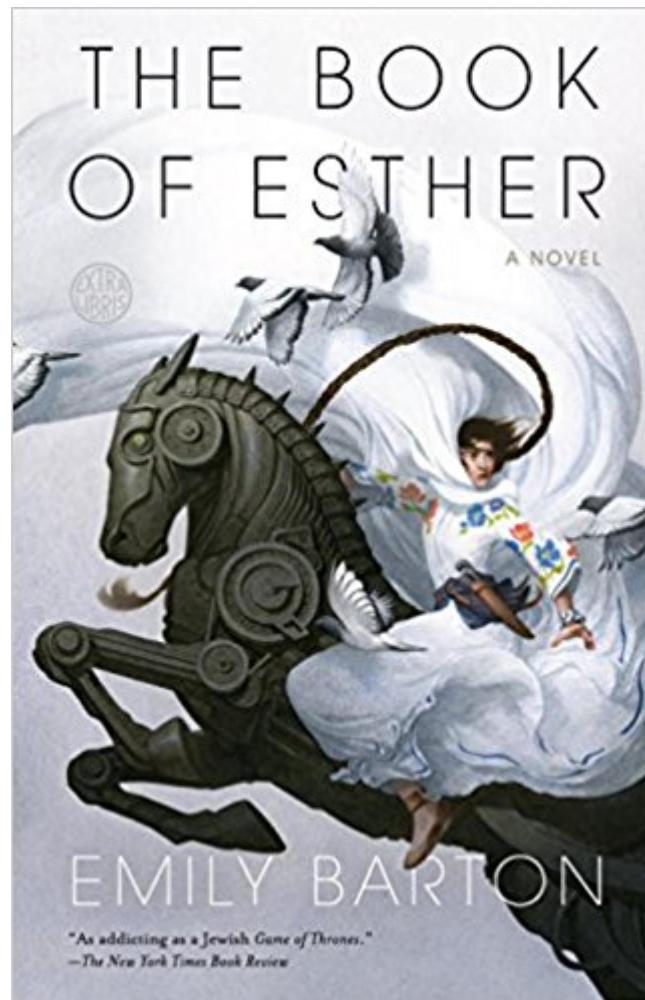




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# The Book Of Esther: A Novel



## Synopsis

What if an empire of Jewish warriors that really existed in the Middle Ages had never fallen—and was the only thing standing between Hitler and his conquest of Russia?— Eastern Europe, August 1942. The Khazar kaganate, an isolated nation of Turkic warrior Jews, lies between the Pontus Euxinus (the Black Sea) and the Khazar Sea (the Caspian). It also happens to lie between a belligerent nation to the west that the Khazars call Germania—and a city the rest of the world calls Stalingrad. After years of Jewish refugees streaming across the border from Europa, fleeing the war, Germania launches its siege of Khazaria. Only Esther, the daughter of the nation's chief policy adviser, sees the ominous implications of Germania's disregard for Jewish lives. Only she realizes that this isn't just another war but an existential threat. After witnessing the enemy warplanes' first foray into sovereign Khazar territory, Esther knows she must fight for her country. But as the elder daughter in a traditional home, her urgent question is how. Before daybreak one fateful morning, she embarks on a perilous journey across the open steppe. She seeks a fabled village of Kabbalists who may hold the key to her destiny: their rumored ability to change her into a man so that she may convince her entire nation to join in the fight for its very existence against an enemy like none Khazaria has ever faced before. The Book of Esther is a profound saga of war, technology, mysticism, power, and faith. This novel—simultaneously a steampunk Joan of Arc and a genre-bending tale of a counterfactual Jewish state by a writer who invents worlds—“out of Calvino or Borges” (The New Yorker)—is a stunning achievement. Reminiscent of Michael Chabon's The Yiddish Policemen's Union and Philip Roth's The Plot Against America, The Book of Esther reaffirms Barton's place as one of her generation's most gifted storytellers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“An imaginative, engrossing, and entertaining storytelling tapestry. . . . As addicting as a Jewish Game of Thrones.”  
The New York Times Book Review  
“Richly imagined. . . . A classic quest tale. . . . A kind of steampunk fantasia. . . . Barton’s book is Jewishly very knowledgeable, drawing on a broad range of history, mythology, and liturgy to create an internally coherent alternative universe.”  
Adam Kirsch, Tablet  
“A surreal meld of counterfactual history and Jewish lore. . . . Raises complex questions about alternate history and mythology.”  
The New Yorker  
“Barton’s audacious tale of an otherworldly uprising against the Nazis is a wild pageant of tumult and valor, magic and inventiveness, which, for all its humor, sensuality, steampunk brio, and full-tilt military action, is profoundly inquisitive. . . . With intimations of Cynthia Ozick and Michael Chabon, Barton is spellbinding and provocative in this refulgent, topsy-turvy, questing fantasy.”  
Booklist  
“In this thrillingly inventive novel, Emily Barton has created a whole world worth losing yourself in. She sneaks up on you with a story so original you’ll wonder how she found it, and so vital that it seems amazing no one has ever told it before.”  
Mary-Louise Parker  
“A bold reimagining of some of the darkest history of World War II. Barton’s Esther is like a Jewish Joan of Arc, except the calling she feels is entirely her own—and to honor it, she has to turn the ways of the world upside down.”  
Alexander Chee  
“A big, thrilling revisionist history and an audacious, wholly realized feat of imagination.”  
Hanya Yanagihara  
“It would be tempting to set The Book of Esther alongside other contemporary Jewish counterfactual fiction, like Michael Chabon’s Yiddish Policemen’s Union and Philip Roth’s The Plot Against America. All three focus on the time between the rise of the Nazis and the establishment of the State of Israel, and, in different ways, they scramble the founding myths of postwar American Judaism. But Barton is hunting bigger, more philosophical game than Chabon or Roth, both of whom imagine undoing Zionism or American democracy’s acceptance of Jews; Barton, however, is braiding a rope of alternative tradition, strong and supple enough to hold modernity without breaking.”  
The Forward  
“The Book of Esther stands out on the

