

The Red Tent

by Anita Diamant

About the Book

Her name is Dinah. In the Bible, her life is only hinted at in a brief and violent detour within the more familiar chapters of the Book of Genesis that are about her father, Jacob, and his dozen sons. Told in Dinah's voice, this novel reveals the traditions and turmoils of ancient womanhood—the world of the red tent. It begins with the story of her mothers—Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah—the four wives of Jacob. They love Dinah and give her gifts that sustain her through a hard-working youth, a calling to midwifery, and a new home in a foreign land. Dinah's story reaches out from a remarkable period of early history and creates an intimate connection with the past. Deeply affecting, *The Red Tent* combines rich storytelling with a valuable achievement in modern fiction: a new view of biblical women's society.

Praise for the Book

"[A] vivid evocation of the world of Old Testament women . . . The red tent becomes a symbol of womanly strength, love, and wisdom . . . Diamant succeeds admirably in depicting the lives of women in the age that engendered our civilization and our most enduring values."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"By giving a voice to Dinah, one of the silent female characters in Genesis, the novel has struck a chord with women who may have felt left out of biblical history. It celebrates mothers and daughters and the mysteries of the life cycle."

—*The Los Angeles Times*

"Diamant vividly conjures up the ancient world of caravans, shepherds, farmers, midwives, slaves, and artisans . . . her Dinah is a compelling narrator that has timeless resonance."

—*Merle Rubin, Christian Science Monitor*

Courtesy of Macmillan

About the Author

Title: Anita Diamant

American Novelist (1951 -)

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Personal Information

Born June 27, 1951; daughter of Maurice and Helene Diamant; married Jim Ball (in public relations), June 12, 1983; children: Emilia. Education: Washington University, St. Louis, MO, B.A. (comparative literature), 1973; State University of New York at Binghamton, M.A. (English), 1975. Memberships: Phi Beta Kappa. Addresses: Agent: c/o Author Mail, Scribner, 27500 Drake Rd., Farmington Hills, MI 48075. E-mail: anitaweb@aol.com.

Career

Writer. *Equal Times*, editor, 1977-78; *Boston Phoenix*, columnist and staff writer, 1980-83; *Boston*, senior staff writer, 1986-88; WBUR-FM Radio, commentator, 1981-82; *New England Monthly*, contributing editor, 1984-86; *Boston Globe* magazine, columnist, 1988--; *Parenting*, columnist, 1993-95; Radcliffe College, honorary visiting scholar at Schlesinger Library, 1994-95; Brandeis University, visiting scholar in Women's Studies Department, 1995-96.

Awards

Clarion Award, 1981; New England Women's Press Association, Best Columnist Award, 1982, Award of Excellence, 1983; awards from Massachusetts Division, American Cancer Society, 1987, 1988; fellow, Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families, 1994; Boston Author's Club Book of the Year award, 1988, Significant Jewish Book of the Year, *Reform Judaism* magazine, 1999, and Booksense Book of the Year, 2001, all for *The Red Tent*; Literary Light award, Boston Public Library, 2003.

Works

Writings

- *The New Jewish Wedding*, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1985, revised edition, 2001.

- *The Jewish Baby Book*, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1988, published as *The New Jewish Baby Book: Names, Ceremonies, Customs--A Guide for Today's Families*, Jewish Lights Publishing (Woodstock, VT), 1994.
- *What to Name Your Jewish Baby*, Simon & Schuster (New York, NY), 1989.
- (With Howard Cooper) *Living a Jewish Life*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1991.
- *Bible Baby Names: Spiritual Choices from Judeo-Christian Tradition*, Jewish Lights Publishing (Woodstock, VT), 1996.
- *Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and for their Family and Friends*, Schocken Books (New York, NY), 1997.
- *The Red Tent*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn As a Jew*, Schocken Books (New York, NY), 1998.
- (With Karen Kushner) *How to be a Jewish Parent: A Practical Handbook for Family Life*, Schocken Books (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Good Harbor: A Novel*, Scribner (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Pitching My Tent: On Marriage, Motherhood, Friendship, and Other Leaps of Faith*, Scribner (New York, NY), 2003.

