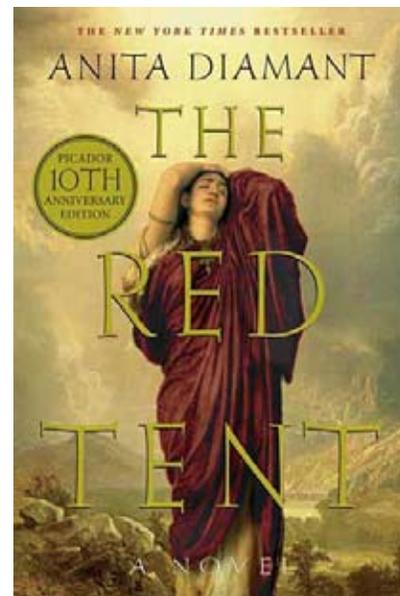




Reading Group Gold

The Red Tent 10th Anniversary Edition by Anita Diamant



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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Red Tent* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Red Tent*.

About the Book

Her name is Dinah. In the Bible, her life is only hinted at in a brief and violent detour within the more familiar chapters of the Book of Genesis that are about her father, Jacob, and his dozen sons.

Told in Dinah's voice, this novel reveals the traditions and turmoil of ancient womanhood—the world of the red tent. It begins with the story of her mothers—Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah—the four wives of Jacob. They love Dinah and give her gifts that sustain her through a hard-working youth, a calling to midwifery, and a new home in a foreign land. Dinah's story reaches out from a remarkable period of early history, and creates an intimate connection with the past.

Deeply affecting, *The Red Tent* combines rich storytelling with a valuable achievement in modern fiction: a new view of biblical women's society.

“An intense, vivid novel . . . It is tempting to say that *The Red Tent* is what the Bible would be like if it had been written by women, but only Diamant could have given it such sweep and grace.” —*The Boston Globe*

“By giving a voice to Dinah, one of the silent female characters in Genesis, the novel has struck a chord with women who may have felt left out of biblical history. It celebrates mothers and daughters and the mysteries of the life cycle.” —*The Los Angeles Times*

“Diamant vividly conjures up the ancient world of caravans, shepherds, farmers, midwives, slaves, and artisans. . . . Her Dinah is a compelling narrator that has timeless resonance.” —Merle Rubin, *The Christian Science Monitor*

“Here is a book of celebration...There should be a song, and Diamant invites us all to sing it with her.”



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—Rebecca Walker, *San Antonio Express-News*

“A full-bodied novel.” —Susan Adler, *Hadassah Magazine*

“Startling in its originality, *The Red Tent* fairly sings its moral message of love and honor.” —Betsy Kline, *Post-Gazette* (Pittsburgh)

About the Author

Anita Diamant is an award-winning journalist and author of five books about contemporary Jewish life, including *The New Jewish Wedding* and *Choosing a Jewish Life*. Her works of fiction include *Good Harbor* and *The Last Days of Dogtown*. She lives in Massachusetts.

Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 34 and discuss how *The Red Tent* changes your perspective on Dinah’s story and also on the story of Joseph that follows. Does *The Red Tent* raise questions about other women in the Bible? Does it make you want to re-read the Bible and imagine other untold stories that lay hidden between the lines?
2. Discuss the marital dynamics of Jacob’s family. He has four wives; compare his relationship with each woman?
3. What do you make of the relationships among the four wives?
4. Dinah is rich in “mothers.” Discuss the differences or similarities in her relationship with each woman.
5. Childbearing and childbirth are central to *The Red Tent*. How do the fertility childbearing and birthing practices differ from contemporary life? How are they similar? How do they compare with your own experiences as a mother or father?
6. Discuss Jacob’s role as a father. Does he treat Dinah differently from his sons? Does he feel differently about her? If so, how?
7. Discuss Dinah’s twelve brothers. Discuss their relationships with each other, with Dinah, and with Jacob and his four wives. Are they a close family?
8. Female relationships figure largely in *The Red Tent*. Discuss the importance of Inna, Tabea, Werenro, and Meryt.



