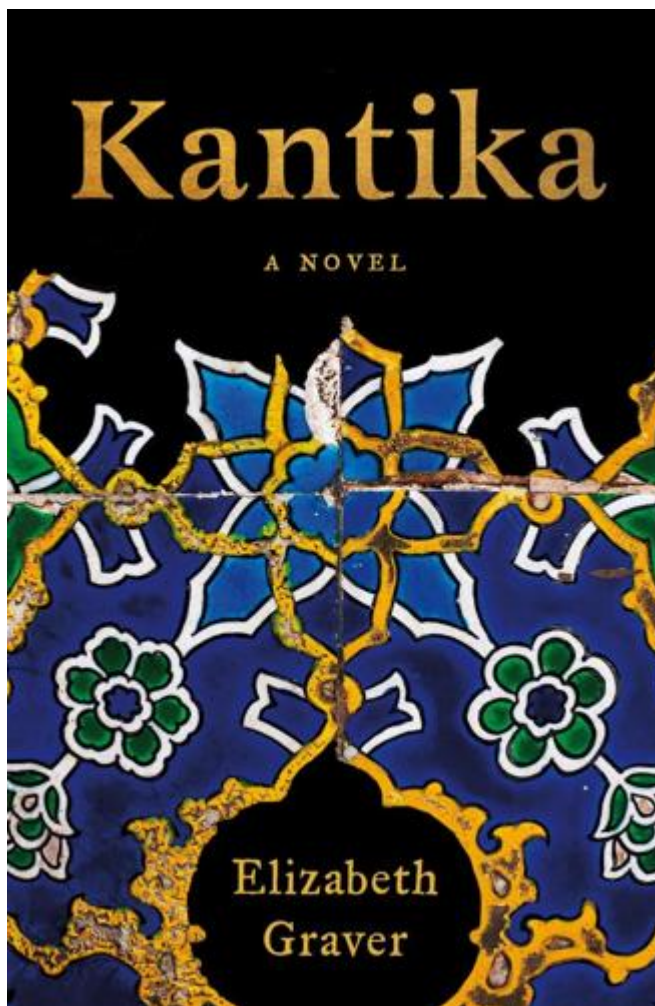


https://www.berkshireagle.com/arts_and_culture/books/book-review-kantika-elizabeth-graver/article_61deffc6-f4d8-11ed-9b67-035c3809c078.html

BOOK REVIEW

Review: Taking inspiration from her Sephardic grandmother, Elizabeth Graver's new novel, 'Kantika' is a love song to family, community and home

By Jennifer Huberdeau, The Berkshire Eagle
May 20, 2023



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Knowing why my ancestors immigrated to a new country, is shrouded in the past, lost in passed-down stories, and romanticized with tales of love and opportunity in faraway places.

Read It

"Kantika" by Elizabeth Graver

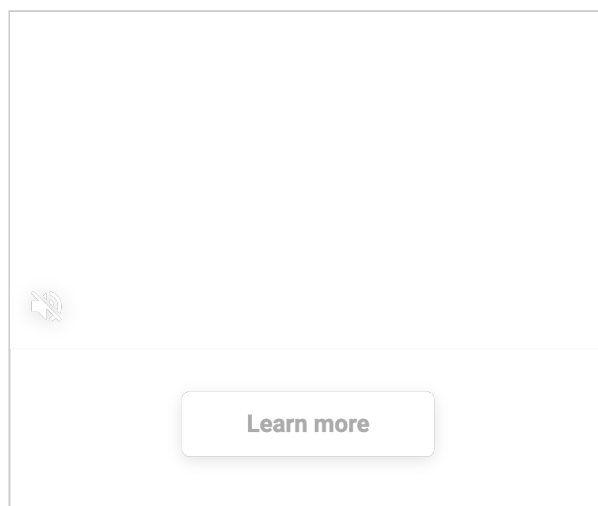
Published by Metropolitan Books

304 pages

\$27.99

I have never learned why an Irish widow, with three children in tow, crossed the Atlantic, to live in Dalton. There are no stories as to what brought my grandfather's German grandparents to farm the hills of Clarksburg and only whispers of what pushed my Italian-Austrian great-grandparents to leave Tyrol for work in the factories of North Adams.

I imagine there were promises of work, maybe even a proposal, for the widow who eventually remarried and raised a blended family. Were my German and Italian-Austrian family members seeking opportunities? Escaping impending war, or persecution?



What would it be like to know the details? To fill in the story? I would like to believe it would be something like author Elizabeth Graver's fifth novel, "Kantika," a fictionalized version of her Sephardic maternal grandmother's journey across four countries, from Constantinople to America, using real photographs and family names.