Contributor to periodicals, including *New England Monthly*, *Sesame Street Parents*, *Yankee*, *Hadassah*, and *McCall's*.

Works in Progress

A third novel.

“Sidelights”

Anita Diamant had penned several well-received nonfiction books about issues in modern Jewish culture before she found great word-of-mouth success with her first novel, 1997's *The Red Tent*. The book adds great dimension to the Biblical story of Dinah, overlooked half-sister to the founders of the twelve tribes of Israel, who is known only to have been raped in the book of Genesis. Diamant imagines the story in Dinah's own words, from her youth with her mother and her aunts, all married to the Biblical patriarch Jacob, to the willing relationship with a Canaanite prince that her brothers term "rape," to her subsequent life as a midwife in Egypt. The initial hardcover printing of *The Red Tent* sold modestly, and many copies of it were scheduled for destruction by the publisher, when Diamant presented them with a list of Reform Reconstructionist rabbis to whom she felt they should send the surplus copies. Her strategy worked; many such recipients of her book talked about it with their congregations, who went out and bought the novel, then recommended it to their friends and fellow book club members. Diamant's publisher repeated this tactic with a list of female clergy, who also frequently talked about and recommended the novel. As Judith Rosen reported in a 2001 article for the *Writer*, "*The Red Tent's* momentum keeps on going." Diamant followed *The Red Tent* with another novel,

Good Harbor, in 2001, and a book of personal anecdotes entitled *Pitching My Tent* two years later.

Among Diamant's factual works about Judaism is *Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and for Their Family and Friends*. This volume had personal resonance for Diamant because her husband converted to Judaism before their marriage. Ilene Cooper, reviewing *Choosing a Jewish Life* in *Booklist*, noted that "Diamant's discussion is both informative and wide-ranging." Diamant collaborated with Karen Kushner on *How to Be a Jewish Parent: A Practical Handbook for Family Life*, which a *Publishers Weekly* critic praised as an "easy-to-read guide" while mentioning that the volume is aimed at "the liberal Jewish community." Of the author's *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn As a Jew*, George Cohen concluded that "this comprehensive guide answers many of the questions that contemporary Jews may have in a time of grief." Diamant's *The New Jewish Wedding* has proved so successful with readers that she issued a revised version of it in 2001.

The Red Tent met with even better critical reception than Diamant's nonfiction. "The best fiction writers create a world and bathe us in it," began Jane Redmont, reviewing the novel in *National Catholic Reporter*, "its sounds and sights, its language and climate, the intricate relationships among its inhabitants. Anita Diamant has performed this wonderous craft." Cooper also reviewed *The Red Tent* for *Booklist*, and stated that "Diamant makes readers see there's not so very much difference between people across the eons, at least when it comes to trial and tragedy, happiness and love." According to Susannah Meadows in *Newsweek*, the novel's popularity has a great deal to do with its emphasis on the female bonding that goes on in the eponymous "tent," which is where the women go when they are ill, menstruating, or giving birth--and where they also share their stories and culture. "With its trinity of woman empowerment, God and quivering thighs, the commercial appeal of the book seems obvious," she maintained.

Though fans of *The Red Tent* have urged Diamant to take on other female figures of the Bible, she switched to a contemporary setting for 2001's *Good Harbor*. In it, two Jewish women--one a convert from Catholicism--meet in a harbor town in Massachusetts. Kathleen is in her fifties and battling breast cancer; Joyce is in her forties and battling a teenage daughter and an indifferent husband. Critics did not respond quite as well to *Good Harbor* as to *The Red Tent*, but a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer felt that the author "does make a smooth entry into the arena of contemporary women's fiction with this graceful story."

Diamant told *CA*: "I can identify five main ingredients that are part of my creative process. The first is ego. For most of my childhood, I wanted to be an actress, to get up in front of a group of people. As a columnist, that's precisely what I do. When editors tell me I have a strong 'voice,' what they are really saying is 'Boy, do you have a healthy ego!' I inherited my ego from my mother. Another ingredient is my father, who read Jack London to me as a kid. The literary part of me is my patrimony.

