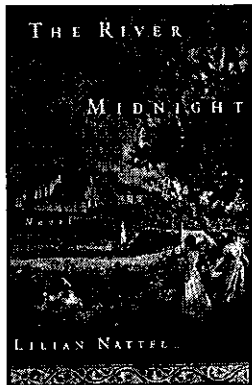


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NovelList



River Midnight, The

Author: Nattel, Lilian, 1956-

The author turns her own family history into the story of five women, Polish Jews living in a ghetto outside Warsaw before the cataclysm of World War II

New York: Scribner, copyright 1999, 414 p.

Popularity: ★★☆☆

Level: Adult

Subject Headings:

Jews, Polish
 Shtetl -- Poland
 Midwives -- Poland
 Jewish women -- Poland
 Women -- Friendship
 Extramarital relations -- Poland
 Jewish-Canadian fiction
 Canadian fiction -- 20th century

Reviews for this Title:

Booklist Review: /*Starred Review*/ As the tiny town of Blaszkka in Russian-occupied Poland readies for the Sabbath. Nattel draws us into the circle of her story as a grandmother might, pressing sweetmeats and tea into our hands so we might listen. First we hear from the women: Faygela's daughter imprisoned for holding revolutionary pamphlets but rescued at last by the whole village; the midwife Misha, holder of secrets and trust, whose knowledge of herbs is matched by her knowledge of what she needs to do her work; of the rabbi whose fear of fire has a terrible source; of Hayim the water-carrier who can sketch likenesses like an angel; of the Traveler who appears, with a silk rose on his collar, when he is needed. These skeins and others are then told from the men's point of view. Since we already know the framework, the second half of the novel becomes an intimate ritual. At the last, we hear the tale from Misha's own head, the gleaming embroidery made whole thread by thread. The eroticism of scent and taste matches the passion of daily living wrought out in Yiddish and Polish proverbs and history. Nattel tells a terrific story, wonderful to read, with its small notes of the magical and its language as blooming and creamy as honey on the tongue. ((Reviewed February 1, 1999)) -- GraceAnne A. DeCandido

Publishers Weekly Review: Canadian author Nattel's debut novel poignantly and humorously evokes shtetl life by interweaving stories of four Jewish women in Blaszkka, a turn-of-the-century Polish village. As vilda hayas (wild children), they romp in the woods. As adults, they bind their community together through their shared joys, sorrows, schemes and scandals. Married to the butcher and running his shop with wily efficiency, childless Hanna-Leah likes to bathe and dream in the Polnocna (Midnight) River. Restless Faygela has several children, the eldest in jail for helping her American cousin spread revolutionary ideas. After Zisa-Sara dies in America, her orphaned children are returned to her native village to be raised by friends. Looming over all is earth-goddess Misha, a strong, independent midwife who divorces her husband and refuses to remarry or reveal the father of her child. Blaszkka plays host to Russians, Poles, Jews, non-Jews, players, peddlers, drifters and demons. As villagers travel, the reader also glimpses the streets of Plotsk, Paris, Warsaw and immigrant New York. Retelling each scene from different perspectives in fluid prose dotted with aphorisms and Yiddishisms, Nattel celebrates a culture that values scholarship, charity and individual freedom, its high-mindedness balanced by a coarse appreciation of human weakness. Details of food preparation, sexual attitudes, religious ritual and family routine produce a richly textured portrait of a small town. While her modest magic realism (evidently owing a debt to Singer and Aleichem) never soars, it beautifully captures a lost way of life and its enduring sense of community. Agent, Helen Heller. BOMC and QPB alternates; rights sold in Italy, Germany, Canada, U.K. and the Netherlands. (Jan.)

Library Journal Review: Polish Jewish life at the end of the 19th century in the fictional shtetl of Blaszkka is the setting of

this powerful debut novel, which balances magical elements with historical detail. Here, strong women ran the businesses, while the men are concerned with religious matters, the village council, the tavern, and the Polish authorities. Misha, the midwife, is a bigger-than-life earth mother who concocts herbal remedies for the village while safeguarding its secrets, including the name of the father of her unborn child. As a girl, she danced in the woods with her four friends, the vilda hayas, or wild creatures. The story of what happens to these girls as they become women is told first from the women's perspective, then from the men's, and finally from Misha's. Reminiscent of the work of I.B. Singer, this portrayal of a world that vanished with the Holocaust is filled with human tension and wonder. Highly recommended. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 9/1/98.]--Molly Abramowitz, Silver Spring, MD

Kirkus Reviews /* Starred Review */ A young Canadian writer's brilliant first novel skillfully evokes what Irving Howe called the —World of Our Fathers— and the genius of such literary forerunners and likely influences as Isaac Bashevis Singer. Nattel's complex story begins in the Polish village of Blaszkia in the late 19th century, a decade or so following the Russian pogroms that cast lengthening shadows over the later lives of her characters—most importantly, four women who grew up together as "vilda hayas" (wild children) and took varying paths to womanhood and fulfillment. Childless Hanna-Lea, wife of Hershel the butcher, haunts the village with the sorrowful fact of her barrenness. Faygela surrenders her dream of being a teacher to become instead the mother of five and, eventually, to see her daughter arrested for "radical" political acts. Zia-Sara emigrates to America with her husband and, dying there, leaves her children adrift between Blaszkia and their strange new country. And village midwife Misha (who has "more life in her than the whole of Russian Poland"), refusing to be bound by propriety or tradition, divorces her husband and later proudly, publicly gives birth on the very eve of Yom Kippur. Nattel weaves these stories together expertly in the richly detailed opening chapters (set variously in Blaszkia, Warsaw, Paris, and New York City); then focuses just as intensely on the several men in her women's lives (the luckless water-carrier Hayim and morose Rabbi Berekh, whose attraction to the forthright Misha will change him forever, are among the most vividly drawn); and finally concentrates on Misha's volatile relationships with her closest friends (who submit to their traditional obligations in differing degrees), and on the wholesale changes wrought by the new century. A marvelous debut and a loving anatomy of the vanished world of the shtetls that merits comparison with the best work of Singer and Sholom Aleichem. (Book-of-the-Month Club/QPB alternate selection) (*Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 1999)

Other titles associated with this book:

Midnight river., The

ISBNs Associated with this Title:

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Biography Resource Center

Lilian Nattel

1956-

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2004.

