

FICTION

A Sephardic Family Odyssey From Constantinople to Queens

Inspired by the 20th-century migrations of her grandmother, Elizabeth Graver's new novel, "Kantika," depicts lives filled with music, ritual and hardship across continents and cultures.

By Ayten Tartici

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KANTIKA, by Elizabeth Graver

Of his refugee parents, the novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen once observed that they had "experienced the usual dilemma of anyone classified as an *other*. The other exists in contradiction, or perhaps in paradox, being either invisible or hyper-visible, but rarely just visible." The refugee, the immigrant, the outsider cannot merely be. She is either passed over or stands out like a sore thumb.

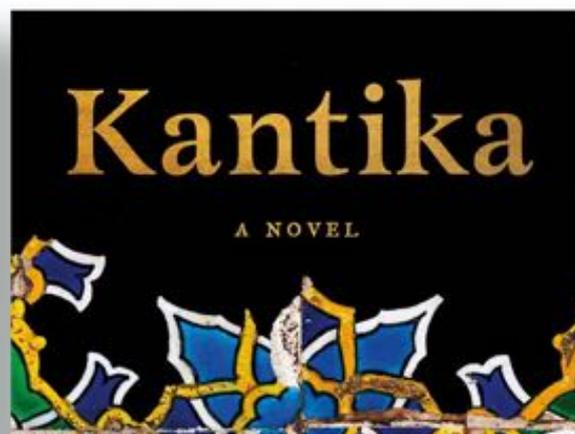
Elizabeth Graver's fifth novel, "Kantika," brings to life this duality through the story of an Ottoman Jewish family's emigration from early-20th-century Constantinople to Barcelona, Havana and eventually New York. The novel raises the literary profile of the Sephardim, which remains less conspicuous in America than that of the Ashkenazi, in that formidable line from Henry Roth to Philip Roth. Largely inspired by her maternal grandmother, Rebecca, Graver has reworked family interviews, photographs and stories recorded on microcassettes into stylized historical fiction spanning nearly half a century.

While "Kantika" inevitably relies on tropes of Jewish immigrant literature, from questions of what and where home is to idolization of America as a land relatively unhaunted by the ghosts of European antisemitism, Graver is equally interested in the resilience of women as filtered through the lens of music, motherhood and disability.

We are first introduced to the Cohens as cosmopolitan, affluent Turkish Jews whose lives in turn-of-the-century Constantinople seem buoyant, even picturesque. Alberto and Sultana live at the top of a hill in the ethnically mixed Fener neighborhood, tending to a garden bursting with roses, crocuses, tulips and hyacinths. Their daughter Rebecca fraternizes with the daughters of Greek diplomats and attends a French Catholic school; an Armenian maid lovingly serves their meals. Early on, Graver's narrator teasingly refers to the intra-Jewish cultural divide that marks the Sephardim as a more colorful branch of Judaism: "Later in life, Rebecca will encounter Jews for whom the Sabbath is a solemn, davening affair — no apricots in syrup or pomegranates with their bloody pearls, just gefilte fish trembling in slime."

Their multiethnic, multisectarian Ottoman world (arguably somewhat romanticized by Graver) soon collapses, replaced by a bureaucratic Turkish nationalism, even as Turkey remains home to the Cohens: their birthplace, the site of Alberto's garden, where his father is buried. Although the Ottoman Empire welcomed large numbers of Iberian Jewish exiles after 1492, some Ottoman Jews began to leave in the 20th century to avoid conscription into the army as well as to seek out better opportunities. After the Turkish government requisitions Alberto's textile factory, he too relocates the bankrupt family to Barcelona with the help of the Jewish Refugee Relief Committee.

Ambivalent about returning to the country that had expelled their ancestors 400 years earlier, the family must rely on invisibility as a form of protection in Spain. Alberto, the raki-drinking businessman with a penchant for the poet Judah Halevi, becomes a humble *shammash*, or groundskeeper, of a tiny, unmarked synagogue. Rebecca marries another Sephardic Jew and has two sons but is forced to conceal her Jewishness, posing as Marie Blanco Camayor, a literal blank slate with a Parisian pedigree, to get work as a seamstress. A filmmaker, who will later become a fascist, pesters the family to appear as specimens with "authentic Sephardic features" in his "little film to educate Spaniards about the national treasure of the half a million Spanish Jews abroad."



