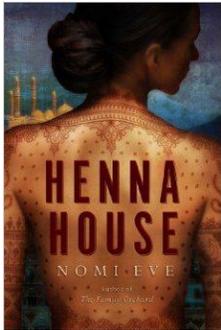




Gratz Insider, October 2014 - Story Continuation

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Gratz Alumna Selected as One Book, One Jewish Community Author



By the time she was a sophomore at Penn State, Nomi Eve knew that she wanted to become a fiction writer. Cautioned about this uncertain career path, Eve has since proved that writing is in fact her calling. She has earned a Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing from Brown University, written pieces for literary magazines, taught fiction writing at Bryn Mawr College, published two novels - *The Family Orchard* and *Henna House* - and is currently working on a third.

In searching for story inspiration, Eve reaches back into her own family history. "In the places we all come from," she says, "there are people who have lived interesting lives, and we can write our own stories if we can get back there."

Henna House is no exception. In this book, the reader is enveloped in the life of a Jewish family in 20th-century Yemen. Although the characters are fictional, the setting was inspired by a Yemenite member of Eve's own family - the widow of her father's cousin, whom Eve visited frequently while growing up spending summers in Israel.

Henna House is written from the point of view of Adela Damari, the protagonist who recounts her life story at the urging of her husband. As a young girl, Adela is haunted by fears of the Confiscator, a sinister-looking official, tasked with seizing young Jewish children from their homes upon the death of their fathers and awarding them to Muslim families for adoption. Since marriage was the only safeguard against confiscation, Jewish parents would arrange engagements for children as young as toddlers. At the age of eight, Adela is engaged to her cousin Asaf, who over time becomes her friend, playmate - and ultimately, despite their young age, her love interest.

Asaf fills a void in Adela's lonely life, and she is heartbroken when he and his father eventually leave on a long journey. But life begins anew for Adela with the arrival of her cousin Hani from the cosmopolitan southern city of Aden, "a panoply of twentieth-

century life," (Eve 211), where even girls receive an education. Hani awakens Adela to life beyond her secluded village, teaching her much, including the art of adorning women's skin with henna. Henna plays such a significant role in the novel that it virtually becomes a character in the story itself.

With her skills as a storyteller, Eve molds this somewhat obscure subject matter into a relevant, gripping and poignant tale, locked in historical context, yet managing to transcend time. Although Eve's Adela comes from a primitive and remote Yemenite village, she is an intelligent heroine, who expresses herself with contemporary resonance, as she guides the reader with grace and honesty through her life in her village, in Aden, and ultimately, in Israel.

In telling her incredible story, Adela benefits from Eve's literary talent. As the characters in the novel adorn their skin with exquisite henna designs, Eve paints her pages with poetic prose. For example, she describes women with "magnificent scarves [that] seemed to only caress their hair, not hold it at bay" (213). She metaphorically depicts a child as "a curly starry-eyed poem of a girl" (212). And she humorously labels Adela's mother as "that monarch of joyless spite who had reigned over the country of [Adela's] childhood" (250). For Eve, writing is a visual and auditory process: she not only writes and thinks in images, but she also appreciates the lyrical quality of language.

Suffused with evocative imagery from prologue to conclusion, *Henna House* is a beautiful read. Nevertheless, I was at first infuriated by the prologue, believing that it should have come with a spoiler alert because it reveals the fate of two of the main characters in the story. Interestingly though, the plot takes such a twisted path to arrive at its forgone conclusion that I was still completely shocked by the time I got there.

While Eve leads the reader on this faraway journey through her imagination, the author herself is actually rooted right here within the Gratz community. Her father taught high school students at Gratz for about 25 years, and also led Gratz student groups to Israel. Her mother taught teachers from the Philadelphia area at Gratz how to incorporate art into Jewish education. Eve is a Gratz Hebrew High School graduate, as are other members of her extended family, and two of her children are now students at the Gratz Jewish Community High School.

As The Henna House author explains, "My family is all over those Gratz walls." But unlike henna, whose color fades, Eve's family leaves a permanent legacy at Gratz.

Nomi Eve will be speaking about Henna House at the One Book, One Jewish Community (OBOJC) kickoff and book signing on Sunday, November 16 at 3 p.m. at Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El at 1001 Remington Road in Wynnwood, Pennsylvania. Admission is free and open to the public. For more information about the kickoff event, click [here](#).

OBOJC is coordinated by the Jewish Learning Venture, which partners with local synagogues and Jewish organizations to further discussion of the selected book. Gratz College has been an OBOJC partner since the program's inception, and Mindy Blechman, assistant director of admissions at Gratz, is an original member of the OBOJC implementation team.