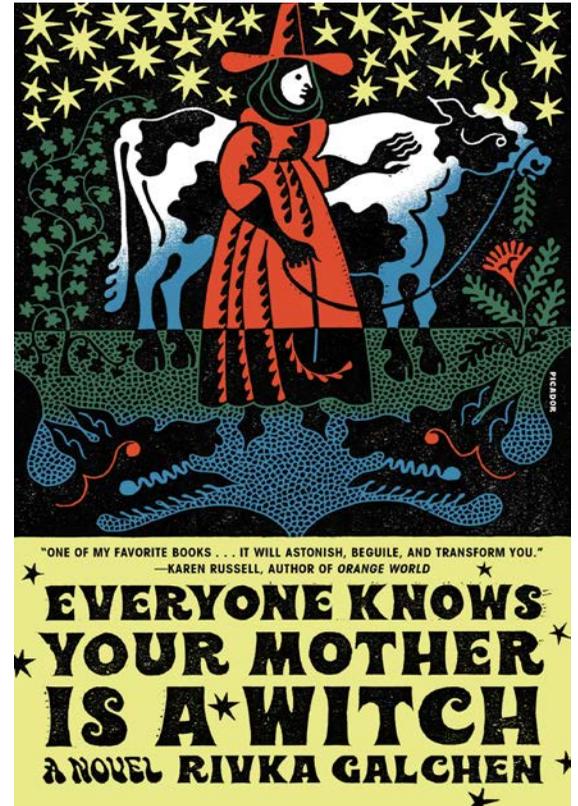


FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

# Reading Group Gold

## *Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch*

by Rivka Galchen



ISBN: 9781250849311 / 288 pages

The story begins in 1618, in the German duchy of Württemberg. Plague is spreading. The Thirty Years' War has commenced, and fear and suspicion are in the air throughout the Holy Roman Empire. In the small town of Leonberg, Katharina Kepler is accused of being a witch.

Katharina is an illiterate widow, known by her neighbors for her herbal remedies and her successful children, including the eldest, Johannes, who is the Imperial Mathematician and the renowned author of the laws of planetary motion. It's enough to make anyone jealous, and Katharina has done herself no favors by being out and about and in everyone's business. So when the deranged and insipid Ursula Reinbold accuses Katharina of offering her a bitter, witchy drink that has made her ill, Katharina is in trouble, facing the threat of financial ruin, torture, and even execution.

Drawing on real historical documents and infused with the intensity of imagination, sly humor, and intellectual fire for which Rivka Galchen is known, *Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch* touchingly illuminates a society and a family undone by superstition, the state, and the mortal convulsions of history.

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## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the author's choice of the book's narrators. We alternate between Katharina Kepler's voice as transcribed by her neighbor Simon, Simon himself, and then testimony and letters from accusers or advocates of Katharina. How might using multiple narrators be more revealing than using a single narrator? What color makes it in, what nuance, or what intimacy?
2. Rumors are central to *Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch*. Describe some of the rumors that affect Katharina Kepler throughout the novel. Are there any that you found particularly insidious? Which ones, and why? How and why do the rumors start? Describe how they take new forms as Katharina's story progresses. Were you surprised by the life some of the rumors took on? What does the evolution of the rumors suggest about the beliefs of Katharina's peers? When and why might they choose to believe rumors rather than what is easily provable?
3. How would you describe Katharina and her alleged crimes? Did you find her trial irritating, cruel, or something else? Do you feel she made herself a target, perhaps by meddling, even if she meant well? Even Simon "acknowledges her intrusive nature," although he admits it has a "resplendent underside" (page 44).
4. What is Katharina's influence on those around her, and especially on someone vulnerable like Anna, Simon's daughter? Does she help those around her to live bolder lives? What does she perceive her influence to be, and is there a disconnect?
5. How would you describe the relationship between Katharina and Simon? How does it grow and evolve as seasons pass? What feelings are too dangerous to say out loud, especially as her trial progresses?
6. Who is Ursula the Werewolf? What is her connection to Katharina, and how have their paths intersected? Is there more to their story besides a frayed friendship? What is she after?
7. Does Katharina possess any true power besides her obvious knowledge and skillful use of herbal medicine? How does this and her "quiet knowledge" (page 160) put her in the crosshairs? What dangers does she pose, and to whom?
8. Did you suspect Katharina's connection to the classical astronomer Johannes Kepler, and if so, when? Does knowing that the story is informed by substantial history add to your reading experience? Were you inspired to learn more about Johannes Kepler's work? How is he connected to the title of the book?
9. "Luther said that even if the earth were to end tomorrow, he would still plant his tree" (page 211). Discuss the role of Martin Luther's theology in reshaping attitudes on faith. How radical were his ideas? What are their ripple effects on the book's characters? What does this quote above mean to you?
10. "I was sitting in a church pew, and at the pulpit was the devil" (page 126). Why does Katharina

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insist on justice, even though so much is at stake? What are her options after she is accused of witchcraft? Why does she return to the town where her accusers have better access to her? Discuss and share how you might have resisted—or relented.

11. “I understood her—to love others is to suffer” (page 184). Can you sympathize with the depths of Katharina’s losses? With her love, her hard-won wisdom, and her sacrifice? “I’ve tried songs about sunshine, also prayers, I’ve tried every kind of blessing . . . I’ve even cursed and begged. Again, who hasn’t?” (page 161). What seems to give her solace or help her persevere—or at least keep the rage from taking over?
12. Think about some modern parallels in relation to Katharina’s behavior. What is universal and true about being a mother, or a mother-in-law? Did you find her relatable regardless of her being a product of her time?
13. Describe the dynamics between Katharina’s children. How do her adult children rally together—or not? How different are their approaches to their mother’s predicament, and what manifests from the stress?
14. Discuss Katharina and Chamomile’s bond. What lies in the space between what is said and unsaid? How does Katharina care for her? How does Chamomile get her name?
15. “It is a common misconception that all children are beautiful and full of spirit. They aren’t. Some are fearful, or aggressive, or aloof, or selfish. Some are wonderful but unreachable and private. I have known and cared for and loved many small people” (page 92). Discuss your feelings on this sentiment. How is Katharina inseparable from Maruschl? How would you describe their connection?
16. What feelings did you have at the end of the novel? Were you relieved, dismayed, or overwhelmed by the way Katharina’s story ended? What did you hope for her?

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## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Think about your family and ancestors. Are there stories of those people that you'd like to investigate? Any misconceptions, gossip, or intriguing stories you'd like to flesh out or clear up?
2. Consider the ranks of other misremembered, mistreated, or simply overlooked female figures or mothers from history. Is there another story surrounding motherhood that you would be curious to see dramatized?
3. Share your thoughts on an "incantation" or whispered saying you use currently—perhaps one that, historically speaking, might have started rumors about you in another time. What mantras or forms of encouragement do you use that have a special, sacred power?