"The third ingredient is poetry. The first thing I published was a poem--a rather mediocre few lines about basketball playoffs. It was my first byline and, once I saw my name in print, my career as a poet was preempted by journalism. Nevertheless, of all my literary influences, Walt

Whitman is at the top of the list. My other all-time favorite poet is the Chilean, Pablo Neruda, who wrote a series of extraordinary odes to things as ordinary and elemental as a pair of wool socks, salt, and watermelon.

"When I began writing essays in 1977, I began reading essayists. Russell Baker and Calvin Trillin are constant sources of pleasure, but my idol, and the fourth ingredient in my creative soup, is Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher. She wrote, often for the *New Yorker*, about her life, her travels, and exquisitely about food. She wrote very elegantly and simply about things that matter. I like to write about food. I even spent a couple of years as a food writer for the late, lamented *New England Monthly* magazine.

"The fifth and final ingredient is feminism and, for me, feminism flows straight out of M. F. K. Fisher's explanation that the elemental truths of our lives (hunger, love, children, neighborhood) are the primary locus of power, struggle, despair, happiness--life and art. I am a product and creature of that ongoing revolution in consciousness, which shifted the world off its social axis forever.

"My career as a book author began in 1983, when I was both casting around for a book idea and planning a wedding. The books that were available on Jewish weddings did not begin to address the spiritual and cultural riches of Jewish tradition, and they were not addressed to grooms, who wanted egalitarian goals reflected in the ceremony. After my first book was published, I swore I would write no more Jewish books, but I did. Each time, I felt that a similar gap on the bookshelf needed to be filled.

"My [nonfiction] books are all about contemporary Jewish practice. Indeed, they are 'how-to' books of a sort. What makes them different from other books of this nature is the quality of the writing and an approach that is respectful of tradition, yet also respectful of the realities and insights of the present--which include, of course, the transformed status of women."

Further Readings About the Author

Periodicals

- *Book*, November-December, 2001, conversation between Anita Diamant and James Carroll, pp. 44-48.
- *Booklist*, April 15, 1997, Ilene Cooper, review of *Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and for Their Family and Friends*, p. 1366; October 1, 1997, Ilene Cooper, review of *The Red Tent*, p. 284; September 15, 1998, George Cohen, review of *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn As a Jew*, p. 175.
- *Christian Science Monitor*, October 11, 2001, Merle Rubin, "Women Who Shelter Each Other," p. 20.
- *Commentary*, December, 1998, Jon D. Levenson, review of *Saying Kaddish*, p. 74.
- *Daily Telegraph* (London), November 16, 2002, Charlotte Moore, "Her Mother's Lover, and Her Brother's."

- *Guardian* (London), March 30, 2002, Alex Clark, interview with Anita Diamant, p. 11.
- *Los Angeles Times*, April 24, 2000, Emily Dwass, "A Biblical Woman's Tale That Won Readers' Hearts," p. E1.
- *National Catholic Reporter*, May 22, 1998, Jane Redmont, review of *The Red Tent*, p. 28.
- *Newsweek*, February 5, 2001, Susannah Meadows, "Meeting under a Big 'Tent': How a Biblical Tale Became a Word-of-Mouth Phenom," p. 61.
- *Publishers Weekly*, September 11, 2000, review of *How to Be a Jewish Parent: A Practical Handbook for Family Life*, p. 87.
- *Writer*, April, 2001, Judith Rosen, "Anita Diamant's Red Tent Turns to Gold," p. 30.

Online

- *Anita Diamant Home Page*, <http://www.anitadiamant.com/> (April 29, 2003).
- *Lilith Magazine*, <http://www.lilithmag.com/> (April 29, 2003), review of *The Red Tent*.
- *Lucy's Books*, <http://www.lucysbooks.com/> (April 29, 2003) review of *The Red Tent*.

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<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=lom_kentdl>.