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9. In the novel, Rebecca is presented as an Oracle. Goddesses are venerated along with gods. What do you think of this culture, in which the Feminine has not yet been totally divorced from the Divine? How does El, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, fit into this?
10. Dinah's point of view is often one of an outsider, an observer. What effect does this have on the narrative? What effect does this have on the reader?
11. The book travels from Haran (contemporary Iraq/Syria), through Canaan and into Shechem (Israel), and into Egypt. What strikes you about the cultural differences Dinah encounters vis-à-vis food, clothing, work, and male-female relationships.
12. In *The Red Tent*, we see Dinah grow from childhood to old age. Discuss how she changes and matures. What lessons does she learn from life? If you had to pick a single word to describe the sum of her life, what word would you choose? How would Dinah describe her own life experience?

Anita Diamant's Reflections on *The Red Tent*

It was 1991. I had hit the big Four-Oh, and after fifteen perfectly happy years as a freelance journalist and writer of nonfiction books about Jewish life, I felt the need for a challenge and a change. And so I tried my hand at fiction.

I spent nearly four years on *The Book of Dinah*, which was the working title for what eventually became *The Red Tent*. I considered the research and writing a sort of hobby/sideline, which I fit in between articles for various newspapers and magazines and working on *Choosing a Jewish Life*, a guidebook for people converting to Judaism.

Having published four books with a fifth under contract, I certainly hoped to see my novel in print someday. But because no one was breathlessly awaiting my fictional debut, I had no expectations or deadlines to meet or disappoint. And although I was sure that there was an audience for a retelling of a biblical story from the perspective of the female characters, I was well aware that plenty of published books never find their readers.

So I was amazed by and thankful for the success of *The Red Tent*, which found its audience largely through word-of-mouth recommendations and support from book groups. Over the past ten years, I've heard from hundreds of readers, and although some correspondents have been dismayed and even enraged about the sacrilege I committed by my use of biblical characters and situations, the vast majority have been generous, kind, and even passionate in their praise. (My thanks to each and every one of you who took the time to write.)

Writing a book is not entirely unlike having a baby—except with a book you go through labor, give birth, and then wait nine months to see your little darling. Even so, once a book is finished and launched into the world, like a child it takes on a life of its own, quite independent of its mother. Readers have responded to words and scenes, characters and situations in ways that I could have never predicted. Midwives, labor-and-



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delivery nurses, obstetricians, and doulas claim *The Red Tent* as their own because of its many portrayals of women's bravery in childbirth. Christians and Jews of all affiliations have compared chapters in my novel with passages in Genesis and Exodus, exploring differences and similarities as a way to understand their own connection to the biblical text. High school teachers and college professors assign the book to spark conversations about everything from the difference between history and historical fiction, to women's changing role in society. Women with sisters have told me they identify with the bonds between Dinah's four mother/aunties. Men (yes, there are male readers of *The Red Tent*) enjoy the sense of getting "fly-on-the-wall" insights into women's hearts.

And then there are emails like this:

I recently finished your book, The Red Tent, and as a 16-year-old, I have to say you've opened my eyes to a new way of thinking about my life as a woman, a sister, a daughter, and hopefully, a wife and mother. . . . Your story . . . connects me to some roots, and I feel a strength coming from the millions of women before me, who have experienced and survived adversity, made mistakes and still lived their lives despite it. . . .

I was drawn to retell the biblical story of Dinah in large part because of her silence. In Genesis 34, Dinah's experience is described and characterized by the men in her family, who treat her as a rape victim, which in that historical setting meant that she was irredeemably ruined and degraded. Because she does not say a word (and because of the extraordinary loving actions taken by her accused assailant), I found it easy to imagine an alternative telling to the story, in which Dinah is not a passive victim but a young woman who makes choices and acts on her own initiative. Not only did I find it easy, I found it necessary.

I am gratified and proud that that readers—especially young ones—feel affirmed and empowered by the essential courage, dignity, and beauty of the female experiences I portrayed in *The Red Tent*. When I am asked if I consider myself a feminist, the question is usually couched within some sort of apology, as though the word itself was an insult. I am as proud to be called a feminist as I am to be called a Jew, or an American. Feminism is an indivisible part of who I am, and I remain mystified by the stigma that has been attached to the idea that women are human beings.

