



Reading Group Gold

The Last Jew

by Noah Gordon

Introduction to *The Last Jew*

In the year 1492, the Inquisition has all of Spain in its grip. After centuries of pogrom-like riots encouraged by the Church, the Jews—who have been an important part of Spanish life since the days of the Romans—are expelled from the country by royal edict. Many who wish to remain are intimidated by Church and Crown and become Catholics, but several hundred thousand choose to retain their religion and depart. Given little time to flee, some perish even before they can escape from Spain.

Yonah Toledano, the 15-year-old son of a celebrated Spanish silversmith, has seen his father and brother die, almost unnoticed in a time of mass upheaval. Trapped in Spain by circumstances, he is determined to honor the memory of his family by remaining a Jew. On a donkey named Moise, the young fugitive begins a meandering odyssey across the vastness of Spain. The novel treats Yonah's evolution into an adult with the outer persona of an Old Christian physician and the rich but dwindling inner life of a Jew. Anchoring the narrative is the moving love story of his relationship with a Converso woman who finds her secret way back to the religion of her ancestors.

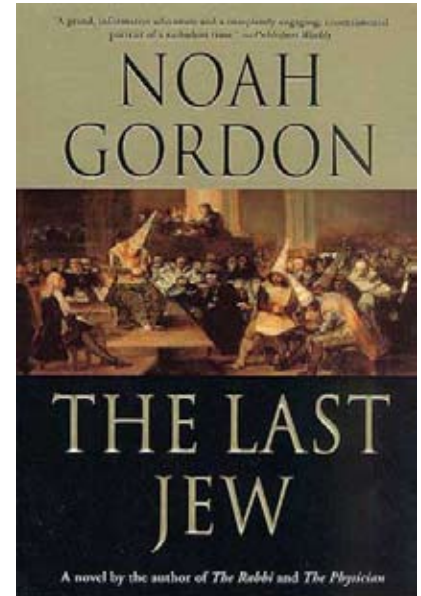
Praise for *The Last Jew*

“Consistently superb... The new novel showcases Gordon's strength as a writer of provocative historical fiction.” --*The San Francisco Chronicle*

“*The Last Jew* is an excellent, abundant tapestry of a historical novel that will keep readers on the edges of their seats.” --*The Providence Journal*

“[Noah Gordon] illuminates the choices history forces on individuals—and, not incidentally, creates a grand, informative adventure and a completely engaging, unsentimental portrait of a turbulent time.”
--*Publishers Weekly*

“Gordon is a natural storyteller, and, given the novel's fascinating setting and a more-than-likeable hero, this superior historical novel should have a place in all libraries.” --*Library Journal*



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Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Yonah Toledano and the other Jews in Spain had terrible choices in 1492: conversion, expulsion, or death. Faced with the same choices today, which would you choose? Why?
2. What were the qualities that enabled Yonah to survive? In your opinion, could a teen-ager survive in a similar situation today?
3. Discuss how Yonah's isolation limited his sense of Jewishness. Did it also strengthen his Jewishness in any way?
4. Helkias Toledano's family had a special relationship with the family of Benito Martin. What are some positive aspects of Spanish society that are revealed by their relationship? What negative aspects are revealed?
5. Discuss Yonah's sexuality. Consider how his sexual experiences were shaped by his secret existence. What effect do you believe this had on his personality and his life?
6. Consider the novel's title. Perhaps in 1492 there were other unconverted persons who, for one reason or another, failed to depart when the Jews left Spain. Yonah knew there were Jews in other lands. Why did he feel as though he were *The Last Jew* in the world?
7. Consider the character of the physician Bernardo Espina, and discuss how the author used this characterization to impart information about the era, medieval medicine, and the Inquisition. What does Espina's marriage reveal about the society? Discuss his religious feelings, and his attitude toward both Catholicism and Judaism.
8. Examine the clandestine Jewish religious service in which Yonah took part while a guest in the Saadi home in Granada. Then consider the religious services which he experienced years later *with the same group of conversos* in the hidden valley of Pradogrande. Discuss the reasons for the differences.
9. Consider Nuno Fiero, physician of Saragossa. What prompted his interest in Yonah? Why was he inclined to look favorably upon Jews? In addition to medical science, what are some of the other lessons that he taught Yonah?
10. In Judaism, Jews may pray when alone, but the presence of ten persons (ten men in Orthodoxy) is required before a formal religious service may begin. In your opinion is there a connection between this requirement and the fact that the children and descendants of most of the "secret Jews" ended up as Catholics? Can you think of other reasons why Judaism could not survive in subsequent generations?
11. The period described in *The Last Jew* was a violent and often barbarous time. Do you believe civilization has advanced since 1492? In what ways? Do you believe we have regressed? In what ways?



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12. Do you think a religious inquisition could take place in America? Give reasons.

About the Author

Noah Gordon, a former newspaperman, has written prize-winning novels that have been widely read in many countries. He is the author of seven books: *The Rabbi*, *The Death Committee*, *The Jerusalem Diamond*, *The Physician*, *Shaman*, *Matters of Choice*, and *The Last Jew*. He lives with his wife, Lorraine, in Brookline, Massachusetts, a few miles from the grandchildren to whom *The Last Jew* is dedicated.

Gordon decided to write *The Last Jew* in 1992. “That year I made two trips to Spain, once to do a book tour and once to accept a prize in San Sebastian. During both trips I noted that Spain was observing two important anniversaries. It was exactly 500 years since Columbus made his first voyage to the New World. And exactly 500 years too, since the Jews were expelled from Spain. I knew of several American writers doing books about Columbus, but I knew of no one doing a novel about the period of the expulsion, and a little fight went off in my head. I was then in the middle of another novel, and it wasn’t until 1995 that I was able to begin work on *The Last Jew*.”

“I had the thoroughly enjoyable experience of making several research trips to Spain, visiting the places and countryside I rvas to write about, and in my imagination seeing and hearing the Jews who vanished from there so long ago. In the process I fell in love with modern Spain, a vibrant democratic monarchy where even now new sites are being uncovered that attest to the Jewish life that once existed there.”