



## The Gilded Chamber: A Novel of Queen Esther

*Rebecca Kohn*

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## **The Gilded Chamber: A Novel of Queen Esther** Rebecca Kohn

For centuries her name has been a byword for feminine beauty, guile, and wisdom. This sweeping, meticulously researched novel restores Esther to her full, complex humanity while reanimating the glittering Persian empire in which her story unfolded. Esther comes to that land as a terrified Jewish orphan betrothed to her cousin, a well-connected courtier. She finds a world racked by intrigue and unfathomable hatreds and realizes that the only way to survive is to win the heart of its king. Passionate, suspenseful, and historically authentic, **The Gilded Chamber** illuminates the dilemma of a woman torn between her heart and her sense of duty, resulting in pure narrative enchantment.

## **The Gilded Chamber: A Novel of Queen Esther Details**

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## From Reader Review The Gilded Chamber: A Novel of Queen Esther for online ebook

### Suzanne says

*"I carried my grace and kindness before the king. He did not know my name, my people, or my descent. He did not care. Desire seized his senses and roused him from the lethargy and indifference. He tasted life again as his old self, the man he was before the loss of Vashti and the defeat in Greece. For this King Xerxes loved me more than all the other women."*

What a gem of a book! I picked this a couple of years of ago at a discount booksellers on a clearance rack. The premise caught my eye: a book of historical fiction based on the life of Queen Esther of biblical fame.

Rebecca Kohn does a marvelous job of transporting the reader to ancient Persia in the court of King Xerxes. The girl, newly named Esther (to hide her Jewish ancestry), is brought into the harem to serve the King. The story of Esther is more than a simple one of a young woman brave enough to answer God's call to save her people. Kohn presents a well-researched novel to try to explain the complexity of Esther's situation. The result: an impressive work sure to please historical fiction fans and biblical story enthusiasts like.

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### Pamela says

Garnered from the synopsis, author commentary, and random excerpts, I understood this to be a non-sterilized, historically sound, creatively fictionalized account of Queen Esther's life as retold from the biblical book of Esther. In a general sense, it is. And that's fine. Creative liberties that fill in gaps, or bring clarity, or transport me to another time or place can truly enhance a story in a positive way.

However, and that's a big CAUTIONARY however, some of the liberties Kohn takes are overtly controversial. And much of the book falls heavily into salacious/lubricious sensationalism and melodrama. Sometimes, less really is more.

Not my cup of tea. Not my chalice of wine.

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### Chelsi Johnston says

A very sad, and at times stomach-churning and graphic tale of Queen Ester, this book was so depressing. I like to think that somehow, God offered His grace to Ester for her faithfulness, maybe offering her some brief times of happiness. There were none in this book.

There were also so many unnecessary details of this book that I found disturbing. Ester saw her father's brains smashed on the road. She was frequently molested by a Eunuch (which was completely illogical to me.) A harem girl was molested by another, older girl, then made to be a dancer who was poisoned in order for her child to be aborted. The king was perverted and a drunk (then suddenly impotent?) so he molested a servant and made Ester watch. We get it. Perversion. Enough!

This girl just could not catch a break. I didn't find this an inspirational book at all. It left me with a distaste for the character Ester in the book. I feel the actual Queen Ester was not so consumed with grief and used her

faith to carry her to her intended purpose.

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### **Ana Mardoll says**

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I cannot help but echo the reviewers who compared this to Falconer's "The Sultan's Harem". The similarities are there - a young woman plucked out of her happy, familiar life in order to sexually service a demanding despot, whilst simultaneously fighting tooth-and-nail against the other "fortunate" girls for a favored position in this unfavorable environment. But here is where Falconer shines and Kohn fades: the reaction of the girl in question to her circumstances.

Falconer's Hurrem smolders with hatred and revenge; she hates the sultan who bought her, she hates the women she is forced to compete with, she hates the country that treats her as chattel to be bought and sold. The fact that she *\*exacts\** revenge is secondary to the vital fact that she *\*desires\** revenge. Kohn's Esther, on the other hand, is placid and sugar-sweet, pitying the women who seek to displace her. Esther's position is never in peril because the author does not allow it to be, and it's a shame because it would be nice to see her reaction to someone who actually threatened to supplant her. However, her character hints that she really wouldn't care one way or another, and even goes so far as to fall in love with the tyrant who kidnapped her.

