



Apprentice

Maggie Anton

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Hisdadukh, blessed to be beautiful and learned, is the youngest child of Talmudic sage Rav Hisda. The world around her is full of conflict. Rome, fast becoming Christian, battles Zoroastrian Persia for dominance while Rav Hisda and his colleagues struggle to establish new Jewish traditions after the destruction of Jerusalem's Holy Temple. Against this backdrop Hisdadukh embarks on the tortuous path to become an enchantress in the very land where the word 'magic' originated.

But the conflict affecting Hisdadukh most intimately arises when her father brings his two best students before her, a mere child, and asks her which one she will marry. Astonishingly, the girl replies, "Both of them." Soon she marries the older student, although it becomes clear that the younger one has not lost interest in her. When her new-found happiness is derailed by a series of tragedies, a grieving Hisdadukh must decide if she does, indeed, wish to become a sorceress. Based on actual Talmud texts and populated with its rabbis and their families, *Rav Hisda's Daughter: Book I – Apprentice* brings the world of the Talmud to life - from a woman's perspective.

Apprentice Details

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Author : Maggie Anton

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Mindy Buenemann says

It was interesting learning about how the Jewish people structured their life around the laws of the rabbis. I am definitely happy not to have lived like this. Women had hardly any rights. They also mixed their biblical laws with superstitions.

Maggie Anton says

Hisdadukh, blessed to be both beautiful and learned, is the youngest child of Talmudic sage Rav Hisda. The series about her unfolds in third-century Babylonia, in the household of her father, one of a handful of beleaguered rabbis struggling to establish new Jewish traditions after the destruction of Jerusalem's Holy Temple.

The world around her is full of conflict. Rome, fast becoming Christian, battles Zoroastrian Persia for dominance while Rav Hisda and his colleagues face defiance by those Jews who cling to the old ways. Against this backdrop Hisdadukh embarks on the tortuous path to become an enchantress in the very land where the word 'magic' originated - where some women draw on the occult to protect and to heal as some employ sorcery to gain power for themselves and to injure others.

But the conflict affecting Hisdadukh most intimately arises when her father brings his two best students before her, a mere child, and asks her which one she will marry. Astonishingly, Hisdadukh replies, "Both of them."

Thus she marries the older student, although it becomes clear that the younger one has not lost interest in her. Despite her growing powers, Hisdadukh soon suffers a woman's most devastating losses. Despairing, she flees to Eretz Israel, her people's ancient homeland. There she confronts her greatest challenges – an evil sorceress intent on destroying her, a previous suitor she despises, and a charming mosaic artisan who offers her happiness at the cost of repudiating everything her family values most.

Amy says

I enjoyed this book. It was good historical fiction, though a little dense with Talmud. Sometimes I just wanted to get back to the storyline. About 3/4 through I thought I wouldn't read the next one - but she left the ending hanging just enough that I want to find out what happened ...

Haven says

Rav Hisda's daughters takes a slightly different angle than the novels of Rashi's daughters. Jewish mysticism is explored more in this book. The heroine, Hisdadukh, is in a position where she has the ability to learn the ways of traditional Jewish women and amulet making as a trade. She also has the advantage of being able to learn Talmud and Torah from her father and his students. She excels in nearly everything she does and yet tragedy strikes her at nearly every turn.

As always Maggie Anton has done a tremendous amount of research when writing her novels. I'm always biting my nails with anticipation awaiting her next novel. I haven't yet begun *Enchantress*, the sequel to *Apprentice*, but I already have it bought. I'm also hoping there will be more stories.

Anton's literary works are so well researched, so well written. I was first introduced to her novels by my Hebrew teacher. I didn't know what to think of at first. My only introduction to Jewish novels were Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*. When I first picked up Anton's book, I was expecting some more of the same. Anton blew me away. She opened my eyes to ancient Jewish practice, to the roles of women, and to Jewish prayers. She made me more interested in works written by Jewish authors. She has revived my interest in practicing Judaism, which is something I didn't think was possible. I have so much to credit her for. Maggie Anton, your books are amazing. You make me dream of worlds far away and you make them seem so close to me, almost as if I can reach out and touch them.

Vivien Silber says

Another fabulous story from Maggie Anton! Loved it!

Hal Schrieve says

This is a story about a girl/young woman in third century Babylonia who is the daughter of a famous rabbi and becomes an enchantress. Making bowls and amulets to protect pregnant women, children and travelers, she also studies Torah and debates issues of Mishna with her two successive husbands, both of whom are also accomplished rabbis. She combats witches and curses placed on her family while also fighting for a measure of power over her own life, children and land in a system that makes this profoundly difficult.

