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The Saturday Wife by Naomi Ragen

List Price: \$13.95
Pages: 320
Format: Paperback
ISBN: 9780312352394
Publisher: St. Martin's Griffin

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About This Book

With more than half a million copies of her novels sold, Naomi Ragen has connected with the hearts of readers as well as reviewers who have met her work with unanimous praise. In **The Saturday Wife**, Ragen utilizes her fluid writing style--rich with charm and detail--to break new ground as she harnesses satire to expose a world filled with contradiction.

Beautiful, blonde, materialistic Delilah Levy steps into a life she could have never imagined when in a moment of panic she decides to marry a sincere Rabbinical student. But the reality of becoming a paragon of virtue for a demanding and hypocritical congregation leads sexy Delilah into a vortex of shocking choices which spiral out of control into a catastrophe which is as sadly believable as it is wildly amusing.

Told with immense warmth, fascinating insight, and wicked humor, **The Saturday Wife** depicts the pitched and often losing battle of all of us as we struggle to hold on to our faith and our values amid the often delicious temptations of the modern world.

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Discussion Questions

You may
think
there's
always
tomorrow.

From the author of
the international
phenomenon
**THE SHADOW
OF THE WIND**

A riveting new
masterpiece about
love, literature, and
betrayal

Contest

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1. **The Saturday Wife** has been described as a satire. Do you agree or disagree? If you agree, what is the author satirizing, and why?
2. Describe what you think would be the perfect ending for this book and why.
3. What do you think is the role of a good spiritual leader?
4. Describe the perfect spiritual leader for Swallow Lake.
5. Do you think Chaim failed the congregation, or did the congregation fail him?
6. In what way could Delilah be described as a comic figure? In what way a tragic one?
7. In her acknowledgements, the author says she was inspired by the book *Madame Bovary*. Can you find some parallels between the two books?
8. Do you think Delilah jumped over the edge, or was she pushed?
9. Describe the kind of life that would have really made Delilah happy.
10. If you had to write a sequel to this book, describe chapter one.

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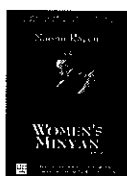
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The Saturday Wife
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Women's Minyan
מנין נשים



The Covenant
הברית



Chains Around the Grass
סיפור אמרקאי



The Ghost of Hannah Mendes
בידך אפקיד רוחי



The Sacrifice of Tamar
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Sotah
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Jephthe's Daughter
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THE SATURDAY WIFE

Naomi's newest book is a hilarious satire about a rabbi's wife and a congregation who truly deserve each other.



SYNOPSIS

With more than half a million copies of her novels sold, Naomi Ragen has connected with the hearts of readers as well as reviewers who have met her work with unanimous praise. In *The Saturday Wife*, Ragen utilizes her fluid writing style -- rich with charm and detail -- to break new ground as she harnesses satire to expose a world filled with contradiction. Beautiful, blonde, materialistic Delilah Levi steps into a life she could have never imagined when in a moment of panic she decides to marry a sincere Rabbinical student. But the reality of becoming a paragon of virtue for a demanding and hypocritical congregation leads sexy Delilah into a vortex of shocking choices which spiral out of control into a catastrophe which is as sadly believable as it is wildly amusing. Told with immense warmth, fascinating insight, and wicked humor, *The Saturday Wife* depicts the pitched and often losing battle of all of us as we struggle to hold on to our faith and our values amid the often delicious temptations of the modern world.

TRANSLATIONS

The Saturday Wife, published in [Hebrew](#) by [Zmora Beitan](#) (September 2007).

REVIEWS:

'Saturday Wife' is well-written satire

Delilah Levi grew up on Long Island. She was blonde and as pretty as any of the girls in her Hebrew Academy. But her parents weren't as wealthy as the other girls' parents. In gym class, Delilah was never chosen first for a punchball team. No wonder, then, that she grew up to be so shallow.

Naomi Ragen's sixth novel, "The Saturday Wife," is a well-executed satire. Ragen slathers on the ironies. Early in the book, Delilah — who does not know the meaning of compassion, who feels happy only when wallowing in materialism — ends up married to an Orthodox rabbi.

