

REVIEWS

Talmud as Fiction

Romantic Scholars in Babylon

Towards the end of *Rav Hisda's Daughter* (Plume, \$16), Maggie Anton's eponymous heroine returns to her home in Babylon after four long years in the land of Israel and is greeted by her father with the words, "Blessed are You, Adonai... Who revives the dead." Anton has made quite a career out of reviving the dead, first with her trilogy of novels bringing to life Rashi's three daughters, and now with her imaginative tale of the daughter of the third-century Talmudic sage Rav Hisda.

The novel's opening scene is closely based on the Talmudic story in which Rav Hisda's young daughter sits on her father's lap while his two leading students stand before him. Rav Hisda asks his daughter which one of them she

where she mingles with amulet scribes, early Christians, and the great scholars of Tiberias, Caesaria, and Sepphoris. It is in Sepphoris that Anton imagines that Hisdadukh serves as the model for the iconic "Mona Lisa of Galilee," a floor mosaic that remains a popular archeological attraction in Israel today.

Many of the conversations and characters in this novel are lifted straight of the pages of the Talmud. But as the Talmud is not a work of history—Anton may be the first to call it "historical fiction"—even these elements of the novel may raise eyebrows: "Everyone knew that the Evil Eye was responsible for a great deal of misery in the world. Rav, Father's teacher, once went to a cemetery and cast a spell that let him talk to the dead. Ninety-nine told him they'd died from the Evil Eye and only one from bad air." We must be

which is clear even without glancing at her intimidating bibliography and the list of illustrious international scholars she acknowledges. Hisdadukh is a student of Torah arguably modeled on her Palestinian counterpart Beruria, but she is also an enchantress who makes magical incantation bowls of the sort discovered by archeologists in the area that is now Iraq and Iran. The discussions that come alive in this book are Talmudic as well as academic, which may explain why this novel will have so much appeal for readers like myself who are steeped in the Talmudic text and the scholarship about its context. For readers who do not experience the pleasure of the familiar in its fictionalized form, Anton's novel celebrates our rich and colorful textual heritage and reminds us that feminist history is often a return to the material and the real—the beer the scholars drank, the springs in which they bathed, the cycle of blood that dictated their most intimate relationships, and the rooms in which they taught texts that occasionally mention wives and daughters whose lives we can at best imagine.

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would like to marry, and she greedily responds, "both of them." One of the students—arguably the more quick-witted—immediately pipes up, "I'll go second!" This story sets the stage for Anton's tale, in which Hisdadukh—Anton invents her name, which is Persian for "Daughter of Hisda"—is betrothed first to Rami bar Chama, the love of her youth and the father of her two children. Following Rami's tragic and sudden death after just five years of marriage, Hisda is betrothed to the other student, the harsh and hardened Rava. The novel follows Hisdadukh not just from one husband to another, but also from her home in Babylonia, where she is one of two daughters and seven sons in an illustrious rabbinic family, to the Galilee,

as skeptical of the historicity of Anton's account as we are of the Talmud's narration of this incident in tractate Bava Metzia. And so in terms of authenticity, perhaps *Rav Hisda's Daughter* has an advantage over *Rashi's Daughters*, since there is no presumption that the former is based on historical sources. When Anton succeeds best, she brings Talmudic debates to life by showing the very human personalities and passions behind the various legal positions. And so when Rami and Rava debate the laws of inheritance, Anton suggests that they are in fact really fighting over Hisdadukh; thus their battle of wits is also a sort of romantic duel.

Anton's novel is rooted not just in the soil of the Talmudic text but also in the field of academic Talmud study today,

Going Back to School

Two Novels

The Year of the Gadfly by Jennifer Miller (Houghton Mifflin, \$24) and *An Uncommon Education* by Elizabeth Percer (Harper Collins, \$24.99) have been described by critics as heirs to the legacies of such prep school tales as *Dead Poets Society* and *Prep*. Students learn about themselves, who they are and who they are willing to push themselves to be.

In *The Year of the Gadfly*, main character and student journalist extraordinaire Iris Dupont routinely talks to the long-dead journalist Edward Murrow as a personal and professional muse. Her switch to prep school Mariana Academy after the death of a friend changes her own life.