The first thing I want to note is that this book would have been a lot of fun for me when I was 12-14. Though there are sexual themes, the bulk of the text is a coming of age story about what womanhood meant in a profoundly misogynist age and what agency would mean within an ancient society. The apprentice narrative within YA is one of my favorite things about historical fiction YA and fantasy—and this book doesn't disappoint. While Hisdadukh faces major tragedies, her power to handle them gradually increases over the course of the story.

I like the ambiguous depiction of magic in the story, which allows for different interpretations: 1. Magic and grace inspired by piety both exist, 2. Only grace inspired by piety exists, or 3. All of what appears to be magic is coincidence. While I love a good fantasy novel and visual magic, I appreciate how well integrated the historical aspect is with the fantasy elements.

Well-researched (to the degree possible), this book tries to fit stories from the Talmud into what is known about the cultural context of third-century Babylonian society. Hisdadukh navigates a world where rabbis have ambiguous authority among Sura's Jewish population, though they command a level of respect. The world she lives in is not egalitarian —there is slavery, misogyny, and routine persecution from Persian kings—and the novel depicts her coming up against the injustices of her age and choosing to combat or sometimes accept them. The novel also shows how diverse the religious world of ancient Persia was and how there were a variety of Jewish practices in the ancient world. While Hisdadukh has opinions about what the right way to worship and live is, the narrative demonstrates that differences of opinion on what Torah and

Mishna dictate would not have stopped Jewish populations from taking an interest in one another or living side by side. There are also converts in Hisdadukh's Sura, and the text outlines what their lives would have been like. While a lot of this is conjecture, the thought that goes into the narrative is really good.

If you like historical fiction like "Anna of Byzantium" which depict powerful women navigating the patriarchal societies of their time, or books like Anita Diamant's The Red Tent, which explore female figures in Jewish holy texts as empathetic Human figures, this is a great book to read.

Tara says

This is one of my favorite books. You immediately feel as if you are transported in time. It is full of rich history of fourth century Jews in Babylon and the sorcery and superstitions they practiced. The characters are vivid and captivating. I couldn't put this book down and finished this and Enchantress in a weekend. The greatest thing about this book is that it centers on a woman who would have normally been overlooked and forgotten during this time in history. The author breathes life into a woman who has been left behind in the history books.

Lisa Liel says

I don't give out 5 stars very often. And I'd probably give 4.5 if that were an option. But the richness of the description of the Sages is just amazing. And learning parts of the Gemara afterwards and coming across statements or arguments that were described in this book was just so cool.

Toby Schonfeld says

I really enjoyed this!

Lee Anne says

Did not care for this one. More than I cared to know about endless discussions of rabbinic minutiae, women's menses, & demons! Some of the content was a bit interesting regarding customs of Persia & Judaism in the 300's (?). Can't recommend as an engaging book; more of an endurance contest if one cares to finish it; I finished, but never really connected.

Shomeret says

This novel deals with the daughter of a Talmudic figure who lived in Persia. The main character, Hisdadukh, is mentioned in the Talmud. It actually means Hisda's daughter in Persian. Since relatively few names of women have come down to us from ancient Jewish sources, I would have assumed that the redactors of the Talmud had left her name out. Maggie Anton decided that Hisdadukh actually was her given name. I had a

problem with this idea. She portrays Rav Hisda as a man who taught his daughter to read, consulted her about who she wished to marry, and had no problem with her sitting in on his Talmud classes. He must have had a great deal of respect for his daughter and her autonomy. So why would he have given her a generic name? That didn't make sense to me, but I got over it.

I got over it because I found this book brilliant and original. I am probably one of its ideal readers. An ideal reader of this book is someone who is educated in Judaism, interested in its history, and in women's historical practices.

Hisdadukh's studies in amulet making, and other Jewish magical practices set this book apart. They reveal a Judaism that is fundamentally different from the Jewish religion as it is currently practiced. I was taught that amulets were always regarded as superstitious among Jews, and that only the ignorant really believed in their power. Am Ha'aretz means someone who is ignorant in a contemporary Jewish context. In the context of this novel, it means someone who doesn't accept the authority of rabbis. Anton portrays these refuseniks as the majority of the Jewish community in Persia. In the time when Hisdadukh lived, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem had been relatively recent. Rabbinic Judaism was an innovation that allowed Judaism to survive without a temple. I knew that, but I hadn't imagined that there could have been such tremendous resistance to this re-conceptualization of the religion. I should have. Historically, changes in religious outlook involve a slow process of evolution. They don't happen overnight. Occult folk traditions were also never completely eliminated from Judaism. My great grandfather considered astrology when he decided the date of my father's wedding. My grandmother did divination by reading the patterns of spilled chickpeas.

