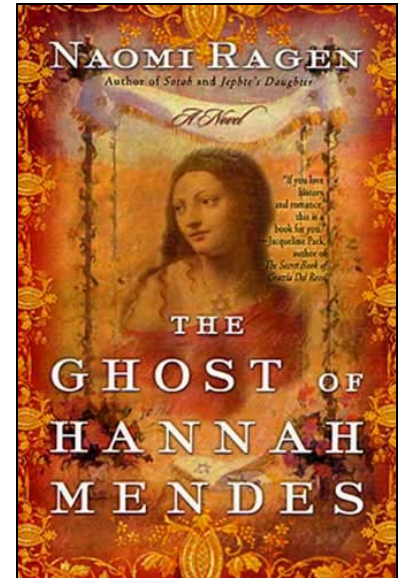


# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* by Naomi Ragen



St. Martin's Press  
ISBN: 0-312-28125-0 (paperback)

### Introduction to *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes*

When elderly Catherine da Costa, a wealthy Manhattan matron, learns she has only a short time to live, she realizes that the family tree will die unless she transfers its legacy to her granddaughters. But Suzanne and Francesca, modern young women in their twenties caught up in trendy environmental causes and ambitious careers, have no interest either in her, or in the past.

Catherine almost despairs until, falling asleep before her fireplace, she is visited by the family matriarch, an indomitable Renaissance businesswoman (and true historical figure) named Hannah Mendes, who offers her a partnership. At the ghost's bidding, Catherine manages to temporarily detach her granddaughters from their New York lives, sending them on a magical journey through England, Spain and Venice in search of an ancient manuscript, Hannah's own handwritten memoirs.

The trip to humor their grandmother takes on serious new meaning to both girls, as manuscript pages begin to show up, forcing the girls into a powerful encounter with their heritage that will forever challenge their view of their past, their present, and their future.

### Praise for *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes*

"Ragen examines questions of faith, responsibility and the urgent desire to ensure the continuation of a family line....Ragen's forte is her ability to forge a connection between past and present, while the book adroitly addresses issues of faith and family." -*Publishers Weekly*

"If you love history and romance, this is a book for you. Using the Spanish Expulsion of the Jews in 1492 as her prism, Naomi Ragen has envisioned a modern variation on Renaissance themes-an ingenious idea that works!" -Jacqueline Park, author of *The Secret Book of Grazia Dei Rossi*

"A mesmerizing tale...Ragen skillfully blends together contemporary voices with voices from the little-known era of the Spanish Inquisition to weave a stunning tapestry that brings fresh meaning not only to the lives of her characters but also to our own." -Gay Courter, author of *The Midwife*

"Ragen beautifully articulates what Jews must do to survive in every generation. Highly recommended." -*Library Journal*

"A glossy celebration of culture and family." -*Kirkus Reviews*

"Engages the reader with its combination of history, passion and spirituality. *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* is not to be missed." -*Hadassah Magazine*

"The blending of past and present in the story's denouement creates a beautiful ending to a story that educates as well as entertains. *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* has a little bit of everything: history, romance, adventure, mystery." -*The Jewish Star*

## Reading Group Guide Questions

1. *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* is really two books: a contemporary novel about the lives of two modern career girls, and a historical novel. Why did the author choose to weave this material together into one book? What do you think it accomplishes? Had she chosen to write the story of Gracia Mendes as straight historical fiction, how would the focus have changed?
2. Catherine da Costa sends her granddaughters off in search of their heritage, their roots, and their history. What do you think the lives of our ancestors have to teach us now, hundreds of years later? Or are we better off not burdening our children with the past, allowing them to discard it like so much excess baggage?
3. Describe Suzanne and Francesca. How are they different? In what ways are they similar? In what ways do each respond to the legacy of their heritage?
4. In one scene in the book, Francesca is fired from her job. What effect does this event have on her life in terms of her actions, her character and her worldview?
5. The author has often said that it is possible to explain all the events in this book without believing in the supernatural. What events are there that are attributed to the ghost? Can you find another way of explaining them?
6. In many cultures, the matchmaker is a respected professional that serves an important role. Yet, when Suzanne discovers that her meeting with Gabriel was prearranged by her grandmother, she turns her back and walks out. Is she justified in being angry?
7. Intermarriage between people of different religions and cultures has become an accepted, routine phenomenon in the modern world. Yet, the book seems to imply that Suzanne's relationship with Renaldo was doomed for exactly those reasons. Do you agree with this implication? Why?

8. "All of mankind is one, each contributing a unique and matchless truth," Catherine writes in her will. This is an idea of unique importance in this book. Explain this idea and its relevance to the material describing the Spanish Inquisition.
9. One of the main themes in this book is the idea of a family wrenched from its past; all those things their ancestors lived and died for, are now barely remembered. Would you call that progress, or a terrible desecration?
10. For further discussion: The diary entries in *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* are fiction. However, the life of Hannah Mendes is based on the historical figure, Gracia Mendes, a Renaissance businesswoman and a converso. Compare the diary entries to the life of Gracia Mendes as outlined in such works as *Gracia Mendes and the House of Nasi*, by historian Cecil Roth and other books about Spanish-Jewish history.

## About the Author

**Naomi Ragen** is the author of four international bestsellers: *Jephthe's Daughter*, *Sotah*, *The Sacrifice of Tamar*, and *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes*. Born in New York City, she earned a BA in English from Brooklyn College, and an MA in English from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. For the last thirty years, Jerusalem has been her home. The translation of her books into Hebrew in 1995 has made her one of Israel's best-loved authors. An outspoken advocate of gender equality and human rights, she is a frequent contributor to op-ed pages and a columnist for the *Jerusalem Post*. She is currently rehearsing her first play, *Women's Quorum*, commissioned by Israel's National Theatre.