He's a wimp. But he's a rabbi. The action rises and falls from there, because, on some level, Delilah's husband actually does believe God is enough.

He believes the Torah is enough. He believes that elaborate bar mitzvahs and designer purses are beside the point and may actually get in the way of human happiness.

Ragen, who was raised in the United States and has lived in Israel for 30 years, explained in her acknowledgements about how she got the idea for "The Saturday Wife." She wrote, "I would like to thank, equally and profoundly, the blonde in the miniskirt and tank top who got up onstage to dance with the toddlers during a Kosher Club week in the Dominican Republic, and Gustave Flaubert for writing 'Madame Bovary,' which I took along with me on vacation. The confluence of those two is truly responsible for this book."

In addition to smiles and chuckles, Ragen gives readers insight into the lives of Orthodox Jews in New York. Details abound.

About a wedding, she writes, "The single girls made their way around the hall, searching for someone who would give them a ride home. That is always the most urgent need when attending a Jewish wedding in Manhattan. You simply do not want to ride out to Brooklyn or Queens on the New York subway system at 10 p.m. ... The second reason, though, was always more important. You wanted to walk out with your pick from the most eligible single men, ensuring a good hour alone with him. It was considered a party favor, much more urgent and useful than catching the bride's bouquet." — **Susan Whitney**, *Deseret Morning News*

Naomi Ragen is one of my very favorite authors, and I always look forward to reading anything of hers.

In fact, she wrote two of my all-time favorite novels: *The Sacrifice of Tamar* and *Sotah*. This new book is a biting and exaggerated satire of an otherwise insulated population: Modern Orthodox Jews.

The wife in the title of this novel refers to a rebbetzin, a rabbi's wife. In this case, the wife is Delilah, a manipulative and selfish social-climber, whose Orthodox Jewish values conflict with her desire for wealth. Being a rabbi's wife was not the life Delilah envisioned for herself, but at the time, Chaim seemed like a way up the ladder and out of her parents' lives. Never satisfied and living by the *grass is always greener* philosophy, Delilah wants what everyone else has. She badgers her husband to leave his comfortable rabbinical position in New York and move to a congregation in an affluent suburb of Connecticut, with

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"Sharper than a Torah pointer, a high-comedy social satire with a bleeding heart." - **Anne Roiphe**

"The pleasure of this novel is in its mercilessness, with Ragen raising the stakes until the very end." - **Publishers Weekly**

"With *The Saturday Wife*, Naomi Ragen proves herself an adept satirist as well as a brilliant storyteller....The heiress to such eternally discontented heroines as Emma Bovary and Undine Spragg, Delilah Goldgrab Levi's story is funny, poignant, and unforgettable." — **India Edghill**

disastrous consequences.

There is very little that is either likeable or redeemable about Delilah, and that is the point. Nothing will ever make her happy; even when she thinks she has what she wants, she will just keep wanting more things, and more space to put them in. Yet at heart, she is a religious Jew who still says the blessings over her kosher food. Delilah has to do her best to impress the bigwigs at the synagogue. When that proves to be too much for her, she befriends an unbelievably wealthy woman in the community, who arranges the most decadent and ostentatious bar mitzvah for her stepson that anyone has ever seen.

All of the main players are caricatures, their behavior extreme. Only Chaim, the rabbi, has any redeemable qualities. This book should not be taken seriously as an accurate picture of Modern Orthodox Jews - it is merely a social satire and a commentary about the dichotomy between solid Jewish values and material excess. Reading it is like gleefully watching a horror movie - you can't wait to see what comes next, knowing a disaster is about to befall someone. In that vein, the ending does not disappoint. The Saturday Wife reminded me of *The Ladies Auxiliary* by Tova Mirvis in the sense that the narrator seemed to be the community at large. – **Hilary Daninhirsch**, [Bookloons](#)

"Sharper than a Torah pointer, a high-comedy social satire with a bleeding heart." – **Anne Rophie**

Like Emma Bovary, Delilah Goldgrab longs for a better life.

