

Review: *The Book of V.*

by Carrie Seleman

In the midst of another Purim, albeit an odd one, what better way to celebrate than by reading a rewriting of Esther's story? Anna Solomon takes on the task of imagining what details might fill in the gaps left by the Book of Esther in her novel *The Book of V.* She doesn't stop with the old story, though; the book alternates between following the Esther we know and love and two more modern women: Vivian ("Vee") and Lily.

Solomon's version of Esther is not the one we love to share with children. It is dark and, frankly, more realistic. Esther's uncle, Marduk, resents her and sends her away to the king's pageant for selfish reasons alone. Once there, Esther spends months waiting with numerous other young women to be beckoned by the king, using their bodies to get what they want and need from the eunuchs assigned to care for them. Esther's life is no bask in the sun once selected to be queen. All she wants is to go home. All she wants is to warn her people, who are under constant attack by the Persians. Her attempts to escape, or at least get word out to the Jews, are thwarted by Haman time and time again.

This story is juxtaposed with that of Lily, a second wife in 2016 who spends her time comparing herself to Esther (with Purim quickly approaching). We watch her battle with her mother over the extent that Judaism will weave into the lives of her children and her battle with herself as a stay-at-home mom who turned down a tenure-track position at a university.

Lastly, we have Vee, a 1970s wife of a senator who represents a modern embodiment of Vashti. Vee's husband, like King Ahasuerus, throws two separate parties, one for the men and one for the women. Vee's husband, like King Ahasuerus, summons Vee to the men's party and demands her to undress. Vee, like Vashti, refuses and is exiled (in this case, to her friend's home).

We all know the Book of Esther as a story highlighting a heroine, the strength of women in a time when most stories erased the impact that women had on them. Solomon's retelling doesn't just do that justice; it is a raw and honest exploration of feminism through the experiences of three different women in three vastly different times. All three of the stories have parallels in their struggles with what feminism means to both the main characters and society as a whole. Solomon shows that, as much as we may think things have changed, we are actually still facing the same challenges that women generations before us fought to extinguish. Solomon also uses her novel as an opportunity to show that there is no right way to be a feminist, and no one is a perfect embodiment of feminism.

The *Book of V.* is an important reminder to women of all ages that there are many before us who set the foundations for the progress that has been made, but that there is still more that must be done. At the same time, Solomon shows through her stories that each woman must recognize the most precious form of feminist success as living her life however makes her happy, whether that means as a stay-at-home mother of multiple children, as a mom who works full-time, as a woman who never marries nor has children, or anything in between.

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