

Hidden Ones: A Veil Of Memories

Marcia Fine

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Hidden Ones is a compelling and often sensuous portrait of brave individuals who fought to preserve their traditions.

In Marcia Fine's captivating *Hidden Ones*, a family of *conversos* battle to maintain their traditions under the ever-ferocious eye of the Catholic Inquisition, resulting in a tense and inspiring picture of faith under fire.

The Crespin family are respected, if slightly held apart, in their Mexican town; they traffic in textiles, attend Mass faithfully, and treat their neighbors with dignity. But they are also a family of secret Jews, and this fact puts them in continual danger. When officers of the Inquisition come for their matriarch, Clara, the family must find a way to hold themselves together until her fate is determined.

The story comes alternately from the perspectives of Clara and her granddaughter, Celendaria. Clara speaks from inside the Inquisitor prison, expressing her fears privately while maintaining her innocence before tribunals; Celendaria captures the worries, and the day-to-day life, of the family outside of the prison walls. And as the matriarch faces her probable end, Celendaria comes of age, under constant threat but nonetheless eager to hold on to the revelations of her new womanhood, including possible love.

Both women articulate their family's history with grace. Sentences move seamlessly between conversation and reflection, resulting in a calming narrative fluidity. As much as men are present in this tale—as teachers, providers, lovers, and persecutors—*Hidden Ones* remains the story of the unbreakable power of women. Familiar elements of Jewish historical fiction are here, though the epic flavor of the story serves most as a background for Clara and Celendaria's resilience, even in the face of the ultimate betrayal.

Evocative images capture life in seventeenth century Mexico, from deprivations to pleasure: "It is a small rebellion to feel the gossamer fabric against my skin, the wings of a butterfly grazing my torso." In similar fashion, lines turn Jewish traditions over and around to make a reverent catalog of their contours: the warm light of *Shabbat*, the preciousness of holy books, the cleansing waters of the *mikvah*, the lusciousness of kashrut cooking. Yet this championing of tradition also contains reminders of the dangers that Jewish practice held for *conversos* living under the malicious gaze of Church authorities; the text maintains this tension well.

Hard decisions—between fleeing and waiting out dangers, between confessing and remaining stoic—are expertly plotted, and "right" decisions remain ever elusive. The jealous avarice and perspicacity of Church authorities is an ever-present factor in the text, and is rendered with quiet skill. Villains may drive the story, but they are not allowed to own it—"history will judge you [and] your lack of empathy....God will judge you," a resigned Clara tells the Inquisitors—and there is power in that narrative choice.

Important historical details are sometimes an awkward fit in the family's dialogue, but they also serve to provide needed context for their struggles. Final chapters are a rush toward a hopeful future, breaking with the terse years of Clara's imprisonment, but they also add colorful new perspective.

Hidden Ones is a compelling and often sensuous portrait of brave individuals who fought to preserve their traditions, even in times of great distress or across generations of persecution.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March 3, 2017)

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