A Queens yeshiva girl, Delilah is prayerfully remorseful after fornicating with young, opportunistic Yitzie Polinsky, and quickly marries mediocre rabbinical student Chaim Levi, who is unable to provide her with a house, much less the glossy upper-middle-class life she longs for. When Chaim accepts a position as the rabbi of an affluent Connecticut congregation, Delilah has the opportunity to indulge her ideas about happiness as the congregation's rebbitzin, with deliciously disastrous consequences. It's hard to like selfish, clueless Delilah or anyone else here: the pleasure of this novel is in its mercilessness, with Ragen (*The Covenant*) raising the stakes until the very end.

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"With *The Saturday Wife*, Naomi Ragen proves herself an adept satirist as well as a brilliant storyteller....The heiress to such eternally discontented heroines as Emma Bovary and Undine Spragg, Delilah Goldgrab Levi's story is funny, poignant, and unforgettable." – **India Edghill**, author of *Wisdom's Daughter*

READERS' REVIEWS

My copy of *The Saturday Wife* arrived today (I pre-ordered on Amazon!) and though I promised myself I'd save it for Shabbos, I couldn't resist cracking it open for a taste. It's 10 PM and I just finished it. A delightful read that I couldn't put down. Thank you for the entertainment and gentle musser. And even more fun for me because you set it in Connecticut, of all places. Your books are always worth waiting for. This one is no exception. Thank you!
– **Marsha**, Stamford, CT

Thank you for another wonderful book. I couldn't put it down. It was wonderfully put together to show the extremes of some people and some congregations. I suppose the unfortunate part is there really are people like this. Once again thanks for a wonder book. I look forward to the next. Thank you for your list server and all that you do!
– **Ilene Gerber**

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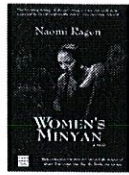
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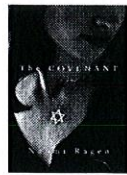
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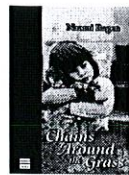
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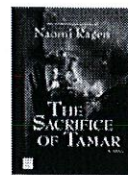
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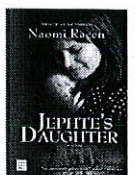
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Naomi Ragen - Autobiography

I was born in July, 1949 at the Brooklyn Jewish hospital. My mother was a second generation American from an Orthodox family, while my father, a first generation American who had come to New York as a child from the Ukraine, was fairly assimilated, following his own father's lead of trying to fit into his new country. I started out going to school in P.S. 44 in Rockaway. Just before I started second grade, my father very suddenly died following a minor operation.

The family was devastated. My older brother was unhappy in school and my mother, thinking it would somehow be helpful to him, applied for a scholarship for him at The Hebrew Institute of Long Island, a private Orthodox Hebrew Day School in Far Rockaway. I believe she had to pay a \$5 fee for an IQ test. After she'd paid the fee, they told her my brother would have to take Hebrew with the first-graders if he got in, something he as a sixth grader refused to consider. My mother asked for the \$5.00 back and they told her it was nonrefundable and did she have another child, perhaps, that might want to apply. And that is how I wound up at an Orthodox private school until I graduated high school.

At first, I was very unhappy with the decision. We lived in a housing project which was mostly lower middle class, mostly black and Puerto Rican. It was hard to make the transition to an all white, all Jewish, very middle to upper class group of children who wore mohair sweaters and kid gloves.

The curriculum was also difficult. I didn't know Hebrew, as I hadn't been there in first grade. I was also struggling to catch up in the secular studies as well, because the school was on a much higher level than the one I'd left. I didn't understand why I needed to know Hebrew. I was an American. I was never going to use it.

