, in all of my novels, to write women protagonists who are strong, driven, in many ways worthy of emulation, and actually human: not perfect. *The Testament of Yves Gundron's* Ruth Blum is passionate about her work, yet not the finest anthropologist. *Brookland's* Prudence Winship is a brilliant businessperson and scientific mind, but she can be blind to other people's emotions and has difficulty reading their cues.

Esther is similarly imperfect: Because of her dedication to her vision, Esther's behavior can be headstrong and rash; she is wise but can't always access that wisdom when she needs it; she often hurts people's feelings. I wouldn't have her any other way. If a young woman of spirit and ambition reads this novel, I want her to think, “I could be just as brave,” not, “Well, I'd love to be as strong as she is, but unfortunately I'm too flawed.” We are all equally human. The question, for female characters as well as for male, is how compelling an author can make that humanity.



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# SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING FROM AUTHOR EMILY BARTON

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## BOOKS I READ FOR RESEARCH AND INSPIRATION WHILE WRITING *THE BOOK OF ESTHER*

### ***Pigeons* by Andrew D. Blechman**

I know I'm not the only person who already kind of liked them! When we lived in Brooklyn, there was one who lived on our block and seemed to know me; her looks inspired Nagehan's.

### ***The Jews of Khazaria* by Kevin Alan Brook**

This is the most up-to-date and complete nonfiction work about the historical Khazars.

### ***Gentlemen of the Road* by Michael Chabon**

This has some Khazar characters and an afterword I found inspiring.

### ***The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon**

This is an amazing work of counterfactual/alt-historical fiction—and a hard-boiled Jewish police procedural, all at the same time!

### ***Hereville* by Barry Deutsch**

This graphic novel adventure series stars an Orthodox Jewish tween. My eight-year-old also recommends it to you.

### ***The Thirteenth Tribe* by Arthur Koestler**

A seminal—and hotly contested—book about world Jewish history.

### ***The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth**

Another great counterfactual historical novel.

## BOOKS I THINK YOU SHOULD GO READ BECAUSE THEY'RE AWESOME

### ***The Last Nude* and *The Teahouse Fire* by Ellis Avery**

Avery is my Favorite Living Novelist You Might Not Have Read Yet. Her books are luscious, sexy, perfectly researched; she manages the arc of a scene and a character like nobody's business.

### ***Middlemarch* by George Eliot**

The best novel anyone has ever written: the best plotted and constructed, with the most subtle, well-rounded characters. I greatly admire Eliot's ability to empathize equally with all of her characters as she switches from one point of view to another.

### ***Visitation* by Jenny Erpenbeck, translated from German to English by Susan Bernofsky**

Continuity in novels usually centers around characters—they start out one way, and if a writer is skillful, grow into their larger selves over the course of the book—but in *Visitation*, continuity has to do with place: a particular house in East Berlin, over the bloody course of the twentieth century. *Visitation* is spooky and lovely at the same time. Because Erpenbeck writes about the horrors of the Holocaust (among other terrible twentieth-century events in Eastern Germany) from the point of view of a place instead of people, she accesses deep stores of dread and empathy, and a remarkable, stark beauty.

***Atomik Aztex* by Sesshu Foster**

I know Foster primarily as a poet, but this novel is astonishing. In it, he imagines that the Aztecs repelled the Conquistadores and went on to become the dominant world culture. So it takes place in a world—and in a prose style—governed by the Aztec concept of cyclical time; is written in an English heavily inflected by Spanish, Nahuatl, and Foster’s own poetic sensibility; and concerns a worker in a 1940s LA slaughterhouse who may also be a great Aztec warrior. I’ve never read anything else like it. I teach it all the time.

***The Buddha in the Attic* by Julie Otsuka**

Using a first-person plural narrative voice, Otsuka writes about the experience of thousands of Japanese-American women who came to the United States as brides and were later interned during World War II. Somehow, she manages to convey the experiences of a whole generation of women through unique and specific examples. I adore this book’s daring and originality.

***The Ant King* by Benjamin Rosenbaum**

If Benjamin Rosenbaum did nothing more in his life than write the story “Biographical Notes to ‘A Discourse on the Nature of Causality, with Air-Planes,’ by Benjamin Rosenbaum,” his would be, in my opinion, a life well lived. In this story (and elsewhere), he calls the writing of fiction (especially alt-historical fiction) “plausible fabulism,” and he enacts it while he explains it. In “Biographical Notes,” he seems to imagine that a) Karaism won out over Rabbinical Judaism, world historically, and b) Hinduism thus went on to become the dominant world religion; then he runs with a steampunk adventure tale from there. I love this story. I try to teach it all the time, and the students always seem really confused. So maybe you need to read it more than once to get it. But I still think you should.



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