

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

SON OF TWO FATHERS

Written by Jacqueline Park, with Gilbert Reid

1. The first scene in the book (pages 1–9) features a dramatic confrontation in Lisbon between an extremely rich “New Christian,” Beatrice de Luna, and a Portuguese aristocrat. Why does the first scene in the book feature Beatrice? What themes, dilemmas, and plot lines does this set up or establish? Note that Beatrice de Luna — her Jewish name was Gracia Nasi — is a real, not fictional, person.
2. The Passover Seder, which celebrates the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, has remained unchanged over the centuries and is now celebrated in much the same way as it was in Danilo and Miriamne’s day. What does the Seder scene (pages 24–46) accomplish in terms of theme, plot, and background story?
3. Is Miriamne a typical romantic heroine?
4. On pages 60–68, Miriamne reads Danilo’s palm — well, both hands, actually. What does this tell us about her, about him, and about how his nature will determine his actions and his relationship to Miriamne?
5. The author, Jacqueline (Jackie) Park, was a very strong woman who created for herself an exceptional career, and she was fascinated by strong female characters. For example, Isabella d’Este’s destiny in her old age is cruel (see pages 281, 315, and 316.). She has been sidelined by her son. When women age, do they lose their power?
6. Meanwhile, Sappho, Isabella d’Este’s teenage slave, also faces limited options (see pages 308 and 318). How does she define her role and carve out a space for herself? How are we to understand the relationship between Isabella d’Este and Sappho? Who, really, is stronger?
7. Miriamne calls Danilo a knight in shining armour and a disabused warrior. Angelica tells him he’s a child chasing an impossible dream. Is Danilo del Medigo a gentleman, a hero, a coward, or a cad?
8. Which of these women had the greatest influence on Danilo and his life: Beatrice de Luna (a.k.a. Gracia Nasi), Miriamne Hazan, Veronica Libero, Isabella d’Este, Angelica Satti, Sappho, or Princess Saida?

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9. In the Renaissance, urban design was king. How do the various cities — Venice, Mantua, Rome, Milan, and Naples — function almost as characters in the novel? See, for example, Vincenzo the gatekeeper’s description of the bells of Venice (pages 20–23), or the gondolier’s hymn of praise to the gondola (pages 166–169), or Miriamne’s enthusiasm for her native city (pages 66–67).
10. Imagine how vexatious and difficult was it to live as a Jew in this period, confined during the night to the Ghetto Nuovo in Venice, and how humiliating it was to wear the yellow cap or yellow veil during the day (pages 20–22)? What would it be like to a New Christian — forced to hide your Judaism all day every day, liable to be blackmailed or exposed, and then tortured and executed at any moment? Think in particular of Beatrice de Luna, head of the Mendes Bank, and of Samuel Mendes, an agent for the bank.
11. Is Pietro Aretino’s salon (pages 83–91, 202–209, and 519–522) a den of iniquity or an island of freedom and refuge for outsiders, artists, intellectuals, and misfits?
12. How does the “back story” — the Mendes Bank, the plight of the New Christians and Jews in Europe — relate to the “front story” of Danilo’s tribulations, love life, and adventures? Note that the Mendes Bank was a real bank; that it made an immense fortune in the spice trade that began after Vasco de Gama’s 1497–1499 voyage around Africa to India; that the bank was based, initially, in Lisbon, then in Antwerp, and finally in Istanbul; and that, under the direction of Beatrice de Luna (a.k.a. Gracia Nasi), it organized an escape route for Jews and New Christians fleeing persecution and the Inquisition. Danilo, in our story, plays a key role in helping the bank set up its headquarters in Istanbul, where, in real life, the bank played a major role in Ottoman commerce and export trade.
13. What type of story is this — a romance, a romantic comedy, a quest, an education-of-the-hero tale? Is it a mix of genres?
14. How would you describe the narrative technique? How flexible is the writer’s use of point-of-view techniques? Does the point of view move in and out of different vantage points from different characters? Did you find that effective?

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15. Were children and teenagers different then from now? Think about Isabella d'Este, married at age fifteen to Francesco Gonzaga and suddenly ruling over the cultural life of Mantua. Reflect on Angelica, sold into slavery when she was ten or eleven, and Sappho, at age twelve or thirteen, and becoming Isabella's confidante and, secretly, a spy for Venice. Consider la Zufolina, Zarah, Toto the lantern boy, and the gang of children in Rome who attack Danilo and Angelica.
16. What function does Mordecai Hazan, Miriamne's brother, serve in the plot? Could Mordecai be redeemed? What turned him into the man he is?
17. How dangerous was sex in those days? Was it more or less dangerous than now? Do you think that sexual behaviours were freer and sexual identities more fluid then than they are now, particularly in the "Most Serene" Republic of Venice?
18. Is Bruno Salvo a good man, by his own lights? Why does he hate Venice, and Jews, and courtesans, and the Papacy? (See pages 75–78 and 171–172.)
19. Will Angelica be happy, now that Danilo is gone? Will Danilo and Miriamne live happily ever after? What adventures may Angelica and Sappho and Pietro face in the future? And what will the future hold for Miriamne and Danilo?
20. Would you have liked to live in that period, the Italian Renaissance? And who would you like to have been: Danilo, Miriamne, Veronica . . . ?