Graver, a native of Williamstown, wrote in an email she interned for The Berkshire Eagle and Berkshires Week during the summer of 1984 and wrote pieces, in high school, that appeared in the North Adams Transcript. A professor of English at Boston College, her fourth book, "The End of the Point," was long-listed for the 2013 National Book Award in fiction.

"Kantika," which means song in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), is a beautifully written story of loss and love, of survival and sanctuary, of a search for home and identity. At its heart, it is a story of family.

If You Go

What: Book reading and signing by Elizabeth Graver

Where: Provisions Williamstown, 4 Water St., Williamstown

When: 5 p.m. Thursday, June 1

Admission: Free. Registration requested.

Information and registration: 413-425-3999, provisionswilliamstown.com

What: "Kantikas/Songs from Our Grandparents: Storytelling & Music in the Sephardic Tradition," with author Elizabeth Graver and singer/writer Sarah Aroeste.

Who: Jewish Federation of the Berkshires

Where: Hevreh of Southern Berkshire, 270 State Road, Great Barrington

When: 10:45 a.m. Friday, June 2

Admission: Free. Registration requested.

Information and registration: 413-442-4360, jewishberkshires.org

We meet the Cohen family in Constantinople, in 1914, high on the hill in their stylish three-story house, their neighbors are Greek diplomats, Armenian doctors, Jewish bankers and Turkish traders who come from a mix of religious backgrounds — Christian, Jewish and Muslim. Rebecca, then 12, and her older sister, Corrinne, attend the French-speaking Catholic school, with their neighbors' daughters and her best friend Lika. Her father, Alberto, is a wealthy businessman and a trader of textiles; her mother, Sultana, runs the household with the help of maids and nannies who oversee the younger children. It is 1914, the final year of prosperity for her family, as war is soon to break out. Lika's family immigrates to America, as many families leave Constantinople. Rebecca's Catholic school closes and she is apprenticed to a seamstress.

There are signs that things will continue to go poorly for the family, but Alberto declines to move away from the land where his family prospered. His memories of trauma are generational, his family exiled from Spain, the homeland they fled during the Inquisition.

Ten years later, the family is one of the last to remain in their neighborhood. Gone are the Armenians and Greeks, who have been pushed out by Turkey, the country's intolerance is now focused on its Jewish population. In his heart, Alberto is Turkish, not Spanish as his immigrant ancestors were. Yet, he soon finds he must return to a land he has never seen, never stepped foot in, never considered home. Alberto and Sultana convince themselves the move is needed, to protect their sons from being conscripted and sent to the front

lines. Corrinne, now married, moves to Cuba with her husband, hoping eventually to land in the United States. Rebecca goes to Spain with her parents and brothers, where her father is employed by as a low-level caretaker of a small synagogue in Barcelona. It is here that Rebecca flourishes, becomes a successful dressmaker and cares for her aging parents.

Faced with the prospect of marrying a Christian or spinsterhood, she marries the only Jewish suitor presented to her. The marriage is ill-fated, ill-matched and ends, to the reader's relief, with his unexpected death in another country. Rebecca, with two sons and aging parents to care for, is happy to run her business and keep an eye on her ever-agitated father, who mumbles under his breath about signs of violence against their Jewish community and hints of greater evils percolating in countries further east.



A letter from her sister, now living in New York, brings her to Cuba and a potential husband, a widower, the husband of her beloved childhood friend. Lika has died in childbirth, leaving her husband and daughter alone in Queens. The chemistry between Rebecca and Sam is instantaneous, their love undeniable. She soon finds herself in Queens, awaiting the arrival of her children, dealing with an overbearing mother-in-law and a coddled stepdaughter. Luna, her beloved Lika's daughter, has cerebral palsy, but Rebecca sees that as no reason for the girl, age 7, to be spoiled and treated like an infant. She sets to work on getting Luna to walk and talk on her own, finds doctors that can treat her, and encourages her continued schooling.

Life, now in Astoria, with a blended family of six, and a family shop to run, is not always rosy, but Rebecca has made a family, a home in this place that is not always welcoming, not always friendly. But always, Rebecca finds community, family and friends in the places that become home.

That is the beauty of “Kantika,” this song about family and home – which reminds us that home is where your heart is and family is made up of the people we choose.

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Jennifer Huberdeau

Features Editor

Jennifer Huberdeau is The Eagle's features editor. Prior to The Eagle, she worked at The North Adams Transcript. She is a 2021 Rabkin Award Winner, 2020 New England First Amendment Institute Fellow and a 2010 BCBS Health Care Fellow.