It sounds so obvious and simple to me, so motherhood and apple pie. And yet the idea that women are human beings remains news, a message that requires constant, clear, and artful reinforcement in a world that continues to undermine the confidence and abilities of girls and women. On the day that the intelligence and talents of women are fully honored and employed, the human community and the planet itself will benefit in ways we can only begin to imagine. I am so grateful that you chose to read these pages. I hope that you will find meaning and hope in my words. And I pray that you will go from strength to strength, always.

Author Interview

1. *The Red Tent* takes place very much between the lines of the Bible. Could you describe the creative challenges of essentially inserting your own chapter into the Bible, and of giving flesh and voice to biblical characters? Did it intimidate you?



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If you take the time to focus on the words on the page of the Bible, you discover that the language is very sparse. The information that contemporary readers expect of a story—or a myth—are missing: What is the weather like? What time of day it? What do the characters look like and what are their motives, what are they thinking?

I wrote *The Red Tent* as a novel—not as an extra chapter in the Bible. And writing fiction required me to come up with answers to questions like these. I wasn't intimidated by the process because I did not think of my work as scholarly or theological. I probably would have been far more tentative and worried had I tried to remain in a "faithful" dialog with the words on the page and the story as given and understood within my religious tradition. But from the start, I intended to depart from the text to make the story my own.

2. This is a work of well-researched historical fiction, but are there limits to what one might find in the historical record—how does imagination take up the task when research is done?

My research focused on the everyday lives of women in the ancient Near East. I discovered tantalizing details about those lives—for example, the process of spinning wool was pretty much ceaseless as far as I could tell. There were spindles for use while walking, which suggests that women's hands were rarely, if ever, idle.

But there was a great deal I could not find. Women's accomplishments, until the very recent past, have been "written" on the bread they baked, the clothing they fashioned, the children they bore and reared. These are monuments that crumble into dust and that is where imagination took over. In many ways, my research focused on avoiding anachronisms: details and ideas that belong to a later historical period. Thus, there are no chickens or tomatoes in the food that appear in *The Red Tent*, but I did invent "recipes" based on foodstuffs that would have been available in that time and place.

3. Could you say a little bit about how Christian readers have responded to the book and how Jewish readers have responded to the novel as "midrash."

Christian and Jewish readers have embraced *The Red Tent* and made it their own. True, there have been outraged emails and letters from people who believe that I took terrible and wrong-headed liberties with a sacred text, claiming that I have misread the Bible, defamed the matriarchs and patriarchs, even charging me with anti-Semitism. A parochial high school for girls tried to ban it from their reading list.

But the truth is, far more Christians and Jews have written to tell me that *The Red Tent* has opened the Bible to them in new ways, encouraging new insights, questions, and an understanding of biblical characters—especially the women—as real human beings. Many Jewish readers see the novel as belonging to the ancient tradition called midrash, which is a highly imaginative and creative form of biblical commentary. I am honored by the comparison and I'm sure that my limited reading of midrash inspired me to take liberties with the stories of Genesis. However, I think *The Red Tent* is a novel that must stand on its own for people who have no connection to or knowledge of the biblical story. That makes it fundamentally different from midrash, which is commentary that reflects back on the original text.

4. The Red Tent has found remarkable support among rabbis and Jewish community leaders, and also



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among Christians, clergy and laity. Did this surprise you?

I am very grateful to clergy for their early and on-going support of *The Red Tent*. Rabbis, ministers, priests, women religious and other clergy have led book group discussions, assigned it to religion classes, and even preached about it from the pulpit. They have told me that the book is an effective teaching tool, providing a fresh look at the Bible for those who have been reading it for many years, and an open doorway for those who turned away from the Bible long ago. Women clergy, in particular, have written to tell me about the ways that the book has moved them and their congregants.

I was not entirely surprised by this reaction because I see my book as an expression of the spirit of our times. I am a member of a generation that includes a large community of learned and learning women of faith; *The Red Tent* grows out of this new and vital tradition.

5. The novel has proven a success among women of all generations, sometimes within the same family: grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. Can you share some of the responses you have received from readers, and tell us why you think so many people identify with the book?

At one of my earliest readings, three women introduced themselves as three generations of the same family and told me that the fourth—a great-grandmother—also enjoyed the book. I was surprised and moved by that meeting, and have since heard from many families who have shared the book through the generations.