They taught us Bible, Prophets, Jewish law, the daily prayers. We would begin each day praying together. We would sing grace after meals each lunch time. The songs, the music, the preparation for the holidays began to enchant me. It was exotic and joyful and the housing projects were so deadening to the imagination - those endless red bricks! Those dingy, frightening hallways. At home, we were still watching cartoons on Saturdays, but slowly I began to want to go to the synagogue, which was full of light, of golden Torah chalices, velvet embroidered covers. It was mysterious and warm and beautiful.

I was in high school, however, when the serious change took place. My best friend was the daughter of a rabbi. They were *haredi misnagdim*. She was a wonderful, brilliant girl who drew me closer into her world and I began to see the value and the beauty of it. I also had a number of inspiring rabbi-teachers for Torah, Prophets, and especially something called *mussar* - sort of spiritual guidance. Through them I began to long for a different kind of life than my parents had had.

I was always writing. Always entering poetry contests, essay contests. Always reading: Dickens, Jane Austen, the Brontes... I knew even then that I wanted to be a writer. But I also knew I didn't want to abandon my Hebrew studies. I still felt very ignorant, as if I was just at the beginning of some real depth and understanding. And so, when I graduated, I went to college during the day and continued my religious studies at night at an ultra-Orthodox women's teacher college in Boro Park called Sara Schneur's Seminary, named after the woman who founded the Bais Yaakov movement. In order to do this, I left home and rented a room in Boro Park with a haredi family, one of the rabbis from the Seminary. They had a daughter my age and her life was so different than mine, so restricted. I got to know her and the life and customs in the haredi world as an intimate insider. It brought me deeper and deeper into the haredi world.

Much of what I saw I deeply admired. And yet there was a narrowness there, a suspicion. I didn't fit in and I knew it. But I didn't want to give either world up. During the day I continued being a college student majoring in English at a wonderful experimental Freshman Program at CUNY's Graduate Center. There I had Irving Howe for English, Leo Steinberg for art, Stanley Milgram for psychology. A whole new world was opening up to me, a world that my nighttime studies were adamantly opposed to. No one else in the Seminary would have dreamt of going to college. And yet my evening studies - Jewish History, Law, philosophy - also fulfilled an important need in me. I wanted and needed both.

I met my husband in 1968, my sophomore year in Brooklyn College. He was a yeshiva high school graduate studying in yeshiva as well as finishing his degree in math. We were married in 1969. In January 1971, we moved to Israel.

My dream was and has always been to be a writer. I was a creative writing major in college and after moving to Israel began to write as a freelance journalist. I had two little babies by then, but the urge to write was so strong, so undeniable, that I had no choice but to write. I picked myself up one day and interviewed some people in the Mayor's Office and published my first article about problems in an immigrant neighborhood, my own. I kept going, writing feature articles for whoever would pay for them - mostly Jewish newspapers, magazines. Believe me, from this you do not get rich! I went back to school and got a Master's in English from Hebrew University.

It was then I began to feel very odd. After all, we were living in an Orthodox neighborhood, which was getting more and more ultra by the minute. I had come from America for religious reasons. *Lech Lecha Me Artzecha*. I wanted to live in Jerusalem, to dwell in G-d's house all the days of my life. And yet, I began to feel more and more out of place. What was I doing in the park with my wig and jeans skirts and little babies working on writing term papers on the love poetry of John Donne, the poetic imagination in Coleridge? The male element in the women of D.H. Lawrence? When all the women around me were busy gossiping over what brand of kosher margarine was more kosher? When they wore longer skirts, and stockings with seams and sleeves to their wrists? Slowly it began to dawn on me that I was uncomfortable among my own kind, religious Jews. That I didn't fit in among them anymore than I had fit in among the Italians in Canarsie or the Catholics in Far Rockaway.

This was a tremendous, traumatic and heartbreaking shock to me. Because I wanted desperately to keep all the *mitvos*, to rise higher and higher, to be part of a society that would be as close to G-d as possible. And yet, the thought of dressing as they did, of spending my days as they did, of giving up my writing,

my work at the Univeristy, made me ill. All the vague misgivings I had had in Boro Park now came back with new strength. I could not live the life of the women around me. I was being pushed out against my will in very subtle ways, being made to feel there was no room for me, for any kind of variety in religious life and observance. Maybe it was all subjective, just something in my head. But that's how I felt.

