

## The Pruning

**Ora Murphy**

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*A woman who longs for belonging navigates the perils of romance and religion in Ora Murphy's engrossing novel.*

In Ora Murphy's novel *The Pruning*, a woman searches for love and religious belonging.

Ruth, a single mom of three, approaches her rabbi to officially convert to Judaism after living a Jewish life for fifteen years. As she awaits an answer from a London beit din, she meets Samuel, an Orthodox Jewish man. Though she's at first determined to steer clear of dating until her conversion is confirmed, she and Samuel enter into a relationship. Within weeks, Ruth introduces Samuel to her children and meets his mother. When her lie of omission is revealed, Samuel feels betrayed; he breaks up with Ruth. Though she spirals afterwards, she's also guided toward self-acceptance, discovery, and new love.

Family is the central concern of the novel. Ruth's drive to convert is propelled by her need to create a stable foundation for her children. Her Orthodox community adheres to the tenet of matrilineal descent, though, and Ruth, who was adopted, doesn't know her mother or her mother's history. By contrast, Samuel's roots are easy to trace; born to Spanish Jewish parents, he can tell their love story from the Spanish Civil War to the present.

The push and pull between the clarity of Samuel's roots and the obscurity of Ruth's is a major conflict, both in the couple's relationship and within the book. Ruth is surrounded by people who are sure of themselves and their places in their community; they know where they came from. By contrast, she uses her work, the ritual of the Jewish calendar, and her romance with Samuel to distract herself from her lack of knowledge about her family.

Though the novel includes weighty occurrences, including the reemergence of Ruth's ex-husband and an implausibly lost piece of mail in a well-run household, it moves well, in great part because of its characters' conversations. Throughout, Ruth is compelling because of her flaws. She's undisciplined when it comes to romance, but she loves her children and is fierce in protecting them. Her choices are not always correct, but she owns them when they cause trouble. Supporting characters are present most to contribute to Ruth's story without distracting from it.

In the engrossing novel *The Pruning*, a woman grapples with questions of heritage and personal history, both of which define and shape her present.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (September 16, 2020)

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