



Between Gods: A Memoir

Alison Pick

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From the Man Booker-nominated author of the novel *Far to Go* and one of our most talented young writers comes an unflinching, moving and unforgettable memoir about family secrets and the rediscovered past.

Alison Pick was born in the 1970s and raised in a supportive, loving family. She grew up laughing with her sister and cousins, and doting on her grandparents. Then as a teenager, Alison made a discovery that instantly changed her understanding of her family, and her vision for her own life, forever. She learned that her Pick grandparents, who had escaped from the Czech Republic during WWII, were Jewish--and that most of this side of the family had died in concentration camps. She also discovered that her own father had not known of this history until, in his twenties, he had a chance encounter with an old family friend--and then he, too, had kept the secret from Alison and her sister.

In her early thirties, engaged to be married to her longtime boyfriend but struggling with a crippling depression, Alison slowly but doggedly began to research and uncover her Jewish heritage. Eventually she came to realize that her true path forward was to reclaim her history and identity as a Jew. But even then, one seemingly insurmountable problem remained: her mother wasn't Jewish, so technically Alison wasn't either. In this by times raw, by times sublime memoir, Alison recounts her struggle with the meaning of her faith, her journey to convert to Judaism, her battle with depression, and her path towards facing and accepting the past and embracing the future--including starting a new family of her own. This is her unusual and gripping story, told in crystalline prose and with all the nuance and drama of a novel, but illuminated with heartbreaking insight into the very real lives of the dead, and hard-won hope for the lives of all those who carry on after.

Between Gods: A Memoir Details

Date : Published September 2nd 2014 by Doubleday Canada

ISBN : 9780385677882

Author : Alison Pick

Format : Hardcover 400 pages

Genre : Autobiography, Memoir, Nonfiction, Cultural, Canada, Religion, Judaism

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From Reader Review Between Gods: A Memoir for online ebook

Rebecca says

There are many levels on which the reader can read and appreciate Pick's memoir, Between Gods.

- 1) As a psychological memoir, detailing the ups-and-downs of depression, particularly in relation to the spiritual life of humans.
- 2) As a part of the Shoah narrative.
- 3) As a Jewish book, detailing the choices of a convert and connection with various beliefs and practices.

Between Gods very much addresses the first two issues so well, I'd like to see it used in classrooms where depression and/or the Shoah are discussed. When Pick describes the heaviness, the indecisiveness, the confusion of mild-to-moderate depression, her images really resound with me, recalling a year of depression in my early twenties and several blue periods I've experienced since then. She also describes pregnancy loss and PPD, which I think many readers will find therapeutic. These topics are unfortunately rarely discussed, and to see a first-hand account handled with sensitivity destigmatizes them and validates the emotions who have shared those experiences.

Pick's description of the Holocaust's aftermath, and how it continues to affect the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of survivors, also touched on things friends and colleagues have shared with me, adding depth and complexity to my understanding of their heritage. At first, I found Pick's accounts of visits to her psychologist to be odd, but as the memoir progressed, Charlotte (her therapist) adds a couple profound insights the really illuminated things.

As someone who is Orthodox, I had a little more trouble with the book from a religious perspective. I had to set aside several of my opinions on issues Pick brings up - most pertinent is the overly-simplified explanation of why Conservative and Orthodox Jews rely on matrilineal descent. Nonetheless, the way hashgacha pratit (divine intervention in the guise of "coincidence" which is anything but coincidental) weaves throughout her tale and the beautiful descriptions of Shabbos and how she and her partner connect to certain practices and ideas really spoke to me. I think they will speak to any person of faith (probably, of any faith).

The end of the book mentions that certain events and people were "adjusted." There are definitely reasons to question this practice in memoir-writing, as it has been much abused. I don't get that sense here. Indeed, I was comforted by the fact that a couple of the "characters" Pick presents us with don't have their real names in the text. They don't always show up very sympathetically, and I think that using different names and circumstances for them in the book probably allowed Pick to be MORE honest about their words and behavior, while maintaining these people's privacy. This is just my opinion.

