

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

The Gilded Chamber by Rebecca Kohn

- How did you like the story?
- What impact did her parents' deaths have on Esther's life?
- Did Esther lose part of her identity, having lost her parents at such an early age?
- Why did Mordechai tell his cousin to take the name "Esther"?
- Note: At great personal cost, Esther manages to operate on two levels while in the palace of Achashveirosh (aka Xerxes) - she masquerades as a Persian ruler, and quietly continues to live as a Jew. Her name - Esther - means "to hide," reflecting her ability to appear one way, while truly being another. (Another name for Esther (in Hebrew) is "Hadassah" - one of the four species bundled together on Sukkot. Because of its sweet smell, the hadassah symbolizes Torah knowledge and the beauty of righteousness. Esther exemplifies these qualities. From www.torah.org)
- What is at stake for the Jewish characters in revealing their heritage?
- What factors contribute to some of them revealing their religion (Puah)?
- What is the source of Esther's courage? For example, providing comfort and advice to Freni, Vadhut and Hutana.
- How is Esther's intelligence shown, especially early-on in adapting to the concubine life?
- Though Esther is pampered, what does her life lack?
- Would you like to have known more about the material and physical differences between those in the palace and those outside? Is this a weakness of the book?
- How does Esther keep herself from being a slave to her surroundings?
- Who is loyal to whom? Is anyone truly loyal to the king?
- Whose side were Hegai and Hathach on?
- How are power, money, greed, and control used as intertwined aspects of the story? Consider the minor characters, especially the eunuchs and the concubines, as well as the major characters.
- Who had the most power?
- How is power a gender-based issue? Can women have power without a royal background?
- Do you think that Xerxes's power is more illusion or reality?
- Is Xerxes insecure (or passive-aggressive)?
- Why was Xerxes so trusting of Haman? (Haman was a former barber according to the Encyclopedia Judaica.)
- Why does Xerxes agree to banish an entire people?
- Does the author make the case for Esther's actions to save the Jews? Does she build a religious "base" for Esther, or is she just being manipulated again, this time by Mordecai? Does she really understand the plight of the Jews or has she been away from it for too long to empathize?
- What was Zeresh's (Haman's wife) agenda?
- Why did Zeresh dress so poorly? (Literally and figuratively)
- What is meant by the expression "the one God"? Used to define Jews – more unified, superiority. Is it an irony that the name is never mentioned in the Megillah – only book it is not mentioned in?



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- Is it better to serve or be served?
- How do you think this novel would be different if it had been told from the point of view of one of the male characters?
- Are there any similarities between the characters' attitudes on sex and modern day attitudes on sex?
- Why does Hegai favor Esther over the others since they first met? (p. 129)
- Why wasn't Esther afraid when she first met the king? (p. 135)
- What was the Gilded Chamber?
- Who do you think murdered Xerxes?
- Why was Esther's life "in grave danger" after Xerxes was killed? (p. 345)
- After Vashti was banished from the palace, were you surprised to see her return? (p. 347)
- What do you think Esther's new life is like at her estate in Ecbatana?
- Do you think Esther misses any part of her palace life?
- Is it possible to be true to your ideals and yet find a way to live in your society, even to effect change?
- What are the problems with the book? Examples: Does interspersing the story of her early life with her parents add to the narrative or detract? Do we understand the Jewish issue or is the reader expected to know the background before approaching the book?
- Consider "character" regarding Esther and the King. How is manipulation used on them?
- On page 30 it reads "And so they became the authors of my misfortune." How much control did Esther have after that?
- What did Mordechai consider his relationship with Esther to be?
- Especially since they were betrothed, why didn't Mordechai marry Esther before she was taken?
- Who would Esther have been a better wife to – Xerxes or Mordechai?
- What is the future for Esther and Mordechai?
- Did you feel any sympathy for Vashti not wanting to attend the banquet?
- Could Haman have been involved in the plot to poison the king?
- Why did Puah identify herself as being Jewish to Esther when they first met?
- How is Esther "a blessing to Puah in her old age"? (p. 90)