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Author Interview

Expressions of Faith: Best-selling author Anita Diamant shares her faith, the importance of friendships, and a sense of community, in both fact and fiction, with her readers.

by Betsy Rogers

Two defining characteristics have shaped the life and work of author and alumna Anita Diamant: She is a woman, and she is Jewish. The deep wisdom of both women's reality and Jewish tradition dominate her writing and often twine together in her books.

Take her best-selling historical novel *The Red Tent* (Picador USA, 1997), which she describes as "my imaginary jazz riff" on the biblical story of Dinah in Genesis. Diamant first considered writing a novel about Rachel and Leah—the two wives of Jacob (the "Father of Israel")—whom the Bible portrays as contentious rivals. "It occurred to me that there had to be more there," she says, "that they couldn't just be enemies in their family situation. They had to collaborate, too."

Dinah was Leah's daughter and the central character in a difficult story of alleged rape and murderous revenge. "I kept bumping up against the Dinah story," Diamant says, "and it's got such a great plot—a very sexy, violent, disturbing story. So I went with her."

As the novel unfolded, it became the story of women, their shared communal life within the larger tribal community, and their tireless efforts to knit their families together.

The Red Tent became a publishing phenomenon. Released with no advertising budget and few reviews, its audience mushroomed due to independent bookstores' support and word-of-mouth among its wildly enthusiastic readers. The novel has gone into multiple paperback printings and appears in foreign-language editions in 20 countries around the globe, from Korea to England, Lithuania to Spain. It has received rich accolades, including the "Best Fiction" selection by the independent booksellers' alliance, Booksense.

Fast-forward 3,800 years from Dinah's era to contemporary Gloucester, Massachusetts, the setting of Diamant's second novel. Though very different in time and place, *Good Harbor* (Simon & Schuster, 2001) also concerns women's relationships, this time the unfolding friendship of two women who meet after services at their synagogue. One is a graceful 59-year-old, newly diagnosed with breast cancer. The other is 42, lively, bright, and baffled by the growing distance between herself, her husband, and her daughter. As the bond between the two women grows, they help each other understand their old hurts and new crises, moving through and beyond them.

The novel illustrates what for Diamant is an important truth about women's friendships. "Culturally women's friendships have been trivialized and demonized," she says, "but we know how important and powerful these relationships are. They hold us together—and they keep our families together, too."

Before she turned to fiction, Diamant had published five books—*The New Jewish Wedding* (1985), *The New Jewish Baby Book* (1988), *Living a Jewish Life: Jewish Traditions, Customs and Values for Today's Families* (1993), *Bible Baby Names* (1996), and *Choosing a Jewish Life: A Handbook for People Converting to Judaism and for Their Families and Friends* (1997). In 1998 she wrote *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead & Mourn as a Jew*, following her father's death.

Diamant began writing nonfiction when she was engaged to be married and looking in vain for a meaningful wedding guide. Her rabbi surprised her by suggesting that she write a contemporary Jewish wedding book. *The New Jewish Baby Book* grew, as well, out of a dearth of available titles.

"Where my books differ is in the attitude toward the reader," she observes. "I don't assume the reader has much of a Jewish background, if any. I do assume that he or she is interested, intelligent, and thoughtful. I don't tell people what they should be doing. But, at the same time, I think my books do have the agenda of encouraging people to try things, and to create a Jewish practice that's meaningful and relevant."

For Diamant, writing and the topics she chooses have deep spiritual content. "One of the great joys of my tradition," she explains, "is that an extraordinarily high value is placed on learning. Learning and prayer are not totally separate categories. There's something devotional in study.

"Writing books deepened my connection, my understanding, my commitment: *Saying Kaddish*, in particular, which I wrote a year after my father died. Really, I was in awe of the psychological and psychospiritual wisdom of this ancient tradition, which asks you to sit still for a week and feel what you're feeling and to re-enter the rest of your life at a measured pace, but insists that you do re-enter it."

Her commitment to the spiritual life of her community has led her recently to establish Mayyim Hayyim: Living Waters Community Mikveh and Education Center. In Judaism, a mikveh is a ritual pool for symbolic purification and transformation. "Every religious tradition in the world uses water as a means of spiritual transformation," she points out.