Entry Updated : 11/11/2004

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"Sidelights"

Lilian Nattel was raised in Toronto by Jewish parents who came to Canada from their Polish birthplace. Nattel's critically acclaimed debut novel, *The River Midnight*, is, according to R. Z. Sheppard in *Time*, her "[attempt] to link emotionally and spiritually with her unknown forebears." The novel is set in a 19th-century Polish shtetl, a Jewish village. The story concerns "nine characters in the fictional town of Blaszkia during the nine months of midwife Misha's mysterious pregnancy," described *Publishers Weekly* contributor Suzanne Mantell. The tale addresses the bonds between female friends and the strain between men and women. As Molly Abramowitz proclaimed in *Library Journal*, *The River Midnight* is a "powerful debut novel.... filled with human tension and wonder." The "richly textured portrait of a small town," asserted a *Publishers Weekly* critic, contains "modest magic realism ...[that] never soars, [but] it beautifully captures a lost way of life and its enduring sense of community."

On Baker & Taylor Information and Entertainment Services' Web site Nattel once described her personal concept of the Jewish villages that once existed. She recounted: "There's a picture that comes to my mind when I think of the shtetl though it's not directly connected with it. When my maternal grandmother remarried, we had a party at our house to celebrate. I remember my mother and her best friend, Marisha, spontaneously dancing with a handkerchief held between them. People were singing and clapping while they danced and I have never seen my mother more beautiful as when she danced with her friend. In that moment I saw a wordless and kinetic bond of friendship, in fact of intimacy and joy, between women. My mother's friend Marisha died of breast cancer the summer I turned sixteen. It is in honour of her that I invented the story about Misha's name: a nickname of 'Marisha,' the Polish name for Miriam."

While doing research for *The River Midnight* Nattel gained greater insight into the identity of a shtetl. As she commented on Amazon.com's Web site: "I discovered the shtetl to be a place where people had hopes and love and crime and talent and idiocy just as we do, now, while at the same time it had a particular character: rich, complex, interesting.... Magic expresses the mythical quality of the shtetl, and ...the mix of superstition and spirituality. But in the end, I believe, human action is what matters."

Critics praised Nattel for her portrait of a shtetl in *The River Midnight*. As a writer for *Kirkus Reviews* praised, it is "a marvelous debut and a loving anatomy of the vanished world of the shtetls that merits comparison with the best work of Singer and Sholom Aleichem." *The River Midnight* is a "terrific story," proclaimed GraceAnne A. DeCandido in *Booklist*, "wonderful to read, with its small notes of the magical and its language as blooming and creamy as honey on the tongue." "Mythic significance" embodies the work, determined Sheppard. "But," maintained Sheppard, "it is the brilliantly patterned minutiae of daily life ...that anchor the novel's loftier meanings." "Humor and broad empathies cushion the obviousness of Nattel's feminist subtext. So does her supple narrative technique, which weds the discipline of scholarship with artistic license," commended Sheppard.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Family: Born in 1956; raised in Toronto, ON, Canada. Education: York University, degree in education; received education to become an accountant. Addresses: Home: Toronto, ON. Agent: c/o Scribner, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

CAREER

Author, c. 1999--. Worked as a chartered accountant.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *The River Midnight* (novel), Scribner (New York, NY), 1999.
- *The Singing Fire* (novel), Scribner (New York, NY), 2004.

Contributor of short stories to periodicals.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, February 1, 1999, p. 963.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 1998, p. 70.
- *Library Journal*, January, 1999, p. 156.
- *Publishers Weekly*, August 3, 1998, p. 55; November 23, 1998, p. 59.
- *Time*, February 8, 1999, p. 70.

OTHER

- Baker & Taylor Information and Entertainment Services, "Lilian Nattel's Writing *The River Midnight*," <http://www.baker-taylor.com/BTBPromos/>
- RivMidnite.html (March 19, 1999).
- Amazon.com, "Family History, Research, Magic of Human Decency," <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/.../qid=921857766/002-1063840-1828419> (March 19, 1999).*

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Historical Fiction Discussion Questions

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not?
2. Discuss the book's structure. Does the author use any narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How does this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? How do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
3. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read his or her favorite passage out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) How does this particular passage relate to the story as a whole? Does it reveal anything specific about any of the characters or illuminate certain aspects of the story?
4. Talk about the time period in which the story is set. How well does the author convey the era? Did you have a sense of whether or not the author remained true to the events, social structures and political events of the time period?
5. Is this a time period that you knew a lot about before you read this book? If so, did you learn anything new? If not, did you come away with a greater understanding of what this particular time and place in history was actually like?
6. Is it difficult to keep our own, modern-day experiences from influencing the reading of a historical fiction tale? Can we imagine what life was really like for the characters within the context of the time period?
7. Compare this book to other works of historical fiction your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book?
8. Why do you suppose works of historical fiction are so popular with readers? What appeals to you the most about these types of books?



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