

ODESSA

Book Club Kit



“The trees curved and twisted in a manner so human she thought they could be bodies...*portraits of my ancestors*, she thought, *or perhaps my descendants*. Or they are all me, she thought. *All the faces are mine.*”

Dear Reader,

Storytelling is an intrinsic part of Judaism. We mark each holiday by recounting our history, we read from the book of the Torah in Synagogue- we tell and retell the stories of our ancestors. Memory is precious, and the telling of these stories is how we keep our people from disappearing. In a way, writing *Odessa* was a very Jewish act. But the story my grandmother told me about our family was a difficult one, and my own research into Jewish women's experiences of the pogroms was equally as upsetting. I wanted to write a story that did their suffering justice, but didn't give in to despair.

When I was a child, my grandmother showed me a photo of my ancestor Golda, who escaped pogroms in Eastern Europe and fled to America. She told me a story about a brave young woman who journeyed to unknown lands alone. Golda, in her travel clothes and with a single piece of luggage, remained a glowing, otherworldly figure in my life, but I only had pieces of her. By the time I grew up and decided to write Golda's story, a story I finally understood had hidden dark corners and centuries of buried pain, my grandmother had Parkinson's, and I could only collect the fragments of her memory that remained. *Odessa* grew from those fragments and became its own creature, sculpted by my own research and imagination.

Judaism, at its heart, is about gratitude. Our prayers thank God for every small wonder, every single day. My grandfather's favorite prayer was called the Shechecheyanu. In the first pages of *Odessa*, Yetta's mother Frieda recites it. In essence, it means this: I am grateful to be alive. It's my father's favorite prayer now, and my mother's, my sisters', and mine. We have inherited that prayer as a thread of hope. When we come together to pray, or to celebrate, or to remember, I feel that we are honoring our ancestors. I hope *Odessa* does the same, and that by continuing to tell Jewish stories, I'm keeping them alive.

-Gabrielle

Required Reading

- *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley
- *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
- *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte
- *The First Day and Other Stories* by Dvora Baron
- *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
- *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier
- *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter
- *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang
- *Kindred* by Octavia Butler
- *The Shawl* by Cynthia Ozick
- *I Who Have Never Known Men* by Jacqueline Harpman
- *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke
- *The Dark Dark* by Samantha Hunt
- *The Safekeep* by Yael Van Der Wouden
- *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova

Discussion Questions

Warning: these questions contain spoilers for *Odessa*.

1

Think of how we are introduced to each character. Freída with Miriam in the water, Mordechai alone in his furniture shop, and Yetta with Benyamin in a field. How did these settings frame each protagonist's story?

2

During the first attack, Yetta trusts Alexei. Why does she place her trust in him while witnessing his violence?

3

Mordechai believes that he will be the chosen one to save his family and his community. How does that conviction slip over time?

4

Did either version of Yetta—the golem or the dybbuk—seem more human to you? Why?

5

When the dybbuk seems so bent on the destruction of the golem, what do you make of the moment she tries to protect the golem from Benyamin?

6

How does Yetta become able to break free from the control of Mordechai's words?

Discussion Questions

7

Discuss the motif of water in the text. For instance, we begin in the mikvah and end with a transatlantic voyage. What is the significance of this story starting and ending this way?

8

How did you respond to Frieda's final decision to leave, along with Ephraim and the boxed Yetta?

9

If you imagine Yetta waking in the attic in the very last pages, facing a new generation, what do you think happens next?

10

What image or scene from the novel has lingered with you most?

Bonus Question

In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the creature declares: "Beware; for I am fearless, and therefore powerful." How does this declaration relate to the attitudes of both the dybbuk and the golem?

Thank you for reading ODESSA

Need more? Listen to our *Odessa* inspired Spotify playlist! (We promise it's full of female rage, heartache, and power).