originality and success of its imagined world. • The Kansas City Star “A glorious mash-up of alternate history, spiritual inquiry, and galloping adventure story, spiced with fantastic technology and a dash of Mulan, The Book of Esther is breathtaking in its ambition and scope. • Chronogram “Barton’s novel is an inventive and detailed tale about a nation on the brink of war that will keep the reader interested through the last scene. • The Jewish Standard “Super badass. . . an interesting and often feminist book with superb writing.” • Filthy Casket “Emily Barton has formerly reimaged the history of New York, and now she’s reconceived historic Europe as an entirely different place, replete with Jewish woman warriors on mechanical steeds and multiplying golems. Exhilarating in its freedom and exacting in its thought • a fine book. • John Crowley

Emily Barton is the author of Brookland and The Testament of Yves Gundron, which were both selected as New York Times Notable Books of the Year. She has received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Sustainable Arts Foundation. Her essays, short stories, and reviews have appeared in Story, Conjunctions, The Massachusetts Review, Tablet, The Los Angeles Times, and The New York Times Book Review, among many other publications. She lives in the Hudson Valley with her husband and sons.

Holy Shekhinah! The Book of Esther is a wild ride through the exquisitely crafted fictive terrain of an alternative dieselpunk 1942 Europa. The story trots out all of the satisfying narrative features of the classic epic Hero’s Journey except our hero, Esther, is a young woman, not a young man. She is therefore considered ineligible to pursue the urgent business of saving her people, descendants of Abraham living on the brink of an inevitable genocidal incursion of the Germanii. Esther hops on her moody mechanical horse with her brother Itakh and his messenger pigeon in a quest to find an elusive tribe of Kabbalists who are rumored to possess the ability to form life from mud, thus potentially capable of turning this happily affianced girl into the hero she will need to become. As Esther forges unlikely alliances with magnificently realized beings, she teases out big questions about artificial intelligence, tribal identity, and gender identity. All the while, the narrative gallops along with life-or-death urgency. I didn’t want this book to end!

Immersive historical fiction with fascinating characters. The story is captivating and it is only when you pause that you think about the alternative history.

Unusual story drawing upon recent and not-so-recent history. Contains elements of the Shoah, but not your typical Holocaust tale.