Highly recommended. Due to two "bad" words, as well as (more importantly) details about Pick's love life and obstetric health (which are handled tastefully, but honestly), I would not recommend the book to readers under 18, at least.

Patty says

I will put a quote here when the book is published

I seem to have run the gamut on Christianity over these past few months. I have read a book about grace, one about people who are leaving the church even though they are still believers, another about Christians who are examining the way they see the Bible, and then a book about evangelicals who are trying to change the more conservative wing of Christianity. I read often about my faith, but I have been especially eclectic lately.

Which brings me to **Between Gods**. Alison Pick was raised as a Christian, but it turns out that her paternal grandparents were Jewish and barely got out of Europe with their lives during World War II. Once in Canada, knowing that relatives had been taken to the concentration camps, Pick's family became Episcopalians. So Pick starts her life being raised as a Christian.

Pick feels drawn back to her family's ancestral faith. This memoir is about her journey to her "conversion" to Judaism. It was a long, intense struggle for Pick and I found it fascinating. I grew up among both Jews and Christians, but I have never known anyone who converted from one religion to the other. I would not have guessed that changing your faith could be so complicated.

I know from my class on Women and Judaism that Jews do not encourage conversion. However, given Pick's family history, I would have thought that the rabbis and teachers that Pick talks to would have been glad to have someone return to their faith. I think most Christian denominations would have welcomed such a "lost sheep" with open arms.

Pick is a poet and has written a novel about the Holocaust. Her writing is beautiful. During her period of being "between Gods" there were many other changes happening in her life. She writes with clarity and attention to detail so that the reader can see the transformation that happens to her life while she is converting.

I don't know what made me pick this book through the Edelweiss program. However, I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I have learned a great deal about Pick's life and I have been able to think about how my life would change if I lived in different circumstances.

If you have any interest in women's lives or in stories from the Holocaust, try this memoir. If you are Jewish or interested in Judaism, I strongly recommend this story to you. If you are a reader like me, who wants to inhabit new and different worlds, then you too may want to pick this up when it is published in this country. I believe that Pick's story is unusual and well told.

Thank you to Edelweiss and Harper Perennial.

Ally says

A really beautiful memoir about depression and finding yourself through religion. Alison Pick writes so beautifully and creatively that you can't help but live along with her, through her depressions, troubles during pregnancy, and journey toward finding herself.

For someone who has never been very religious, I'm always very interested in others' religious journeys, and Alison tells a heart-wrenching tale about her journey toward Judaism and how her family's past has called to her all her life. The history of her family, from their time in Czechoslovakia to Auschwitz to Canada is terrifying and somewhat surreal.

If you enjoy memoirs with a World War Two background, religious focus, and depression underlying it all, this one is for you.

Christopher Farrell says

This book really, really resonated with me for some reason - it was like a copy of *The Memory Palace* that I could actually relate to, and therefore, feel for. Alison's journey is sad and tragic, yet uplifting at the same time - the connections between her past and present are dramatic, yet not overbearing. I loved the relationship she has with her Dad, and how easy they both are with each other. While it didn't really end to my satisfaction, it is still a worthwhile read.

Rosa Laborde says

Intimate. Raw.

Laura Duhan says

After great tragedy, a family comes to Canada, hoping to find a new life, hoping to leave old suffering and old identity behind. This works well ... for one generation, maybe two. And then hints of what was suppressed begin to surface. But the situation is no longer tragic. Because Canada can be a safe place to confront the past, make peace with it, and choose a future. That's what Alison, the part of author Alison Pick showcased in the *Memoir Between Gods* does. She shows how this journey into identity can be done.