Though there are mikvehs in the Boston area, where Diamant lives, she found them crowded and not conducive to reflection. "It was my dream," she says on her Web site, "to create a mikveh where time and gracious space were available for converts and their families and friends." She gathered an interested group, which grew into a "fabulous board of directors" and an ever-widening circle of initiatives in conversion, healing, spiritual renewal, and education.

"'Spirituality' is not a traditional Jewish word," she muses. "In Judaism, there's no separating the spiritual from the mundane. The notion that you're connected to something bigger than you isn't a separate category. But in American society, spirituality is part of our vocabulary, so I think there's a searching for an authentically Jewish notion of spirituality. There's a yearning for it."

Diamant's attention to making such connections also played a pivotal role during her college years. Originally an undergraduate at the University of Colorado, she transferred to Washington University as a junior. "It was a very happy transfer," she says with feeling. "I loved my two years at Wash. U." Diamant graduated with a degree in comparative literature in 1973.

She attributes much of her writing success to Harry Marten, then a young faculty member in the Department of English in Arts & Sciences. "I think I took every course he offered," Diamant says. Marten suggested graduate student Sondra Stein as a writing tutor for Diamant. "Between the two of them," she says, "they completely changed my writing. Washington University was very crucial to me." She and Stein remain close friends, and she still keeps in touch with Marten, whom she names as her favorite English professor in her latest book, a collection of essays called *Pitching My Tent* (Simon & Schuster, 2003).

Diamant's parents were both Holocaust survivors, and she readily acknowledges that history's formative power. "It is part of my personal background," she observes. "Growing up with that, I embraced a sensitivity to justice and human rights—and that informs all that I do."

Betsy Rogers is a free-lance writer based in Belleville, Illinois.

Source:

Rogers, B. (2003). Expressions of Faith: Best-selling author Anita Diamant shares her faith, the importance of friendships, and a sense of community, in both fact and fiction, with her readers. *Washington University in St. Louis Magazine* - Winter 2003. Retrieved December 03, 2009, from <http://magazine.wustl.edu/Winter03/AnitaDiamant.htm>

Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 34 and discuss how *The Red Tent* changes your perspective on Dinah's story and also on the story of Joseph that follows. Does *The Red Tent* raise questions about other women in the Bible? Does it make you want to re-read the Bible and imagine other untold stories that lay hidden between the lines?
2. Discuss the marital dynamics of Jacob's family. He has four wives; compare his relationship with each woman?
3. What do you make of the relationships among the four wives?
4. Dinah is rich in "mothers." Discuss the differences or similarities in her relationship with each woman.
5. Childbearing and childbirth are central to *The Red Tent*. How do the fertility childbearing and birthing practices differ from contemporary life? How are they similar? How do they compare with your own experiences as a mother or father?
6. Discuss Jacob's role as a father. Does he treat Dinah differently from his sons? Does he feel differently about her? If so, how?
7. Discuss Dinah's twelve brothers. Discuss their relationships with each other, with Dinah, and with Jacob and his four wives. Are they a close family?
8. Female relationships figure largely in *The Red Tent*. Discuss the importance of Inna, Tabea, Werenro, and Meryt.
9. In the novel, Rebecca is presented as an Oracle. Goddesses are venerated along with gods. What do you think of this culture, in which the Feminine has not yet been totally divorced from the Divine? How does El, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, fit into this?
10. Dinah's point of view is often one of an outsider, an observer. What effect does this have on the narrative? What effect does this have on the reader?
11. The book travels from Haran (contemporary Iraq/Syria), through Canaan and into Shechem (Israel), and into Egypt. What strikes you about the cultural differences Dinah encounters vis-à-vis food, clothing, work, and male-female relationships.
12. In *The Red Tent*, we see Dinah grow from childhood to old age. Discuss how she changes and matures. What lessons does she learn from life? If you had to pick a single word to describe the sum of her life, what word would you choose? How would Dinah describe her own life experience?