I'm not sure what we are to make of this. Xerxes is shown in the novel as a despot. He is cruel to his women, even going to far as to brutally rape and seriously hurt one of Esther's close friends in the harem. He is a drunken lout, despised by his own courtiers. He denies Esther anything which makes her happy, monitoring her eating habits and demanding that she spend less time with an adopted daughter in order to focus on making a "legitimate" heir. It is understandable that Esther would want to placate this dangerous entity, but there is nothing here to love. We do not despise Esther for her compliance, but we do despise her for her capitulation: for loving this man who brutalizes her and everything she loves *\*because\** it pleases him to be cruel.

I can only guess why Kohn made this authorial decision, but I suspect that the "love angle" was written in to ensure that a certain segment of the target audience wouldn't be offended - there are, I suppose, certain people who would call Esther's integrity into question if she sleeps with a man she doesn't love. For whatever reason, however, I believe that this decision hurt the novel badly. Instead of an interesting tale of Esther's ingenuity in surviving, thriving, and insinuating herself into a place to save her people, we are given a love-lorn woman who regularly laments that the man she loves is just too stupid, cruel, evil, and awful to be the man she deserves. Thus is a very interesting story reduced to just a bland romance novel.

~ Ana Mardoll

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### **Holly says**

I had a lot of flying time last weekend, so this was a \$1 novel that I picked up, intending to discard at my destination.

I didn't discard The Gilded Chamber, but actually carried it back. I enjoy historical fiction -- history leaves me asleep if I don't have a character(s) to experience life through.

Queen Esther once again showed how women have spent much of humankind's time on earth valued only for their beauty and sexuality. It is chilling how a girl really, selected for her virginity and beauty, would still need 12 months of "beauty" treatments to be fit to send to the king's bed. The life of a concubine in the king's harem is mind numbing just to read about -- living it would be difficult.

I'm impressed that Queen Esther used her intelligence, savvy and kind heart to help save the lives of thousands of Jews when they were to be slaughtered.

I've read a few of the reviews, and I agree that the men are pretty one dimensional.

But overall, an illuminating and educational read.

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### **Lisa (Harmonybites) says**

It may be that with two stars I'm being too generous, but then having tried this novel of Queen Esther after the eye-bleedingly awful *The Other Boleyn Girl*, this didn't seem so wretched in comparison. Which doesn't mean it's good, and it didn't hold my interest and only its appearance on a historical fiction recommendation list caused me to give it over 50 pages.

I wasn't taken with the style at all. For one, this is first person, yet early on she's telling us of scenes in the palace with Xerxes she couldn't have witnessed--yes, I know, they could have been reported to her the way the doings of say Bush's or Obama's cabinet meetings are reported to those of us who have never seen the inside of the White House, but it seemed jarring. Then there were the flashbacks done in eye-straining italics--always to me an amateurish move, as if stupid font tricks will drape gauze before our eyes. Kohn also went well over her quota in exclamation points and her dialogue was graceless.

Finally, the author's Esther struck me as vapid, especially in her devotion to the spineless Mordecai her betrothed (and uncle!) Yes, I know, this wasn't a modern woman, but one raised in a patriarchal culture. That didn't stop Diamant (whose *Red Tent* this novel was compared to on the cover) from making her heroine a compelling figure without feeling anachronistic. But then Diamant can write...

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### **Chuck says**

This is an historical novel based on the life of Queen Esther on which the Bible's book of Esther is based. Esther is a beautiful young Jewish girl of fourteen when she is abducted, as were many other young virgins, at King Xerxes order to join the king's harem from which a new queen would be chosen. This is the same King Xerxes who sat on a mountain top and watched his Persian army defeat the 300 Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae. Esther is chosen to be the new queen and Mrs. Kohn describes vividly the details of her life as queen including Esther's role in saving the Jews in Persia from an edict of genocide. I re-read the Book of Esther after reading the novel and found that with a few additions and clarifications the novel was faithful to the history. I found it to be a thoroughly enjoyable read.

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## **Ursula says**

I was really drawn into this book right away. I didn't know anything about Esther, so I can't really comment on the historical/Biblical accuracy of the story. The plot moves along very quickly in the beginning, with Esther (then called Hadassah) being orphaned in Babylon and going to live with her cousin/husband-to-be Mordechai in Persia. Mordechai, however, is now known as Marduka the Babylonian, an adviser to King Xerxes I.

Before Hadassah can sort out whether or not her cousin still intends to marry her (she's 14 and getting impatient), she's taken by the king's soldiers and sent to the harem to see if she will be a good concubine for the king. She is now known as Esther and fearful of revealing herself to be Jewish. She finds favor with Xerxes and is soon elevated to Queen. She ultimately uses this position to save the Jews of the Persian Empire from a death edict.

