



The Garden of Ruth

Eva Etzioni-Halevy

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A historical novel imagines the riveting story behind the Book of Ruth

Sitting beneath a tree in ancient Bethlehem, Osnath, niece of the prophet Samuel, examines a dusty scrap of parchment she found hidden in her relative's scroll room. Scrawled on the decaying page is an intriguing message addressed to Ruth the Moabite, great-grandmother of David, the future king of Israel. Compelled to discover the truth about Ruth's life, Osnath begins searching for the identity of Ruth's nameless lover and the secret that is cloaked behind his anonymity. But as she digs deeper into the past, she finds her inquiries blocked by David's brother Eliab. What is the long-buried truth he fears will come to light? And what is the threat that Ruth's story poses to his family's vast inheritance?

Eva Etzioni-Halevy's novel deftly interweaves history and fiction to create a compelling exploration of a prominent biblical figure. Told through the voices of both Osnath and Ruth herself, *The Garden of Ruth* transports readers into the ancient world and offers a dramatic and thought-provoking new perspective on a well-known tale.

The Garden of Ruth Details

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From Reader Review *The Garden of Ruth* for online ebook

Heather says

In this work of Biblical fiction, a young woman named Osnath, who is also the niece of the prophet Samuel, arrives in Bethlehem. Upon perusing the scroll room belonging to the relatives she is visiting, she discovers a scrap of parchment with a most interesting love poem written upon it. As Osnath soon discovers, this parchment is only a fragment of the life story of Ruth, who became the wife of Boaz and was the great-grandmother of the man known as King David. While trying to uncover more of the parchment scraps that tell Ruth's story, Osnath discovers that Ruth, a woman highly esteemed for her piety and grace, had once been caught in the throes of an illicit relationship with a man other than her husband. But as Osnath begins to dig for more clues into Ruth's life, she comes to arouse the suspicion and anger of Ruth's great-grandson Eliab, who is desperate to keep his ancestor's reputation from being tarnished. Osnath, trying frantically to uncover more information about this tantalizing story, becomes genuinely surprised when she finds her feelings of disgust for Eliab turning into feelings of desire. Now Osnath must reconcile both Ruth's past and her present to finally restore harmony to her life. In this surprising and evocative story, Etzioni-Halevy takes one of the most famous stories in the bible and turns it in fresh and unexpected direction.

About a year and a half ago, I had the pleasure of reading my first book by Eva Etzioni-Halevy. It was called *The Song of Deborah* and I had a great time with it. When the author contacted me about reviewing one of her other works, I was very excited to see what her other stories might have to offer me. I was greatly pleased with this book and ended up being very satisfied with its story. I think this was perhaps my favorite of the stories I have tried from this author and am excited that she has another book out for me to enjoy as well.

Though this book ostensibly had two stories woven into one, the story involving Osnath was the principal focus. Osnath was a very headstrong young girl at the beginning of the tale, and only as the story progresses do her attitudes and behaviors begin to change. From the outset, she is extremely caught up in the search for Ruth's tale and it seems that she will do almost anything to discover the truth surrounding it, even if it means angering everyone around her. I found her diligence to have a curious effect on me. I also wanted her to find out Ruth's tale and was invested in her search, but I thought that she sometimes came off as a little brazen in her tactics. As she struggles to worm her way into the scroll room, she seems to be making enemies all along the way, but surprisingly, the people she is offending offer her friendship and, in one case, love.

Osnath also has to contend with the desires of her heart. At her first meeting with Eliab, she discovers him to be crude and coarse and really wants to have nothing to do with him. After a flagrant affront takes place between the two, Osnath's heart is set against Eliab in the most heated of ways. She will never love this man and will learn to live around him. Instead, she prefers David, a starry-eyed youth who spins endearments from thin air, much to Osnath's delight. As the story begins to take shape, Osnath's feelings for David become tangled by the deeds he commits and she is left feeling exploited and rebuffed. In anger, Osnath wishes to leave Bethlehem after she uncovers Ruth's story, feeling that her time in the city fits only that purpose and no more. Surprisingly, Osnath begins to discover that there is more to Eliab than she once thought, a revelation that seems to come a little too late, forcing Osnath into a position of suffering that breaks her body and spirit. The only way to reconcile her situation is to do the unthinkable, which for Osnath, is a tough order indeed.

Towards the middle of the book, Osnath's persistence pays off and she is rewarded with Ruth's story in all its sordid detail. This section prompted me to perk up while reading, for the story of Ruth and Boaz has always

been a favorite of mine. This book takes a slightly different direction with the story and tells the fictional tale of the man who seduces Ruth immediately after her first husband dies. I really liked Ruth and found her humble yet knowing. In this tale, she was placed in a very difficult situation and had only her wits and character to pull her through it. These passages were evocative and humble, painting a vast and far-reaching picture of the trials that Ruth faced. I must admit that these sections were my favorite parts of the book and I hungered to hear more about Ruth and her situation. She was a winning character, filled with shame at her situation but strong enough to do what was required of her.

