

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

The Secret Book of Grazia dei Rossi By Jacqueline Park

1. Park's fictional characters interact with real historical figures. How much artistic license do you think Park has taken with her fictional world? What does blending fact and fiction in this manner allow her to accomplish?
2. Do you think Grazia has successfully set down the secrets of the heart in her secret book? What are the most important lessons that Grazia wishes to communicate to her son?
3. How does Park's use of the device of the "secret book" affect your experience of Grazia's world? Discuss, for instance, the use of first-person perspective, the flow of time, and the ways the narrative is shaped by the fact that it's a private document, intended for Danilo's eyes only. What additional perspectives do the copied letters transcribed throughout the book give us on its narrative world?
4. Much of Grazia's life is defined by flight and upheaval, how does this shape Grazia's personality and her outlook on life?
5. The Christian contingent in Italy — both the aristocracy and the commoners — consistently paint the Jews as greedy, dishonest, and vengeful, whereas they view those of their own religion as pure, honest, and good. How do the various events of the novel undermine the Christian narrative?
6. Although the separation between the Jews and the Christian aristocracy is strongly enforced, the two communities are also deeply intertwined — socially, culturally, and economically. What role do the Jews play in Renaissance Italian society? How do the Christian leaders reconcile their official beliefs with their dependence on the Jewish community?
7. The first time Grazia lays eyes on Judah, she identifies him as her "guardian angel." Does this premonition hold true? In what ways is Judah her guardian angel? What kind of happiness does she find with him?

8. Why do you think Judah unquestioningly accepts Danilo as his son despite knowing it's impossible that he is the boy's father? Do you think he harbours any resentment towards Grazia, Lord Pirro, or the boy? Is he a good father to Danilo?

9. The letters between the Marchesa Isabella d'Este and her son, Federico, that Grazia transcribes for Danilo in her book, present a view into a very different type of mother/son relationship than we see play out between Grazia and Danilo. What does this say about the different worlds the two mothers and sons inhabit?

10. In a narrative full of dashed dreams and lost hopes, the story of what becomes of Zaira is uniquely tragic. What does Zaira mean to Grazia, and how does her life story provide a foil or complement for Grazia's?

11. Both in the Jewish faith in which Grazia is raised and in Renaissance Italian society at large, the scholarly tradition is for the most part open only to men, a situation that Grazia fights tooth and nail against her whole life. In what other ways is she not a typical woman of her faith, or of her time?

12. Grazia attributes certain things to the Hebrew God and others to the magical workings of Fortuna. Are God and Fortuna opposing forces in the novel? How does Grazia reconcile her Jewish and her humanist beliefs?

13. Although the customs of the times, and her religion, are the largest barriers to Grazia's freedom, there are a number of characters in the book who wilfully hold her back from achieving her dreams, and typically these characters are other women. Why do you think it's other women who are Grazia's biggest betrayers? What does this say about the world in which the novel takes place?

14. Were you surprised by Grazia's final choice between Judah and Lord Pirro? What will the implications of this choice be for Danilo when he learns the truth about his parentage? What do you think the future holds for Grazia's son?