Just looking at it as a story, I was hoping that Xerxes would end up having a little more substance to him, or at least a more consistent characterization. But royalty was allowed to be as mercurial as they pleased, so maybe that's based on history. I sped through the first 2/3 of the book, but the last part dragged for me a bit. I was sort of disappointed - I thought Esther would do more, somehow, or change Xerxes for the better, and the last chapter or so seemed unnecessary.

But overall, I enjoyed it and the depiction of a harem/concubine/court setting from a place and era about which I knew nothing.

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## **Zohar - ManOfLaBook.com says**

The story is a familiar one, Hadassah, a Jewish orphan, is being brought to the court of King Xerxes as a possible queen. Hiding her Jewish origins she changes her name to Esther, becomes queen and saves the Jews from certain death (now...let's eat).

The book itself is very inventive, I must give the author credit and I really enjoyed the first part of the book. However, for me the book took a wrong turn by not sticking with the biblical timeline and taking too many liberties with the "fiction" part of historical fiction. Part of my enjoyment reading historical fiction is that I learn something along the way, if I have to pick apart what's accurate and what's not it takes away from the experience.

The female characters are drawn very nicely, but the males seemed to be a bit flat and uninteresting. That's too bad because Xerxes, Mordechai and Haman are fascinating cultural, historical and biblical characters by their own right.

This is not a criticism, just an observation.

Another issue is consistency. The king is depicted as a raging drunk in one scene, and as a benevolent monarch in another and from some reason Esther's portrayal changes towards the end of the book. However, these might be just me nitpicking because I really like the Book of Esther.

Overall I liked the book. It was engaging, entertaining and doesn't sugar-coat (too much) the harsh life women had (even royalty).

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## **Tifnie says**

The Gilded Chamber is pretty much a verbatim of The Book of Esther in the Old Testament. I pulled out my Bible, read Book of Esther and the author, Rebecca Kohn, used just about all of the text and then wove a tale to fill in the blanks to make her story - albeit something like a soft porn.

So, for those of you who do not know The Book of Esther, err..rather The Gilded Chamber, here is the story:

When King Xerxes commands his wife to display herself in front of his men in nothing but a turban, she refuses. Now exiled from the King's kingdom for disobeying, the king sets out to find every virgin in his kingdom for his pleasure/harem. Taken from her home at the age of 14, Esther finds herself in the King's harem where she must undergo 12 months of beauty treatments before being presented to the king.

Fast forward...once Esther has secured the favor of the king, she sets out to free her people, the Jews, from an edict issued by the King to kill all Jews in his kingdom for disobeying his rules.

Unfortunately, our first time author, Rebecca Kohn, spent too much time on Esther's 12 months of beauty treatments, the King's favorites, the outfits that the virgins wear, the eunuchs that run the harem, and wine induced pleasures that the real story of Esther freeing her people from slaughter was an afterthought.

Pity.

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## **Haley Starshine ;) says**

Rebecca Kohn hasn't exactly created a masterpiece in *The Gilded Chamber*, with an unsatisfying climax and a style that seems to strain its first-person capabilities, but she *has* written a solid work that pretty well taps into an incredibly powerful narrative tradition behind the Bible.

Kohn's prose vacillates between poetry and cringe-inducing -- Esther refers to her sexuality as "her flower," for God's sake, on multiple occasions, and it doesn't matter that this is the kind of modest metaphor Esther would've actually used, it's still jarring and embarrassing enough that Kohn should've at least tried to find a workaround. And it's pretty easy to see how a different kind of reader wouldn't see the poetry there at all, but put it down to purple prose; the seemingly endless descriptions of the extravagance of palace life can, after the nineteenth iteration, feel just a touch repetitive.

There are definitely places, notably the stretches of time between Esther's arrival at the harem and her marriage, and her marriage and her miscarriage, that are hugely underutilized in the book. Kohn mainly fills the time with anecdotes about the major events in Esther's friends' lives, but by skipping over how Esther and her friends pass time in the day-to-day vagaries of palace life, Kohn misses a huge opportunity to make Esther more relatable and likable. What we get instead are a few paragraphs about boredom and depression that, while probably accurate to the lives of harem women in Persia 2500 years ago, don't exactly make for thrilling reading.

But what I think leaves me the most dissatisfied about this book is the way her ultimate triumph -- turning the beauty that has trapped her into a life of decadence and excess into a weapon for the good of her people -- doesn't quite strike the reader as the thrilling triumph of good over evil that it ought to be, that it definitely *is* in the Biblical Book of Esther. There's no sense of climactic resolution when Esther gets Haman sentenced to death. In fact, it doesn't even seem a result of her actions, as it's made pretty explicit that the official reason is Haman's threats towards Esther's life, not Esther's accusations of Haman. It's a huge letdown. We've been watching Esther spiral downwards into being the simplistic ornamentation women were meant to be at that time, and in the pivotal moment where she summons up the force of her sexuality and becomes a warrior instead of a weapon, she...doesn't manage to do much at all, or at least it's not portrayed that way. Kohn's Esther does some pretty impressive things: she saves her friends, she saves her people, she overcomes the circumstances that have been forced upon her by her beauty. But when she, as the narrator, fails to recognize the importance of what she's done, the reader isn't quite convinced, either, and as a result Esther's entire character arc falls flat on its face.