I left the neighborhood. And then one morning when I was taking my child to kindergarten a neighbor asked me if I'd heard what'd happened the day before. A young, beautiful *haredi* woman from across the street had taken her little girl to the top of a hotel in Tel Aviv and jumped to her death, killing them both. The woman, she said, was in her early twenties, a stunning blond, very intelligent, the daughter of a very wealthy man from Europe. The child was a little blond angel. And now they were both dead. It was a *shidduch*, my neighbor said. Her father wanted a Talmud scholar. "He wasn't for her," my neighbor said. She was a very wise woman and very shrewd. "She wanted to work, to go to the movies, to concerts. He wouldn't go and he wouldn't let her go. Everything she wanted to do was no. In frustration, he began to beat her, to be cruel to the child. He was locked into a marriage that was not for him and she was locked into a marriage that was not for her."

Something about this touched me deeply. Not just the bad marriage, but the portrait of this stifling life, the crushing of individuality, the creativity that was being drained from this woman who couldn't be part of this society without conforming one hundred percent. And she was being brutalized into conformance.

I didn't do anything about the story for a long while. I was shocked. Stunned. It was almost a personal tragedy and I didn't understand why it was affecting me so deeply, until I looked at my own life, I looked at how I had felt at what was happening to me. How I was being pushed out. Thank G-d I had a husband who supported me and what I wanted to do... But what if I hadn't? What if my husband had been against me also?

And people began to say "She was crazy." And when I heard that I got very angry, because I knew in my heart she wasn't crazy. I understood what happens to someone who is forced to conform. A lovely intelligent deeply religious person, which she was. I began to write *Jephthe's Daughter* because I wanted to explain to myself what had happened, and because I wanted to stop her from taking that step out of the window. I wanted to show her another way she could have gone and solved her problem.

What have some of the reactions been to the publication of *Jephthe's Daughter*, among secular and religious Jews and among Gentiles? I'm a little isolated from it all because I live in Jerusalem. I can only tell you what letters have been sent to me and what rumors have come my way. Out of the dozens of letters I've received from all over the world, only three have been critical. Of those, two were from Gentiles who were mildly to extremely outraged over my treatment of Catholicism. I stand by what I've said and have it on the best authority.

The only Jewish letter I got was from a very passionately irate Jewish grandfather from England who wrote me three ten-page letters explaining the Jewish religion and pleading with me to withdraw the book from publication. He even offered to compensate me for my loss by paying me fifty pounds sterling. What upset the gentleman from England, however, was the suggestion that an Orthodox Jewish girl ever thought about sex. Kissing, he explained to me, was very unsanitary, and it was much better to show affection with a hug, even among married people. "As if a girl really needed a man's arms around her and a kiss on her lips (the latter I explained as ridiculous)! With the correct thinking and attitudes these feelings do not come, or at most, not too much in quality nor quantity, and when in marriage there is a correct way of dealing with all this at the permitted times. If one is cuddling a girl for a certain time, he will get a certain fast heart and pulse beat, and a certain amount of harm to the spine. Suffice it to state that in the preliminary to cohabitation (at the permitted time of course within marriage) I emphasize that a limited amount of kissing and embracing is advisable. I need not state why an unlimited amount would do more harm than good and have the wrong result. It is too delicate for me to speak to a lady in that way, I would not have written the way I did to you but I had to in the light of the delicate issues you raised."

The rest of my correspondence, dozens and dozens of letters were beautiful. Most Jews wrote that they could see the Israel I described and really identify with the plight of the characters. Others said I had led them to look through the Bible again, something they hadn't done in years. I got a letter from a shelter for battered Jewish women in Ontario saying that the situation I described was very accurate, and a letter from a psychiatrist who had worked in Israel among *haredim* which said he thought he knew the people involved and that he had come across many such cases. I got a phone call from a distraught American mother whose daughter was desperately seeking a divorce from a *haredi* she had married in Jerusalem through a *shidduch*, asking for my advice.

