
Reviewed by Judith Laura, Independent Scholar and Author, Maryland USA

For as long as she could remember, author Michelle Cameron’s mother had been telling her that she was a descendant of a famous 13th century European rabbi. But it wasn’t until Cameron was researching her family tree for other reasons that she uncovered the rabbi’s name: Meir Ben Baruch of Rothenberg. After this discovery, Cameron began researching her ancestor on the Google, and this novel is one result of that research.

The book’s title is from Proverbs 31:31 (last verse of last chapter in the Book of Proverbs). The verse describes the “woman of valor,” and is traditionally recited in the home before sitting down to Sabbath dinner. It is commonly understood to be complimenting the wife/mother of the household. Each of the novel’s five parts and its 38 chapters begins with a quote. Part I’s quote is from the traditional Jewish women’s morning prayer: “Blessed are you, Lord of the Universe, for having made me according to your will.” This is contrasted in the second chapter (32) with the men’s morning prayer: “Blessed are You for not having made me a woman.”

Though the impetus for the novel is Cameron’s ancestor, Rabbi Meir, the story is told from the first person point of view of a fictional character, Shira, the only child of a fictional twice-widowed rabbi in 13th century France, Rabbi Shmuel Ben Solomon, whom non-Jews in the real town of Falaise call Sir Morel. Rabbi Meir’s “baby name” for Shira is “Songbird.” In Hebrew, “Shira” means song [poetry and singing], and in this novel may be thematically related to Shabbat Shira, during which Jewish congregations to this day sing the song of thanksgiving that
the Israelites sang after the crossing the Red Sea.

We first meet Shira when she is a young child. She can barely remember her mother, who died in childbirth when Shira was five after a succession of other failed pregnancies. One of Shira’s first memories is sitting on her father’s lap while he is teaching his yeshiva class. In addition to her father, Shira is cared for by a Christian servant originally hired as a wet-nurse and of whom Shira is very fond. But the rabbi fires the servant after she uses the same cooking utensil for both milk and meat, contaminating the food by breaking kashrut (kosher) laws. Up until this time, Shira has been allowed to study Talmud with her father. At first Shira is allowed to sit among the yeshiva boys. But both the women in the congregation and the boys and young men in the class are uncomfortable with Shira in the classroom. The male students complain that Shira is a distraction from the “sanctity of their studies” (9). So, her father moves her to a chair on the side of the room. But after the kashrut-breaking servant is fired, women neighbors insist that Shira, now nine, needs to be brought under control. Even though the rabbi hires another servant to tend to the kitchen, the women persuade the rabbi that his daughter should no longer be allowed to study and instead be detained to kitchen duties because it is her appropriate role. When Shira is ten, a controversial student, Nicolas Donin, an historical character, comes to study with her father. Shira estimates Donin to be about fifteen or sixteen and is drawn to him—he is the only male besides her father whom she feels takes her intellectual abilities seriously. But Donin already has a bad reputation in Ashkenaz (in medieval times, the areas of Germany and France where Jews lived) for being a rebellious, outspoken, even belligerent advocate of Maimonides’ view that study of Torah was all that was important and that the study of the Talmud was “a sinful waste of time” (30). Most Ashkenazi rabbis and scholars, on the other hand, advocated Talmud study. Though his audacity increases Donin’s allure for Shira, she also knows, she should be cautious. Donin asks to be betrothed to Shira (the marriage to be delayed for several
years), but her father is against it. Nevertheless, he asks Shira her opinion. In her ten-year-old-way, Shira is intrigued by the possible match, but makes a deal with her father: she will refuse Donin’s proposal if her father will permit her to study with him again. Rabbi Shmuel agrees and tutors her privately. Donin, who later is ex-communicated and vengeful, leaves her father’s yeshiva. Yet, the women in the congregation, having observed the attraction between Shira and Donin, manipulate the men into persuading Rabbi Shmuel, to remarry, hoping a new wife will bring stronger hand to rein-in Shira. The rabbi marries a woman he selects from among eligible widows, and she becomes pregnant. While she is in labor, the rabbi is taken by guards to the Baron’s castle, apparently under arrest for some unknown infraction. After the baby is born and the rabbi still has not returned, Shira, followed by one of her father’s new students, Meir Ben Baruch, hurries through a snowstorm to find out what’s going on at the castle. Shira and Meir are eventually betrothed, then married in a beautifully described ceremony. This takes us about 150 pages into the 434-page book. Rather than give away the rest of the plot, I will just tell you that it focuses on Shira and Meir’s growing family and their response to the increasing antisemitism in Europe, and I will turn to the stylistic elements of the novel.

Despite the first-person narration, a point-of-view that usually brings the reader more closely and easily into the story, in the first few chapters of the novel I felt a bit distanced from both the narrator and the plot. Since this feeling faded after several chapters, I attribute it to Cameron’s having to establish and explain the historical setting and customs of the time. Therefore, for readers whose interest in the book is mainly historical, this will not be a problem. For readers whose interest is predominantly novelistic, I advise: read on, you will feel more comfortable soon. Cameron has done an excellent job of explaining Jewish customs, and when she uses Hebrew words, follows with a sentence using the term(s) in English so that the meaning is clear to non-Hebrew speakers. In addition, there is a glossary of terms at the end of book.
believe there is a factual error in the reason given for the wedding ring placement on the bride’s right forefinger in Jewish ceremonies. Shira tells us that the right forefinger is “closest to her heart” (62). Unless the heart has moved since the 1200s, it is the fingers of the left hand that are closest to the heart. A non-Jewish custom placing the ring on the left ring finger is based on the belief that a vein in that finger leads directly to the heart. A little Googling on my part turned up other reasons for the Jewish tradition of putting the wedding ring on the right forefinger. These reasons include the Biblical tradition that placing a finger on the right hand signifies a vow (though not necessarily a marriage vow) and the observation that the right forefinger is the easiest for witnesses to the marriage to see.

Cameron portrays Shira’s attitude towards girls and women’s issues as changing over the years. When she is a girl she is inquisitive and assertive, as when she has rebellious feelings about being assigned to kitchen duty and denied the opportunity to continue her studies, when she is sitting with the women behind the synagogue partition, (44-48), and in a narrative of the demonization of Lilith (85). But by the time she is married and in her twenties, when her husband asks her to take dictation to help with his correspondence she is highly complimented and enthusiastically complies. She seems to have become acculturated.

In this, her first novel, Cameron is at her best when writing about romance. Her writing flows when describing the emotions Shira feels for Donin, Shira’s early meetings with Meir, their (very) subtle flirtations when others are around, Shira’s experience in the mikveh before the wedding, and the delicacy of their wedding night. These and other passages of love shine with authenticity.

There appears to be growing sub-genre of novels about real or invented Jewish ancestors. They include Lilian Nattel’s The River Midnight, in which Nattel, frustrated when unable to trace her family back past her grandparents, created a protagonist for her family to claim as ancestor, a
midwife in a Polish shtetl in the late 1900s. Another is Joyce Carol Oates’ The Gravedigger’s Daughter, roughly based on her grandmother’s and great-grandfather’s lives beginning in Nazi Germany in 1936. Michelle Cameron goes back in time much further, indeed further than most families—especially Jewish families—can trace their family trees. The Fruit of Her Hands takes a welcome place among this growing number of Jewish ancestor novels.