In the end, the story of Ruth is revealed in its complete form, as is the tale of Osnath and her difficult road to maturity. The two sections of the book dovetailed at the end, and despite the trials that the two women faced, they are able to find a happiness that stretches across generations. Though Ruth and Osnath were very different women, I was happy to see their lives reconciled and their fates sealed, so for me, the story came full circle in a wonderful way.

If you are the type of reader who enjoys biblical fiction, then this book is probably something that you would enjoy. The author takes great pains in fully realizing her characters and the dramas they face, so this novel would also be of interest to those who love character driven books. Though there are certain liberties taken with the tale of Ruth, I think that in this case, they were very well done and believable and they gave the story a profound sense of drama and insight. The complexities of the two stories being interwoven was also done with a lot of style, making this a very pleasant reading experience.

Lexi says

A good, interesting take on early Jewish history. Living here I found some of it hard to buy...including the supposed authenticity of acceptance of pre- and extra-marital sexual activities (though I'm not a scholar of Jewish history so I could be wrong) as well as the description of household furnishings (did Jews in the time of David really have tables and chairs when everyone else in this region still use cushions on the floor?). The story was imaginative though and an interesting interpretation of the story of Ruth. A little too close to a romance novel for me, but still a good quick read.

April says

This might possibly be the worst book I've ever completed. Basically, Etzioni-Halevy took the biblical story of Ruth and mixed it with a drug-store Fabio novel. Why she felt that the Bible needed more harlequin romance and euphemisms for loins is beyond me, but it doesn't work. It's a bad premise, bad writing, crappy characters, and a bad idea all around!

Aryeh says

Unexpectedly good. This book weaves the Biblical story of Ruth with the story of a fictional granddaughter who faces a number of the same entanglements in beliefs-love-family-life. Well written and fun to read. Also, although it was placed originally in the YA section, this is not YA. Lots of references to various stories and legends, and a firm general knowledge of Torah will help with catching a lot of the subtleties.

Ruth Neese says

The story is set in early biblical times--David is still a shepherd and not yet king of Judea. Osnath, a Jewish girl of 15, is the main character. She is distantly related to a neighbor of David's family and meets him and his brother, Eliab, on a visit to her relative. Ruth the Moabite was the great-grandmother of David and Eliab. Minimally couched in pseudo-intrigue surrounding Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz (who are long dead when the story begins), the book actually tells the coming-of-age story of Osnath. As an Orthodox Jewish girl in ancient times, Osnath is property to be married off before she "ruins" herself. The book reads like a soap opera script, recounting sexual exploits of David, Eliab, Osnath, and assorted others. Conveniently, Osnath does not become pregnant out-of-wedlock and is made an honorable woman by Eliab. The book does provide accurate depictions of Jewish tribal traditions. Those who like romance novels and romantic historical fiction might enjoy this book. I found it disappointing, tedious, and misogynist (though "historically" misogynist).

Courtney says

I just finished reading a series of books about religion, and introspective work, and I wanted to read this book to transition to cultural studies books. In all I really like this book, and I would recommend it. However, it is quite a bit more sexual in nature than I had thought, verging on (biblically) raunchy. It is quite a mix, I must say. The story is very good, though if you are looking for a retelling of the story of Ruth, I would recommend "The Red Tent" by Anita Diamant any day of the week.

Elisha (Iishie) says

I liked the book but didn't love Osnath enough... the author used Osnath, Ruth's descendant (Great great grand-daughter), as a device to relay Ruth's story... Osnath's and Ruth's shared similarities but I had a hard time getting by the feeling that Osnath wasn't just a young woman who was a bit too inquisitive and disrespectful although the book wants to make you feel like she was learned and therefore uncovering the truth. I did enjoy how it felt like I was reading something from the Old Testament times and it felt truly like historical fiction. I still have a hard time getting past the polygamist views but can appreciate the truth of them... And I would have liked not to read the phrase "all of the days of my life" so many times!

Jennifer Harshaw says

I'm not sure how I felt about reading this book. It is historical fiction which I like but I agree with other reviewers about the harlequin fiction, the author completely changed what we do know about Ruth. A proverb 31 woman. I did enjoy Red Tent, but it was similar I think the reason why I liked Red Tent more though was seeing The tribes of Israel. The early genealogy of Christ is very interesting to me. This book was ok. I did finish it. The biggest thing that stuck out to me was Ruth quoting psalm 126:6 those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Linda says

Interesting interpretation both of the story of Ruth as well as the story of David and his family in the time before he became king. I'm not sure if this is an accurate representation of what life was like back then or if lurid details were added less for the sake of historic accuracy and more to sell books with a more 'liberal' or 'antibiblical' slant. Nevertheless, it was an intriguing take on a biblical story and a good attempt to bring the characters alive.

Amy Hoffman says

This is an interesting take on the biblical story of Ruth as told partly by Ruth herself and partly by Osnath, the wife of one of Ruth's descendants. While I liked the story, I thought that Osnath's persistent curiosity about Ruth's life (despite several warnings from her family) was a little too overzealous to be believable. I found it to be an annoying character trait, but otherwise, the story was entertaining. If you like Ruth's story from the bible, you should give this book a try.