I've heard rumors that the book has been banned in Jewish book stores in Boro Park, and confiscated by Jewish mothers so their marriage-age daughters won't read it. I've heard that several Michlalah girls who read it were shocked and outraged and that my old editor at a *haredi* publishing house in Jerusalem, the same one who wouldn't put my name on my work because I was a woman, the same one who bragged to everyone when I sold my book to Warner Books that he'd helped me do it, was ready to organize a lynch.

And then of course there were the critics, some of whom were so ignorant they couldn't believe any of this could be true and so accused me of starting a new genre: Gothic Jewish.

But mostly, my heart has been warmed by the beautiful words people have written. And almost everyone said the same thing: They loved the book and couldn't put it down.

I've searched my conscience and am not completely convinced that bringing all these issues to light was the right thing to do. Because of this, I've turned down a number of movie offers as well as a publication contract in Israel. I hope Hashem will forgive me for any harm I've done, as well those people who've been personally offended by my descriptions of Issac Harshen. I was not describing the rule but the exception. Isaac Harshen is a bad person. It just happens that he's *haredi*. He'd be a bad Catholic, a bad Hindu. I do not, and did not mean to indict the whole *haredi* world, for which I have great respect and admiration both for their dedicated self sacrifice and commitment to spiritual growth. Their way is not my way, but I hope both our ways lead to the same G-d, the same Torah.

Before I close, I have something I would like to share with you, which I've told very few people about and which I myself have just discovered. It's an anonymous letter written right after the suicide of the real Bathsheva Halevi. The letter was photocopied and handed out in the neighborhood.

"In this tragedy that has just befallen us, there are a lot of people who want to judge, and many who don't want to understand. Some want to say it was *besheit* [pre-ordained], and some say she was crazy and some even justify her. And some just want to forget. But I would like to look into the Torah and into reality and understand why this catastrophe took place and see what there is to learn from it.

"It's wrong to say it's *besheit* because a man has free choice, including the ability to fling himself off a roof. It's wrong to say she was insane, because I knew her, and she was very normal. I know that she killed herself because she didn't want to get a divorce that would disgrace her family, herself, her husband. It was no doubt some momentary insanity because as she fell she cried out, coming to her senses and doing *teshuvah* before she died.

"We fool ourselves, we who are supposedly living a life of Torah and piety, while in our midst we see divorces, violence and hatred, dissension, slander and dishonesty. How can such things happen among our kind? It is because we do our mitzvos only for ourselves, to receive a reward and not from the love of G-d. Things will only get better when we take it upon ourselves to open our eyes and look around us, to think what our friends and relatives need, when each man stops thinking only of himself. And then the verse from Yehezkel will be fulfilled in us: "And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit, and I will take away the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

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Author Biography

Naomi Ragen is a beloved and bestselling author of books about Jewish women, which have earned her a worldwide following. An American, she has lived in Jerusalem for more than thirty years, where she also writes for the Jerusalem Post.

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Author Interview

Q: In a recent *Jewish News* article, you mentioned that with your

heritage. My reason for making the move was originally religious: "Leave your father's house and your birthplace and go to the land I will show you," G-d tells Abraham. I took that personally. I had never been to Israel when I moved there with my husband in 1971. I was just a starry-eyed kid. But the interesting thing is I never got disillusioned. It's an amazing place to spend your life if you are a Jew, especially a religious Jew. But while I've never looked back, I know that I will always feel like an American living in a foreign country, even though I've lived in Israel now longer than I lived in America.

Q: How do you balance the demands of the religious and the secular as both an observant Jew and a commercial novelist?

A: I try, as best I can, to always remember the larger picture. My work is an avocation, not just a vocation. In my books I explore the ideals and conflicts that religious women face. I try never to cross my own red lines, which is to denigrate my religion or make G-d's laws appear cruel. I always separate Divine commandments, from the behavior of the divinely-commanded, who don't always live up to their obligations. I criticize religious people, but never my religion as such. My own view of my religion is that there is vast room for the individual to serve G-d with his or her particular talents. And so, having been given my own gift, I try to use it well. Being religious and being a novelist is something I share with many other writers. I think of Pope and Donne, and many others who were actually clergymen. The love of G-d and the clear grounding in identity and history that comes from knowing who you are and what you believe in is a gift for any artist.