Readers identify with *The Red Tent* for many reasons. Book group members tell me that it had inspired conversations about everything from the experience of childbirth, to mother-daughter relationships, to the importance of women's friendships, to the role of women in their religious traditions. Many readers say that they love the book because of the way it affirms the essential dignity, power, and integrity of women's lives.

6. Do you feel that men and women read the Hebrew Bible in fundamentally different ways?

Although there are important and visionary exceptions throughout history, I believe that men and women have read the Bible essentially the same way because everyone viewed it through the same theological/historical "lens." To this day, virtually no one reads the Bible without a specifically religious interpretive framework, Jewish or Christian.

However, in the past few generations, the work of feminist theologians and artists has provided a new lens and new perspectives. Thanks to them and the conversations they have engendered, we are aware of the silences in the Bible—such as Dinah's silence. We wonder about the women who are only mentioned in passing and also about the barely hinted at experience of women who are prominently featured—from Rebecca in the Hebrew Bible, to Mary in the Christian Bible.

Today, a great many women—in all faith traditions—read the Bible with a heightened sensitivity to the presence and absence of the women characters. The truth is, the same can be said of many men of faith as well: the conversation has changed for everyone.

7. How did you come to have the idea of the red tent itself, did it occur to you early in the writing process,



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or did it evolve with the novel's creation?

First, it's important to note that I have never claimed that the women of the Bible actually used a menstrual tent; there is no historical evidence to support such acclaim. However, since there have been menstrual tents and huts throughout the pre-modern world, it seemed historically plausible to give them one.

The importance of the tent developed in the process of writing, but the idea of making it a place of community, rest, and celebration predates *The Red Tent*. Some years prior to starting the book, I heard a lecture by the Jewish writer, Arthur Waskow, who suggested rethinking a biblical law that required separation of a woman from the community for 60 days after the birth of a girl compared to 30 days after the birth of a boy. From a feminist point of view, this could be seen as a reflection of the notion that girl babies made mothers more “unclean” than boys. Waskow asked us to consider a different theory, no less feminist, but far more interesting to me. Perhaps, he said, this was an acknowledgment that giving birth to a birth-giver was a more sacred, a more powerful experience. The extra month could be seen not as a punishment, but as a reward.

8. *What do you see as the differences between a writing a novel about an historical subject, as opposed to writing a story set in contemporary society?*

Historical fiction requires a leap of the imagination into a world that looked, tasted, and smelled different from our own. The characters of *The Red Tent* lived without clocks or calendars, so their experience of time was nothing like ours. In *The Last Days of Dogtown*, a novel I set in the early 19th century, a distance of only a few miles became a prohibitive journey in the deep freeze of a New England winter. You have to exercise certain imaginative muscles to enter an earlier mindset. One of the more subtle challenges in writing historical fiction is the need to set aside modern assumptions about what is good, bad, or necessary for a life well-lived. For example, in *The Red Tent*, I tried to treat polygamy as a simple fact, without making a moral or ethical judgment about the practice.

Writing the contemporary novel, *Good Harbor*, was more daunting in a way because readers know the world that I'm describing, so I felt the margin for error was much smaller.

9. *The Red Tent has been published in twenty-seven countries; do you find that responses to the book vary significantly around the world?*

Remarkably, the responses are quite consistent. Regardless of their origin—Australia, Israel, Latin America—questions about the research and reactions to characters and themes are very similar. The ease of communication through email makes me feel like a part of a world-wide community of readers, and since the vast majority of my correspondents are women, their responses tend to affirm my belief that what unites is far greater than what divides us.

10. *Are there any other parts of the Bible that you have considered re-writing, or imagining more fully?*

Many readers have asked if I plan to revisit the Bible as a source for another novel. I've learned never to say “never,” but my answer, for now, is no. I like to take a big risk each time I attempt a work of fiction, to challenge myself with new situations and new settings. The truth is, stories have a way of finding me, rather



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than the other way around. I have come to trust this process, which remains a wonderful mystery. The road twists and turns, and I have confidence that I'll discover my next project, unforeseen and new, somewhere up ahead.