I have very mixed feelings about The Book of Esther. My first impression was one of surprise: 'Wow! Here is an alternate history unlike any other alternate history!' First of all, it is about Khazar Jews. The Khazars, at least the elite, scholars think, converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages. In Emily Barton's story, they all (or most of them) converted to Judaism. Though the Khazars in her story practice tolerance, there is no doubt that you are privileged if you are a Jew in what has become, by 1942, a polygot nation under threat of Germani, led by somebody very much like Hitler. Germani is pushing East, having overrun the Ostro-Magyars and the Ukrainians and Polonia and other similar, yet different-sounding countries in Eastern Europe. And they are rounding up Jews and putting them in camps and killing them wholesale. There was something very much like WWI which led the Khazars to develop mechanical horses - but not tanks - and airplanes, but very inferior airplanes. In other words, the Khazars do not have much hope of standing up to Germani and the Rus to the north are as pressured as they are, despite apparently technological superiority (over the Khazars at least). So this is nice. You have an alternate Europe. You still have Ottomans to the south and an apparently independent Persia. The Franks get mentioned (France) and Britain too. I don't have the maps because my copy has only pages where the maps go, so I can't get a complete understanding of what's what, and sadly, Barton did not provide a glossary either of Jewish terms, nor of other useful tidbits for her very original world-building. More's the pity. That's not the only problem, unfortunately. The first Act I'd give 5 stars. Easy. I was thrilled, pulled along on this completely original storyline by some very fine writing and character development. The second act I'd give 4 stars, as things started to bog down a bit and the terminology became difficult to follow. I'm not Jewish. I need some help here, and the characters may know what they're talking about, but I was like an outsider looking in and left scratching my head. It's fine for the characters to feel this way sometimes, but the reader needs some help to maintain interest in the story. It's the third act that is the real problem. I'd give it 2 stars at most. Toward the end - and without giving anything away - the story just falls apart. I don't know if the author didn't know where to go with it, but you have a 16-year-old girl who feels the pull of God to do certain things, and when it matters most, when the 's\*\*\* hits the fan' and the Germans invade, she turns into a normal 16-year-old girl. Where

is God when you need him? You expect her to know what to do, to feel impelled to do things, but she's just pulled along helplessly by events like everyone else. It was a complete collapse of what the storyline was building up to. At the end, I could not wait for the story to end. Where before I could not put the book down, at the end I could barely bring myself to pick it up, driven only by a need to finish it to see if she could salvage the mess. And even then, at the end, I could not tell if it was just a really appallingly bad ending, or if it was a lead-in to a series of books. It was that bad. I just dropped the book beside me on the couch and lamented the hours I'd lost off my life-span reading it. There were some thoughtful moments I enjoyed, for example, what is it exactly that makes someone a Jew, or even more critically, what makes somebody a human being? But ultimately, these were not enough to save the story. I will give it three stars because that's about what it averages out to by act, but really, I don't like it much and I'd be tempted to give it 2 if not for the very fine beginning. Honestly, I can't recommend this book at all, and I wish I could. It had such promise, and the author is obviously very talented. But she needs some help with the military aspects of the story, she needs a glossary, or at least some of those dreaded info-dumps that liked or not, serve a useful purpose. And she needs a third act that is comprehensible based on the previous two acts.

Good story, didi not like the ending

The original story of Esther, for whom we celebrate Purim, was one of the low brought high. She was an orphan and an exile, but was raised up and married to the king, Through both her cunning and her charm, she was able to thwart a plot to destroy her people, killing the perpetrator in the process. Here too, we have an Esther who is born lacking the power to do what she must, but she is also raised up and through her cunning and her charm is able to save her people. I like that so many such biblical themes are echoed here, in forms appealing to a more modern audience. It is the low brought high. It is wit over brute strength. It is protection upon the righteous. Those brought up with these stories will love the parallels and echoes found here. Those unfamiliar will find a strong heroine and a thrilling adventure. Both sets of readers will be pleased.

i thought this book would be much better...the premise of the book was a fine idea but the story became very silly and nonsensical....the ending did not satisfy me ,it seemed rushed and underdeveloped...not a book i would recommend

This was so "famished" and the use of languages was so convoluted that I rolled my eyes every

time I saw a word that kinda-sorta resembled Yiddish, Hebrew or Turkish. Esther ranged between being a teenager obsessed with men and She-Ra the warrior. The mechanical horses verses tanks was hokey. There was nothing I liked in this book but I finished it.

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