That's not to say that Kohn's book isn't strong, even stunning, in other areas. The snapshots of life she conjures up of Persia, circa 500 BCE, are overflowing with life -- you can practically feel the historical accuracy dripping off the tiles. And in spite of the way that Esther, one of the Bible's iconic seductresses, is reduced to a vapid girl bordering on the unlikable at times whose greatest success isn't even hers, Kohn has done an incredible job revealing what life was like for the women of the ancient world -- from Freni, freed and charged with backbreaking work to ensure her family's survival, to Puah, aged and trapped into servitude, to Esther herself, *The Gilded Chamber* is thick with stories of the secret lives of women, and the secret horrors of *being* a woman in a time when the king's law is absolute and woman are occasionally less than property.

At times -- especially when Kohn taps into a Biblical narrative tradition that calls the repetition of these stories through millennia -- Kohn's writing can be shiveringly lovely. When Esther describes herself as "a blessing to [Puah] in her old age," for example, the almost thoughtless reminder of Abraham and Isaac is a punch to the gut with the weight of cultural history. And *The Gilded Chamber*'s take on the role of the faith in the lives of Mordechai and Esther is surprising and intriguing; for a story ripped from the pages of the Hebrew Bible, it's almost startling to imagine Mordechai as an unobservant Jew, or Esther as a girl who doesn't know a single Hebrew prayer; the transformations of Mordechai and Esther, and the unwavering faith of Puah and Freni, is one character arc that definitely *doesn't* fall flat.

In summary: worth reading, but definitely wouldn't read again, and would recommend with caution.

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### **Jamie J says**

This behind-the-scenes glimpse of an emancipated royal concubine is one undergirded in Orientalist romanticism. It completely reifies the 2-300 yr old Western stereotype of "exotic" harem behavior. I nearly threw-up when the author described homosexual activity within the harem, not because I didn't enjoy the visuals, but because it was SO PREDICTABLE!

I would hesitate to compare "The Guilded Chamber" to "The Red Tent" just because the main character is Jewish woman and the story is told from a female perspective. The writing was simplistic at best and the plot was trite. Esther's excessive musings over her late mother and her estranged cousin-husband and the all-too-obvious foreshadowing ruined the storyline for me. I dreaded reading the book until the last 100 pages or so when a few interesting characters were finally introduced.

If you've read the Red Tent and The Guided Chamber and are interested in other readings about Jewish woman in historically-based yet fanciful settings, may I suggest "Flowers in the Blood" by Guy Couturier. It's a fantastic story and is very well written.

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### **Marissa says**

I was really looking forward to reading this book, Because it's about one of my favorite subjects (Queen Esther).

But I ended up reading only 2 or 3 pages and closed the book, because I couldn't believe how graphic (sexual) it was...and I'm sorry but I was Disgusted by it.

Now I know and love the story of Queen Esther very well, so I found this book very distasteful.

And also it's NOT a book for all ages.

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### **Prairie78 says**

Here's the deal: very minor problems can sour a novel, and this book is filled with minor problems; and unfortunately, some major ones as well. One problem is the author doesn't know how she feels about her characters. It's as though she's developed them haphazardly, with no thought for consistency or cohesion. The relationships between characters are not believable. The behaviors of the characters are not believable. A major problem is that the plot disappears at one point, never really to resurface. The story of Queen Esther is rich and complex, and the author almost seems to use it well, only to completely fail.

There are some serious descriptive problems as well. For example (and I'm embellishing ever so slightly here): "My sorrow flowed from me like a red blood river that filled the coffers of my enemies with its bittersweet fragrance."

No, actually, I take that back, there's no embellishment there at all. The book is filled with similar phrases, and while at first they seem quite lovely and poetic, by the end of the novel, you want to stab your eyes out so that you too might weep a red blood river.

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### **Kris Irvin says**

I read this book in early 2008, after buying it for a dollar from Borders. I remember being drawn into it at first, but couldn't believe how graphic (sexual) it was. The word that comes to mind is smut. Total smut. Normally after I finish a book I own and didn't like, I donate it. This one, I threw away. It wasn't even good enough to recycle.

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