

Flower from Castile Trilogy: Book One: The Alhambra Decree

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During the tumultuous Spanish Inquisition, with an impending battle to conquer Moorish lands brewing, a privileged Spanish Catholic girl named Isabella Obringon is kidnapped from her parents. Her kidnappers reveal to Isabella that she was born a Jew, and that they have taken her in an effort to keep her safe from persecution. Isabella is initially brought to stay with the King of Granada in a Moorish palace, but with a battle approaching she is still in danger. She is finally escorted to the home of a loving Jewish family.

Isabella questions her own loyalty to Spain when one of the strongest acts against the Jewish population there is issued by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand—the Alhambra Decree, which will expel the Jewish people from their homeland. Against this backdrop, the investigation into young Isabella’s disappearance gives rise to the cruel torment of anyone suspected of being involved in her kidnapping.

While telling the story of Isabella’s abduction, her journey home, and the uncertain future that awaits her, the author offers an apt description of the political events going on, in and around her world. The novel follows the fundraising efforts to finance Spain’s conquests, the battle to conquer Granada, and accounts of the torture tactics of the Inquisition. The social and political tension of the time are clearly conveyed to readers, even those with no prior knowledge of the period.

Despite the fact that there are multiple plot lines, Gafni generally succeeds in transitioning clearly from one part of the story to another. She has much to cover in one book, and although the story lines show elements of a greater whole, some scenes feel unnecessary and slow the book’s overall pace.

While her writing style is rich in detail, Gafni’s descriptions of events and people often merely tell the reader what is happening and what her characters are doing and feeling rather than showing. This hinders the development of both the plot and the characters, further slowing the pace of the novel.

Through multiple perspectives and a huge cast of characters, the author paints a picture of the realities and complexities of fifteenth-century Spain. For example, she includes accounts of the horrendous torture inflicted by Tomas de Torquemada, but also shows how, as the Queen’s confessor, he uses his influence to earnestly encourage the monarchy to establish Spain as a Catholic nation.

With so many other characters, main characters like the young Isabella appear overly simplified, their stories sometimes lost among the drama of historical elements. In addition, had the author spent some time delving into Queen Isabella’s thoughts, it would have added an interesting dimension to the story. After all, her decisions largely direct the plot.

The author conveys the cruelty and injustice inflicted on the Jewish people during the Inquisition. Forced to flee religious persecution in Egypt herself at a young age, Gafni is able to provide authenticity to the story and elicit an emotional connection from the reader. Despite its flaws, *Flower from Castile Trilogy: Book One: The Alhambra Decree* is an accessible novel that inspires interest in, and relays the complexities of, a fascinating period in history.

ALICIA SONDHI (January 20, 2012)

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