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Shirley Graetz is a woman with conviction. To the titles mother, Israeli tour guide, and PhD student she added the title “author of historical fiction.” Her debut novel, *She Wrote on Clay*, came out of her dissertation research for which she read thousands of Old Babylonian letters. She describes writing the book in the early morning hours as a labor of love, a way for the ancient world she was studying to spring to life. And spring to life it does.

Set roughly 3800 years ago in the ancient city of Sippar, the book describes the life of a girl named Iltani. As such, it falls into the “coming-of-age” genre where dialogue and action are interspersed with Iltani’s inner monologue. We learn that ever since she can remember, Iltani has wanted a future not easily available to women in her time; she wants to be a scribe. Her character’s determination and grit makes her seem like an ancient Anne of Green Gables. Like Anne, Iltani instantly comes across as spirited, opinionated, and a trifle naïve. Iltani’s father, himself as scribe, has arranged for her to join the ranks of the *nadītu* priestesses, Sippar’s cloistered women. Iltani will be adopted and looked after by her aunt, Amat-Šamaš who is also a *nadītu*, and trained by the best female scribe within the cloisters. As the day for leaving home nears, Iltani begins to realize the trade-offs necessary to obtain her dream of becoming a scribe.

For the first two years she will not be free to leave the cloisters (*gagû*), which means no visits to the family she loves dearly. After her initiation ceremony, Iltani is reunited with her childhood best friend who had joined the *gagû* a few years before. It is at this point that Iltani first learns that not all women are happy living lives devoted to celibacy and serving the gods; her friend has fallen in love and is pregnant. She plans to escape from the *gagû* and marry the baby’s father. Bereft at her friend’s imminent departure, she focuses all her energies on becoming a scribe.

Iltani is a quick study with much promise and is promoted to reading texts for a prominent
nadītu, in the gagû. But here things take a dark turn as the woman makes advances towards the innocent girl. Iltani resists and in doing so makes her first independent decision. Her decision turns out to be a two-sided sword. True, it saves Iltani from this lesbian “cougar,” but the older woman uses her political influence within the cloisters to prevent Iltani from receiving more scribal lessons and achieving her dream. Iltani hits rock bottom. Her best friend has left, her mentor will not teach her, and her aunt has died. At this point in her life, Iltani must make a choice: she will either sink into despair and slowly wither away or join the ranks of those nadītu who overcome the odds and lead a prosperous life (103). She chooses the latter.

Aided by a slowly growing network of other nadītu, Iltani finds a way to become the scribe she wanted to be. Her work is so well known that when the Code of Hammurabi is constructed, the chief scribal architect asks her to be on the team of engravers. This is where the narrative takes another turn. Iltani unwittingly falls in love with the handsome, strong young man who is not only a scribe, but also a trusted adviser to the crown prince of Babylon.

Graetz does a lovely job of bringing to life the gagû in Sippar. We learn of the social stratification through the relationships and people that Iltani encounters. Some women came from prominent families, while others entered the gagû with the hopes of improving their standing. In addition to serving the gods, these women had secular professions such as weaver, textile producer, scribe, property manager, midwife, and healer. Older women took care of and adopted the younger women. Older women also mentored and tutored the new initiates.

The gagû was a world unto itself, a world not easily accessible to the contemporary reader. To make up for the foreign nature of the setting, Graetz relies upon universal themes: corruption and politics of bureaucracy, love and loss, and life and death. Perhaps in trying to make the book accessible, Graetz relies a little too heavily on some themes that appeal to the modern reader. For example, the scene where an older woman tries to seduce Iltani seems a bit gratuitous in my mind (p.84). (I am not trying to be prudish, for the LGBT community, while a minority, was alive and well in the ancient world. What bothers me is the way the scene was used as pivotal scene in the book.) Iltani makes her first adult decision concerning her future and her body. If
Graetz wanted to emphasize the politics of the gagû and the power a single person could wield, this could have been done outside of the bedroom. And if she wanted to emphasize the different kinds of sexualities in the ancient Near East, it could have been done in a different way.

The ending of the book also raised some issues. Iltani winds up falling in love with a man and agreeing to marry him. In a different story, this would not be a problem, but the majority of the book was dedicated to a narrative wherein Iltani had made a decision to lead a fulfilling life without a man. The first time Iltani had doubts about life in the gagû she told herself: “I have always wanted this path, to become a female scribe. The gagû was her only option. All beginnings are difficult, and I will work hard to fulfill my dream.” (56) Later in the book we are told, “Iltani was determined to be the best female-scribe in the gagû.” (116) For nine years she was content to be a scribe, teacher, and to offer prayers. In fact, the first time marriage is proposed, Iltani refuses on the grounds that “… my path in life was to become a scribe and a nadītu of Šamaš. That is my destiny and what the gods have ordained for me . . . I am content with my life as it is.” (170) And then, in the last twenty pages, this storyline changes. Iltani decides to get married and leave the gagû. Maintaining that Iltani would not have to give up her profession, the ending confirms the message that Iltani has fought against the whole book: no woman is happy or can lead a fulfilling life without a man. In a way, the ending Disney-a-ifies what could be a wonderful opportunity to present the contemporary reader with a life not often portrayed in the ancient Near East, the life of an unmarried, powerful and respected woman.

It took a chapter or two to get into the style of writing, after all, one is not used to seeing Akkadian vocabulary in a work of fiction. If you can get past this hump, an entertaining read awaits you. The fact Graetz is able to seamlessly weave in primary texts ranging from hymns, to love poems, to legal documents is a testament to her writing abilities. The reader will walk away not only having read a great book, but also with a richer understanding of a rather obscure corner of Mesopotamian history.