In Graver's vision, migration is a mix of and zag, doubting, retracing and zigzagging. Her characters dig up bulbs from his Turkish garden, an absentee father who is suffering from depression, hoping to get into America, an American citizenship, before finally landing in Queens.

Graver freely enters the consciousness of her novel focuses heavily on Rebecca, not one but myself," her younger son, from her second marriage, she wants more chatter, more cuddling, more love.

The amount of research that Graver has done on Sephardic Jews have traditional titles, which means "song" in Ladino. Her repertoire of Spanish, Hebrew and Yiddish transmit her cultural heritage.

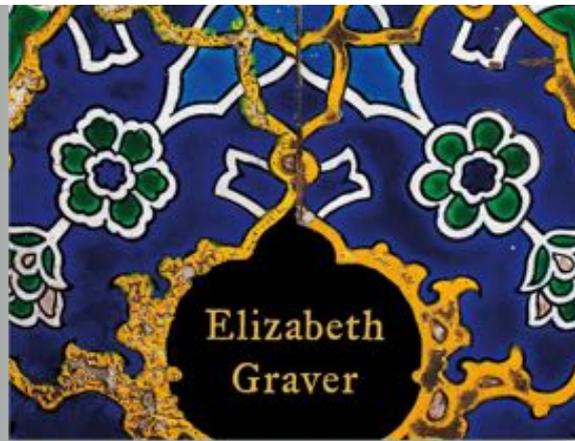
The omniscient narration can sometimes be overwhelming, as when the novel later veers into a side quest about David, Rebecca's son, who is assigned to the U.S.S. Franklin during World War II.

Yet Graver's ability to tenderly and humorously inhabit the mind of Rebecca's disabled stepdaughter, Luna Levy, sets "Kantika" apart. Luna has cerebral palsy and Graver replaces the economic betterment motif of immigrant narratives with an account of Rebecca's persistent and successful resolve to teach Luna not to lower expectations for herself: "Newmother tortures her. For the past month, she has been taking her through a set of exercises for an hour a day, but with Nona" — her grandmother — "gone, the hour becomes two, then three." Rebecca's tough love, however, is genuine and Luna soon embraces her hyper-visibility, merrily greeting others in her father's shop in Queens: "Ahmlunalevy pleeezedtameeyoooo!"

That careful attention to individual speech underlines "Kantika"'s kaleidoscope of languages, accents and dialects. Graver weaves together snippets of Ladino, Turkish, French, Castilian, Catalan, Hebrew and English like one of Rebecca's hand-stitched dresses. Helpfully translated so as not to lose the reader, these fragments enrich Graver's fiction while also stressing one of its central questions: whether a language can stand in for home.

"Kantika" answers in the affirmative. Puzzled by the word *aman* in a Ladino song Rebecca sings, her husband, Sam, and daughter Suzanne hit the books: "At the public library the two of them discovered that it meant woe is me in Turkish and Greek, 'safety' in Arabic and something akin to 'believe' in Hebrew, but when they came home and told Rebecca, she rolled her eyes and said just let it be, it means *aman*, so they left it untranslated." Yet by the novel's end, a lightly tragic note surfaces. As their lives in the United States take off, Rebecca's American-born children can only muster "kitchen variety" Ladino. "Kantika" is thus also a gesture at preserving a language that, like Yiddish, is now endangered.

Queens is not exactly Fener, English is not Ladino, and Rebecca's thriving garden of snap peas and sunflowers cannot replace her lost parents. Far from being a Pollyannaish tale of New World success, "Kantika" is a meticulous endeavor to preserve the memories of a family, an elegy and a celebration both.



Rather, her characters zigzag from Spain to Cuba, an emigrant partner with American

, setbacks and successes. The story of a child, Papa. I belong to no one but her. Including the children in their idle age, she wants "more more play."

is known as rue that is threaded throughout. True to its roots, Graver has at her fingertips a broad range of languages, both to shield them and to tell a fairy tale, and the omniscient

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