



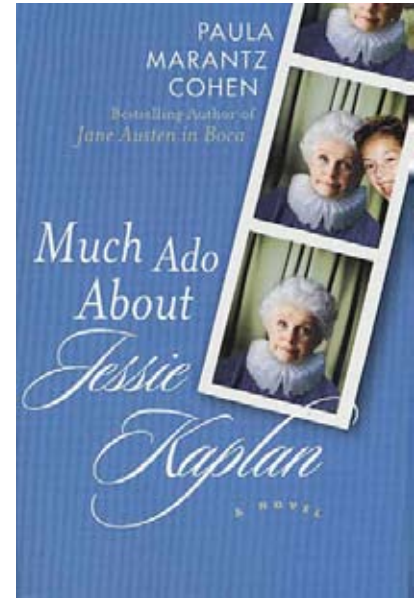
Reading Group Gold

Much Ado About Jessie Kaplan

by Paula Marantz Cohen

Introduction to *Much Ado About Jessie Kaplan*

Paula Marantz Cohen's triumphant first novel, *Jane Austen in Boca*, was an inspired blend of classic English literature and modern American manners. Her new novel heads north to the seemingly quiet suburban town of Cherry Hill, New Jersey, for a comedy that even Shakespeare couldn't have imagined.



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Carla Goodman is worried. Her husband, a gastroenterologist in private practice, is coming home frazzled because medicine isn't what it used to be. Her son's teachers want to put him on Ritalin to stop him from wreaking havoc on the fifth grade. And her cranky twelve-year-old daughter has a bas mitzvah coming up.

But it's Carla's sweet, widowed mother, Jessie Kaplan, who really has her baffled. Jessie has suddenly "remembered" that she was Shakespeare's girlfriend—the Dark Lady of the sonnets—in a previous life. Can even the famed Dr. Leonard Samuels, psychiatrist and author of the self-help book *How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love My Mother-in-Law*, help with problems like these?

Witty, engaging, and wickedly observant, *Much Ado About Jessie Kaplan* is an unpredictable tale of love, loss, and family rites of passage.

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. How do you view Jessie Kaplan's ideas about her past life? In what ways are they creative and/or therapeutic for herself and for her family? Does it bother you that her ideas are never fully explained?
2. How is Carla's reaction to her mother's behavior at once logical, loving, and selfish? How do you view her handling of her daughter? Discuss the stresses of Carla's position as she struggles to do the best for her family.
3. How do Margot and her mother resemble and differ from each other? How does Margot reflect the gains that feminism has made possible for women as well as some of the losses that accompany those gains?
4. Discuss the different views of religion held by Carla and Mark. What do these differing views reveal



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about the temperament and nature of these two individuals?

5. Discuss Stephanie's initial response to her Torah reading and then look at her final *D'var Torah*. In what way does her response reflect a synthesis of Carla and Mark's views of religion?
6. The gap between appearance and reality is a major theme in Shakespeare's work. Discuss what it means to look below the surface of things and how this theme functions in the novel.
7. Discuss the idea of interpretation (the theme of Stephanie's *D'var Torah*)—as it relates to Jessie's notions of her past life, as it relates to Hal's role as a teacher and critic, and as it relates to Margot's abilities as a lawyer and as a woman seeking a soul mate?
8. Discuss the methods of Dr. Samuels. Is he a good therapist, in your opinion? Would you like to consult him? Why or why not?
9. Discuss the statement made by Mr. O'Hare: "I'm sure we go to the same place...only the scenery is different, which makes a lot of sense when you think about it. God doesn't want to go to the same goddamn play every night." How does this statement relate to the lives of the characters in the novel? To your own life and beliefs?

About the Author

Paula Marantz Cohen is Distinguished Professor of English at Drexel University in Philadelphia. She is the author of five nonfiction books, including *Silent Film and the Triumph of the American Myth* and *The Daughter as Reader: Encounters Between Literature and Life*, as well as the novel *Jane Austen in Boca*. She lives in Moorestown, New Jersey, with her husband and two children.