And it is not easy! Sometimes you will laugh, often you will cry, and occasionally you will roll your eyes along with Alison as she tries to reclaim her Jewish heritage -- in a Jewish community that protects itself with many barriers.

Alison begins her journey with the fantasy that she will meet a Jewish man. They will fall in love. She will slip into his Jewish family, take on the clearly defined role of Jewish wife, and live the way her great-grandmother did in Europe generations ago.

And here is where the genius of Alison Pick, the writer, shines. Alison Pick shows us the gritty psychic reality of Alison's determination, the way it comes to animate every sensory detail of life. Alison hears a door close down the hall, just as the rabbi says "no" to her and closes off an important opportunity. Alison realizes she can tolerate the taste of her mother's holiday cooking and forgives her for being Christian; for being reserved; and for being her mother. The ordinary becomes extraordinary, and little questions become big questions, as Alison remakes her life -- one mistake, one insight, one flash of empathy, one victory at a time.

Alison Pick tells us a Canadian story, not unfamiliar in a nation with many immigrants. She also tells us a human story, very familiar to anyone who thinks, feels, dreams, perceives, remembers, and retells. Without exiting her narrative, she lets us know that, while the story of Alison in *Between Gods* is true, it is also a story. It expresses only one facet of author Alison Pick's worldview. Seeing the world through the lens of this one story opened my eyes, mind, and heart. I can't wait to read more and see more from the perspective

of this gifted and skilled writer.

Carolyn Somerville says

Recommended by Lucie for book club. I really wasn't interested in reading this book. At all. But I forced myself to (why I'm not sure as no one else in the book club is going to read it. Sorry Lucie will). But I found it to be very readable and enjoyable. It wasn't just a story about this woman's conversion but also her depression, marriage, parenthood and the questions we all ask ourselves about those things.

Krissy says

Intense emotions and a beautiful journey through depression. Pick takes us through 2 years of her life and her journey to find the faith that speaks to her soul, through her blood. I thought this was going to focus more on religion. It was a pleasant surprise to find that the focus was on her present, on her blood's history, & on finding herself in a faith that is hers. Historical context applies, Holocaust references abound. As someone who has black moods come and go from her life, I appreciate this portrayal and how she adapts to find peace.

Alison Baxter says

As a convert to Judaism, I was very interested in reading this book. My aversion to the author is so great that I simply cannot finish it. Whining, privileged, cloying, vain.....not someone I would want to know in a memoir or otherwise.

Heather Fineisen says

I can certainly see why Pick has the accolades under her belt. This is a book that is hard to put down. Especially if you are addicted to stories of spiritual quests and long depressive sad lives to compare to your own fucked up life. If you are, and I certainly am, this is the perfect book for you.

Pick finds out her grandparents escaped from Czechoslovakia and pretended to be Christians. Her world and faith is rocked when she learns of her Jewish Heritage and that her relatives have died in Auschwitz. She chronicles her discovery and research and you can't begin to imagine her pain or confusion. I have visited Aushwitz and it is a sobering piece and place in history that forever haunts. I cannot begin to imagine a discovery such as Pick's and its subsequent impact. She becomes obsessed with the subject. She has nightmares.

Prone to depression, Pick seeks therapy while she explores Judaism and possible conversion. Is she genetically prone to depression from her father? Is she genetically prone to Judaism from her father? Masterfully, Pick chronicles her journey with an edge of mystery and anticipation to her writing. This is not a dry retelling of psychotherapy and Hebrew class but a lovely pattern of prose and research and history. I wanted to keep reading to find out if she stays with her fiance, if she converts, if she finally does the dishes. There is so much to her story and it's worth every page.

Rena Graham says

"We huggle on the couch - hug + cuddle - and try to memorize the Hebrew letters we've been assigned for our latest Jewish Information Class." It was lines like this, and the constant crying - bucket fulls! - that made me want to throw this book across the room at times. I stayed with it as I was interested in the sense of identity she felt with the Jewish faith and how that would play out for her. Well written and chock full of yet more hideous Holocaust stories, this is not a writer I will be following. Her life of privilege and perfect family were not something I can relate to and I found it all just a bit too charmed and lacking in depth.

