



# *The Weight of Ink*

BY RACHEL KADISH

**An intellectual and emotional jigsaw puzzle of a novel for readers of A. S. Byatt's *Possession* and Geraldine Brooks's *People of the Book***

Set in London of the 1660s and of the early twenty-first century, *The Weight of Ink* is the interwoven tale of two women of remarkable intellect: Ester Velasquez, an emigrant from Amsterdam who is permitted to scribe for a blind rabbi, just before the plague hits the city; and Helen Watt, an ailing historian with a love of Jewish history.

As the novel opens, Helen has been summoned by a former student to view a cache of seventeenth-century Jewish documents newly discovered in his home during a renovation. Enlisting the help of Aaron Levy, an American graduate student as impatient as he is charming, and in a race with another fast-moving team of historians, Helen embarks on one last project: to determine the identity of the documents' scribe, the elusive "Aleph."

Electrifying and ambitious, sweeping in scope and intimate in tone, *The Weight of Ink* is a sophisticated work of historical fiction about women separated by centuries, and the choices and sacrifices they must make in order to reconcile the life of the heart and mind.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Describing the impact of his blindness, the rabbi says to Ester, "I came to understand how much of the world was now banned from me—for my hands would never again turn the pages of a book, nor be stained with the sweet, grave weight of ink, a thing I had loved since first memory."

For the rabbi and for Ester, ink means many things—among them freedom, community, power, and danger. What does the written word mean to you? Is it as powerful today, amid all our forms of media, as it was to the rabbi and to Ester?

2. The novel opens with a quote from Shakespeare's Sonnet 71: "Nay, if you read this line, remember not / The hand that writ it".

Which characters in the novel choose to give anonymously, or without receiving any credit? Would you be willing to have your most meaningful accomplishments remain anonymous or even be attributed to others? In today's interconnected world, with privacy so hard to achieve, is there anything you would write or say if you knew your words would be anonymous?

3. In order to write, Ester betrays the rabbi's trust. Yet in her final confession Ester says, "Yet I would choose again my very same sin, though it would mean my compunction should wrack me another lifetime and beyond."

Is Ester's betrayal of the rabbi's trust forgivable? When freedom of thought and loyalty argue against each other, which should a person choose?

4. William, Manuel, and Alvaro offer Ester very different sorts of love. What does each offer her, and what sacrifice does each require? How might you answer this question for the love between Dror and Helen?

5. Both Helen and Ester fear love. How do they wrestle with this fear? Could they have made choices other than the ones they made?

6. In what ways did Aaron mature throughout the book?

7. Did the motivations of Ester, Helen, and Aaron change as the novel progressed?

8. Ester's life is shaped by the wrenching between the life of the mind and the life of the body. Can a woman today freely choose to combine love, motherhood, and the life of the mind, without unacceptable sacrifices?

9. What story do you imagine Dror would tell about his experience with Helen?

10. Ester grows up in a community of Portuguese Inquisition refugees who are fiercely focused on ensuring their safety in the "New Jerusalem" of Amsterdam; they place great importance on reviving Jewish learning and they give their harshest punishment to Spinoza for his heretical pronouncements. When Helen goes to Israel, she encounters Holocaust survivors struggling with the legacy of their losses and the need to establish safety in their new home.

In what ways are these communities similar, and in what ways are they different?

11. What clues does the author include as to the identity of the true grandfather of the female scribe? Did Lizabeta (Constantina's mother) make the right choice in refusing to play on his pity and beg him to keep her and her daughter in London?

12. After months of chafing at the Patricias' strict stewardship of the rare manuscript room, Aaron has this epiphany: "and as if his own troubles had given him new ears, Aaron understood that her terseness was love—that all of it was love: the Patricias' world of meticulous conservation and whispering vigilance and endless policing over f-cking pencils."

What sorts of love are on display in unexpected ways in *The Weight of Ink*? In what unexpected ways does love show itself in your own world?

**RACHEL KADISH** is the award-winning author of the novels *From a Sealed Room* and *Tolstoy Lied: A Love Story*, and the novella *I Was Here*. Her work has appeared on NPR and in the *New York Times*, *Ploughshares*, and *Tin House*. She lives in the Boston area.