Q: In the opening chapter of *The Saturday Wife*, the first thing we learn about our heroine is that she "always considered herself the victim of a painfully disadvantaged childhood." You have discussed -- in interviews and lectures, and in your autobiographical novel *Chains Around the Grass* --- your own difficult childhood. Can you share some stories about your childhood in New York City during the 1950s? How, if at all, did it inspire Delilah's story?

A: Actually, that line is meant to poke fun at our heroine. Unlike Delilah, who has two perfectly nice parents who while not wealthy, provide her with a perfectly adequate childhood, I was not as fortunate. There is a big difference between bemoaning your fate if you have to buy clothes on sale, and not being able to afford to buy clothes at all. My childhood was overshadowed by a father's untimely death, and the struggles of my widowed mother to keep off welfare --- which she did, to her great credit. Like Delilah, I too went to an upscale Orthodox Hebrew Day School. But I was a scholarship student, unlike Delilah whose parents had to scrape together the tuition. I sympathize with Delilah out on the punchball fields wanting to play. I was more like the narrator, "permanently relieved of hope." The Delilahs in my class were one rung up the social and economic ladder from me. But from vantage point of rock bottom, I could see clearly all the way up to the top. I've tried to convey this.

Q: Please share a few words about the writing process. Also, did you face any particular challenges while working on *The Saturday Wife*?

A: The process of figuring out a character is a journey you take sitting next to a stranger on a long ride, who slowly opens up to you. By the time the ride is over and you've reached your destination, you know absolutely everything there is to know about them, from the things they've told you, and of course and most importantly, from the things they've desperately tried to hide. I never know more about my characters than initial handshake at a party would tell you about the guests, along with some whispered rumors you've heard before they've arrived. So it's really more like reading a book than writing it. And always full of surprises.

Delilah was a particular challenge because she just kept telling me these awful things about herself. She was sacreligious in a way I found shocking. I've had characters who were evil, like Isaac in Jephthe's Daughter, and characters who are noble, like Josh in The Covenant. But I never had a main character who was an airhead with absolutely nothing admirable about her. Keeping the reader interested enough not to throw down the book in disgust was a challenge. I think I succeeded because she has so many of the faults we recognize in ourselves (except she is blessed with far more than most). And she is always getting into trouble. It's so much fun to see how she slides her way out. And of course, we enjoy laughing at her and at ourselves.

Q: Who are some of your favorite Jewish female literary figures --- fictional, historical, even biblical --- and why?

A: I adore Abigail, the woman in the bible who was married to a cheapskate named Nabal. She was resourceful, beautiful, and intelligent, and managed through her cleverness not only to dissuade an angry King David from justifiably destroying her home in response to her husband's stinginess, but also managed to win the King's heart and give her husband a heart attack, in roughly that order. In the end, she became David's wife.

One of my other favorite Jewish women is the late Professor Nechama Leibowitz, who taught Bible for seventy years or more, and who wrote and gave out study sheets on the Bible to factory workers, so they too could learn. She spent her spare time checking answers and replying to hundreds, even thousands of students who mailed the sheets to her home in Jerusalem. Of course, she never asked to be paid either for the sheets, or for her time. I remember her telling us in class that she'd gotten a phone call at 2 a.m. from someone who wanted to discuss the answer to a question on one of her Bible study sheets. Far from being furious, she politely asked why he was calling at such an hour. "I'm a street cleaner," the man told her. "This is the only time I have to study." She answered his question, and then told him how much she admired him.

Q: And what are you working on now?

A: I'm working on a book about a mother and daughter whose wonderful lives face sudden destruction, and how the experience makes them reexamine everything they thought they knew about life, with startling results.

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