Kitty B says

This beautiful memoir gracefully touches on so many heavy and deep subjects; depression, conversion to Judaism, familial relationships, cultural and religious heritage, the Holocaust, motherhood.... it's themes are as complex as life itself. This is a memoir borne from a period of introspection and personal conflict in the face of the burdensome conversion road she sets upon. But as Pick's therapist tells her, 'there is a time for contemplating life and a time for living it'. I think this book achieves that balance and while Pick creates a profoundly spiritual and moving story of her yearning for belonging and Jewish identity it is against the backdrop of mundane detail of everyday life. As in her other work, Pick is a master of language and prose that is pure reading pleasure.

Rebecca says

At a time of transition – preparing for her wedding and finishing her first novel, set during the Holocaust – the author decided to convert to Judaism, the faith of her father's Czech family. There are so many things going on in this sensitive and engrossing memoir: depression, her family's Holocaust history, her conversion, career struggles, moving to Toronto, adjusting to marriage, and then pregnancy and motherhood following soon after – leading full circle to a time of postpartum depression. That said, this book is exactly what you want from a memoir: it vividly depicts a time of tremendous change, after which the subject is still somehow the same person, or perhaps *more* herself than ever.

See my full review at The Bookbag.

Sarah says

Thank you, Random House and GoodReads for the free copy!

Between Gods is the first thing I've read by Alison Pick, and it won't be the last. Her writing style is vivid, her descriptions are beautiful, and I know now that I'm going to have to read her novels and poetry.

What really sticks in my mind are the little moments she included to characterize the people she writes about.

The way her father reacted when he watches sad movies, for example, said so much about him.

And the same goes for Alison herself. There were so many little things that gave tremendous insight into her experience. There's a line, for example, about breast cancer genetic screening that made me do a double-take... but it also showed perfectly how much this meant to her.

Overall, this was an enjoyable (and often heartbreaking) read. I look forward to immersing myself in more of Alison Pick's writing.

Joanne says

I saw this book on someone's Top 10 list in a national paper, and borrowed it from the library on a whim. It sat in a pile of books for two weeks while I tried to decide if I wanted to read it. I finally picked it up, and to my surprise, I just couldn't put it down.

When Alison Pick was a young woman, she discovered that her grandparents were Jews who fled Europe in 1938 and upon arrival in Canada, hid their history from everyone, going to a Christian church, never telling anyone their true story. Her father wasn't even aware of being Jewish. Alison became obsessed with Judaism: researching, taking classes with the aim of converting, confronting her father with the past. She assumed that merely being the daughter of a Jew made her a Jew, and was horrified and deeply upset to find out that it wasn't so, that modern Judaism is matrilineal, and that it would take much more to be accepted into the Jewish community.

She set out on a 3 year Odyssey, taking classes, learning many of the rituals, taking counsel with a female Rabbi. She and her Gentile fiancé Degan plunged in willingly, but were hurt and stymied by the seemingly endless hurdles thrown their way. The more she studied, the more determined she was to understand both her family's story and the religion itself. She and Degan went to Europe to visit family sites, visiting Auschwitz and the Holocaust memorial in Prague, where she found family members' names inscribed. Meanwhile, she was struggling to finish a novel based during the Holocaust, and to finally marry Degan after 7 years together. She became pregnant, lost the baby and had a subsequent live birth, all during this stressful 3 year journey.

There were times when Alison's dogged determination bordered on obsession, distressing her family, her fiancé and even her Jewish friends. At times, I felt that same frustration with her. It took time for her to get grounded and work through it all, but in the end, she did, with the help and support of those who cared for her.

This book was interesting and inspiring, and I hope she has exorcized some of those demons now.