I think that readers who know little or nothing about Judaism may not understand or appreciate this book as much as I did. It seems to me that Maggie Anton assumes a certain amount of knowledge in her readers. For example, we are told that the Jews in Palestine during this period celebrated Tu B'Av as a holiday in which unmarried Jews can find mates. I ran a search on Tu B'Av and learned from the article on Tu B'Av on Wikipedia that in modern Israel it's the equivalent of Valentine's Day. Hisdadukh considered it an antidote to Tisha B'Av, the anniversary of the destruction of the Jewish Temple, which is still commemorated in modern times with a fast. Someone who is unfamiliar with the Jewish calendar would see the similarity between Tu B'Av and Tisha B'Av without realizing why they are similar. These names are actually dates. Tisha B'Av occurs on the 9th of the month of Av. Tu B'Av occurs less than a week later on the 15th of Av. This is not explained in the book. There are numerous details of Jewish life that aren't fully explicated for the general reader. That is the only weakness in Rav Hisda's Daughter that I can identify.

I consider this novel the best book that I've read so far in 2013. I will definitely want to obtain the sequels. In the mean time, I have a subject that I want to pursue in further research. I have just located *The Women of the Talmud* by Judith Z. Abrams and intend to read it by the end of March.

For my complete review see my February 2013 blog post "But Is It Really Jewish Magic?--Reading Rav Hisda's Daughter" at:

<http://www.maskedpersona.blogspot.com>

Barbara says

I had never heard of Rav Hisda, but had so loved Maggie Anton's "Rashi's Daughters" my expectations were very high. At first I was disappointed.... All seemed too esoteric, too much of the hair-splitting arguments that bore me, but then I did finally get into the story. I know little to nothing, really, about this period of Jewish history during the Babylonian exile, and the story did bring the period to life. I was quite surprised at all the talk of incantations, amulets, demons and spells connected to Judaism, and found why my husband often used to call our little dog "Mazik," (impish demon). I found myself eager to keep reading once I was halfway through... I wavered on my star rating....probably 3.5 - 4.

Helen says

On many different levels, I am grateful to Maggie Anton for writing this luminous book.

When you study Talmud--the oral law accompanying the Torah that was originally passed down by word of mouth and eventually organized, edited, cataloged and written down--you learn the names of many different rabbis. You read their opinions, you observe them arguing with each other, but for you, the reader, there's no way of knowing what era they lived in, or what events impacted their lives. On the same page, you come across the comments of someone who lived in Babylon, the opinions of someone who lived during the Roman persecution, or the analysis of someone who lived in France around the year 1000 C.E.

What we know about the first centuries after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem comes to us like flashes of light. The Talmud is a remarkable document. There are discussions of great intricacy, where an agreement rests at the end of a long string of logic; probing psychological insights; passages of awe-inspiring humanity; and hilarious insults. In the course of the discussion of a particular law, the Gemara may reveal that a particular rabbi was rich or poor, or if he was in a stormy marriage, or that one rabbi made charcoal for a living (considered a very low occupation) but was rich in wisdom. Our knowledge of their daily lives appears in these tantalizing glimpses--mundane workaday details that shaped our Rabbi's opinions and decisions, decisions which have been codified through the centuries as unshakable Laws. The voices of women are absent. We know of women only through studying the laws that apply to them. Two thousand years ago, women were more or less possessions, ruled by their fathers, husbands or brothers.

Through the story of Hisdadukh, daughter of the wise, wealthy, and eminent Rav Hisda, Maggie Anton brings these silent women to life, revealing their prayers, their yearnings, their customs, their labors, their relationships, their tragic losses, and the power that came from sorcery. *Rav Hisda's Daughter* is a must-read for anyone interested in women and the ancient world, and if that's not your thing, the novel is a fascinating tapestry of Jewish history, early Christian history, and the history of the Middle East. I couldn't put it down.

Carmen says

I like the exposure to this period in history. Specially the discussions about the law. I could have used less talk of romance and descriptions of the sort. It took way from the overall theme of the book. I would have liked more descriptions as far as the particulars of the time period (clothing, etc.) I found I had to look these things up to get an overall feel for the times. Complexity of theme and writing was fine, but a bit over simplified at certain points. Would recommend if you have time to research along with the book.

Lillian says

Great read. Historical fiction. Lots of Talmud throughout
