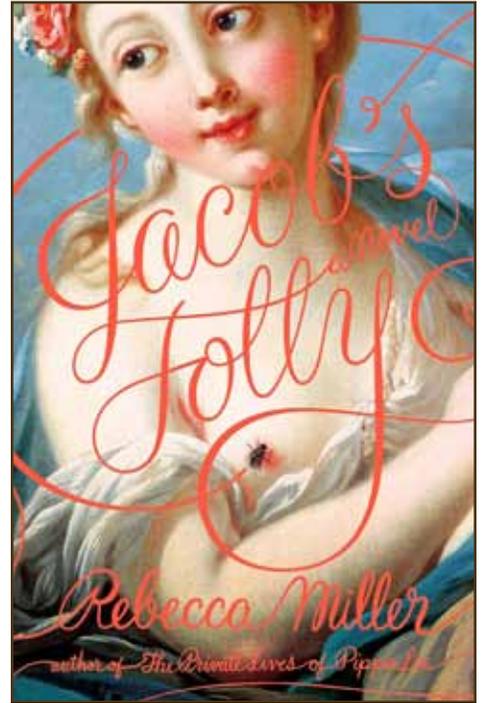


Reading Group Gold

Jacob's Folly Rebecca Miller



ISBN: 978-0-374-17854-3 / 384 pages

An ingenious novel of love, faith, and reincarnation, *Jacob's Folly* weaves three storylines to create a rollicking tale in which the past reverberates into the present. At the heart of the novel are Jacob, a Jewish peddler living in eighteenth-century France; Leslie, a Long Island volunteer firefighter; and Masha, an alluring young Ultraorthodox Jew who aspires to become an actress. In Rebecca Miller's inventive second novel, the fates of these individuals intertwine when Jacob finds himself reincarnated as a fly in contemporary New York. Showcasing Miller's quirky humor and keen eye, *Jacob's Folly* traces the characters' multifaceted transformations: personal, spiritual, and literal. As Miller considers the collision of fate and free will, her world becomes a place of matchmakers and gamblers, vagabonds and heroes, all united in the pursuit of unrealized dreams.

We hope that the following discussion topics will enhance your reading group's experience of this funny, luminous, and deeply moving novel.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss Jacob's storytelling style. How does he create a tragicomic tone? Which passages moved you the most? When did you find yourself laughing inappropriately?
2. Jacob and Masha face difficult decisions about whether to follow religious tradition. Do their family legacies empower them or hinder them? Would you have turned down Monsieur le Comte's job offer? Would you have said yes to Eli's marriage proposal?

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3. Discuss Hodel's transformation. In the novel, is sexuality something to be savored, or does it spell doom?
4. How does Leslie relate to his older sister? Does Masha have much in common with Deirdre and the other women in Leslie's life? What makes him well suited to his job as a rescuer?
5. Visiting from Poland, Gimpel claims that Jacob has become too much like the French. What does it cost Jacob to assimilate, leaving behind even his name? What does it cost Gimpel to be himself? By the end of Jacob's life in France, has he abandoned or discovered his true self?
6. What do Masha's roles onstage, which place her in a world that is so different from her own, mean to her? What role does she have to play in her negotiations with Nevsky? How does Jacob's skill as an actor in daily life prepare him for a career onstage?
7. Ultimately, does Hugh lead Masha to a better life, "healing" her in a way? What was at the heart of Pearl's fears?
8. What historical details did you discover about eighteenth-century France by reading Jacob's tale? How does his anti-Semitic world compare to Masha's New York?
9. What does Antonia's story illuminate about class, leverage, and survival as Jacob tries to find security?
10. Shortly after Jacob's awkward Good Friday experience, the count says that he is naming the pyramid "Jacob's Folly" to commemorate the Jews' liberation from Egypt and one of their heroes. Discuss the many ironies of the building's name (and the novel's title).
11. In chapter 42, Max's story serves as a bridge between the Old World and the United States. Is this a novel in which history repeats itself, or do the characters become masters of reinvention?
12. What do you predict for Jacob? Will his final prayer be answered? How have his experiences affected his relationship with God?
13. Discuss the book in comparison to Rebecca Miller's previous novel, *The Private Lives of Pippa Lee*. Do Pippa, Masha, and Jacob speak to any common themes about fate and risk?
14. If you could be a fly on the wall of a family three hundred years from now, what would you hope to see? What type of family would you want to set up housekeeping with?

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

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PRAISE FOR *JACOB'S FOLLY*

“Marvelous, deep, rich, sexy, transgressive, terrifying, tough, and very, very funny—a great ingathering as multifaceted as a gem, or the eye of a fly!” —Tony Kushner, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright of *Angels in America*

“A hugely ambitious, wildly imaginative novel.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“A deeply pleasurable, darkly comic, and original reinterpretation of Jewish history’s ‘indestructible storyline,’ alighting thoughtfully on forces both individual and collective, internal and external, from genocide to assimilation.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Miller is the author of the short-story collection *Personal Velocity*, her feature-film adaptation of which won the Excellence in Cinematography Award at Sundance, and *The Private Lives of Pippa Lee* (FSG, 2008), which she also adapted for the screen. She lives in New York and Ireland with her family.

Reading group guide written by Amy Clements / The Wordshop, Inc.

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