Cathleen says

Absolutely one of the worst books I've had the misfortune to read all the way through.

Shannon says

While I liked this book, I didn't love it. The concept was interesting and I liked the way the author intertwined the stories of Ruth and David by using a character (Osnath) from David's generation who wants to investigate Ruth's past. Where I felt the book fell short was in the author's desire to link Ruth & Osnath's stories: she made the parallels too obvious and therefore not as believable to me.

Another complaint is that while this book as an interesting narrative, it did not raise any significant personal questions for me to ask myself. There was nothing that a character encountered that made me ask myself how I would react in similar circumstances or how I felt about a particular issue.

This would be a good beach read - it entertains rather than causing introspection.

Veena Regit says

The story of Ruth is well known for all who have read the Bible and I am not one of them. The story starts with a young beautiful Israelite girl, Osnath traveling to Bethlehem to meet her extended family. Osnath has the ability to read and write, which is a rare quality possessed by women in those times. She is educated by her mother, who herself is a scribe and also by her father. She loves reading and writing

scrolls and to her amazement finds a scroll room in there neighbors house. This is where she accidentally stumbles upon a few of Ruth's poems which depict her life. Another scroll adds to the mystery about Ruth's life which Osnath is determined to unravel. She is undeterred by the stiff objections from Ruth's descendants. Osnath knows that there is a secret that Eliab, Ruth's great grandson is trying to protect and she wants to know it and write about it too. Osnath gets help from her uncle Prophet Smauel and bit by bit uncovers the truth. In her journey to find the truth, she falls in love with Eliab's youngest brother David, who is destined to be the King. She later realizes her true love and fights for him just as Ruth fought for hers.

This story shows women of strength who fought for there causes among there own kin and others. It is a beautifully written work and an amazing story! Eva has done a beautiful job of showcasing the strength of women in times when there choices were very limited. This book is highly recommended.

Third Assistant Librarian says

I was looking forward to this book, and was hoping it would turn out to be really good, since the author has written several biblical fictions, and I enjoy a good biblical fiction. However, I was disappointed.

I finished it, because I did want to know what happened. However, by the end I was mostly skimming.

Why?

Well, as a woman, it made me really uncomfortable. I understand that the story is set in a different time period, but it still made me uncomfortable.

The main character is obsessed with the story of Ruth, who lived several generations before. Osnath (the MC) is about the same age as David (of David and Goliath) and his brother. She's into both of them.

The brother rapes her (and supposedly promptly regrets it, but still says that she has giving mixed signals and she didn't actually say no, just hits him). Not only does she ultimately forgive him (after David ditches her), she ends up deciding that he is the love of her life and basically does everything but kill herself to get him to take her back as his concubine, since he's already married by the time she figures out she's in love with him. She hopes he'll marry her and take her as his second wife, but she doesn't seem to be too fussed about it. The relationship is just really screwed up and makes me feel uncomfortable.

Ruth makes me much less uncomfortable, but she also basically gives up everything for a guy who turns out to be a jerk and needs to be rescued by another man who very graciously forgives her for the indiscretion.

There's also an ongoing theme of "men can't be expected to abstain from sex, so women can't get annoyed at them for it." It was just discomforting.

David Raz says

The Garden of Ruth by Eva Etzioni-Halevy
Hebrew review follows. ?????? ?????? ??????

Note that this review is of the Hebrew version. In the afterword the author writes that the versions are not identical, although from the summary it seems to be quite close.

I enjoyed *The Song of Hannah* and was expecting a similar experience, but sadly this is not the case. Like *Hannah*, the the semi-biblical dialect (I read the Hebrew version) is appropriate and helps the atmosphere. I also appreciate the way the author fills in the lacunae in the story (specifically, the story of Ploni Almoni) - I felt the solution is intelligent and appropriate. However, the structure of the book is all wrong.

The author tried to combine a love story (actually, two, Osnath's and Ruth's) with a mystery/detective story (Osnath obsessing about Ruth). The Mystery part is dreadful. Instead of gradually revealing the parts of a mystery, the "detective" spends half the book brooding over why no-one tells her anything, and then suddenly in the second half is given the solution on a silver plate (well, for sexual favors). One critical part of the mystery is kept from the readers almost to the end, although the protagonist finds it much earlier but doesn't tell us with absolutely no reason, only to find out it is quite minor and uninteresting. As it turns out, the reason for all of this being a mystery is also minor and unjustifiable. It seems the author is just lost in this genre.

The "romance" part is one which I did not expect to enjoy to begin with, but it was even worse than I expected. The women of the story are depicted as senseless naive bimbos. No matter how they are wronged (even raped), they forget and forgive, suddenly falling for the tormentor who becomes the lover. This is repeated *ad nauseam*, to the point it becomes, well, nauseating. This brings me to another thing which really stood out in *Hannah* and was completely missing here - strong, interesting women one could connect and sympathize with.

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