



Book Club Set

The Oracle of Stamboul

By Michael David Lukas

About the Author



Michael David Lukas has been a Fulbright Scholar in Turkey, a night-shift proofreader in Tel Aviv, a student at the American University of Cairo, and a waiter at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont. Translated into more than a dozen languages, his first novel *The Oracle of Stamboul* was a finalist for the California Book Award, the NCIBA Book of the Year Award, and the Harold U. Ribalow Prize. His second novel, *The Last Watchman of Old Cairo*, won the Sami Rohr Prize, the National Jewish Book Award, the Prix Interallié for Foreign Fiction, and the ALA's Sophie Brody Medal. A graduate of Brown University and the University of Maryland, he is a recipient of scholarships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Montalvo Arts Center, New York State Summer Writers' Institute, Squaw Valley Community of Writers, and Elizabeth George Foundation. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Slate*, *National Geographic Traveler*, and *Georgia Review*. He lives in Oakland and teaches at San Francisco State University.

Michael teaches in the Creative Writing department at San Francisco State University. Over the past twelve years, he has taught creative writing to MFA students at University of San Francisco, undergraduates at University of the Pacific, and middle school students at 826 Valencia. He has also taught postgraduates and working adults at Stanford University Continuing Studies, Gotham Writers' Workshop, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. In addition to teaching, Michael has worked as a reader at a number of literary magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *VQR*, and *Zoetrope: All-Story*.

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About the Book

The Oracle of Stamboul is a historical novel about a preternaturally intelligent little girl who becomes an advisor to the Ottoman sultan and, through her advice to him, changes the course of history. It is the story of an eight year-old orphan who pushes back against the tides of history and changes their direction. Influenced by Charles Dickens, Roald Dahl, Italo Calvino, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, The Oracle of Stamboul is an evocative, magical historical novel that will transport readers to another time and place...romantic, exotic, yet remarkably similar to our own.

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Discussion Questions



1. A prophecy foretold the birth of a girl like Eleonora Cohen. Do you believe in mystical propositions such as prophecies? Do you think the events surrounding her birth were truly foretold or just coincidence? Why do we in the West dismiss the idea of prophets and prophecies? Have we lost something in doing so?
2. What were your impressions of Eleonora? What made her different from others, especially other children?
3. What was the significance of the purple and white hoopoes in the story? Why did animals behave as they did around Eleonora? Do you believe animals can sense things differently perhaps better than humans?
4. Eleonora's life touched those of many adults, including her father, Yakob. Talk about their bond. How did the various characters in the story view Eleonora? How did her father see her? What about her tutor, the Reverend James Muehler? Her father's friend and her guardian, Moncef Bey? The sultan and the other people in his palace, including his mother and his counselor, the Grand Vezir? What about the American journalist? What impact does Mrs. Damakan, the Bey's housekeeper, play in the course of the girl's early life?
5. When she mastered reading, Eleonora's favorite saga was a seven-volume epic called The Hourglass. What lessons did she learn from the novel? How did the book impact the events that followed? Do you have a favorite book that has influenced you?
6. Why was Ruxandra, the girl's stepmother, suspicious of her gifts, and especially hostile to her reading? Why are so many people afraid of learning and knowledge? Are some people too wise for the world?
7. When it comes to books, Eleonora's tutor, the Reverend Muehler tells her guardian Moncef Bey, "I have never held the novel in much esteem. It is a genre for idle women and romantic young boys. Such frivolousness, even a masterpiece such as The Hourglass, cannot have any real utility. But I would think that if she were given more serious reading material'philosophy, history,

rhetoric it might do her some good." What do you think of the reverend's condemnation of the novel? Can we learn as much from fiction as nonfiction? Should we teach more literature to young people? Does it matter if they read novels or not?

8. "If there was one thing she learned from *The Hourglass* it is that you should always follow the dictates of your own heart." Do you agree with this? What happens when we don't follow the dictates of our hearts? When might we choose not to do so?
9. When the Reverend Muehler and Yakob met on the ship, they exchanged stories of their travels. "It goes without saying, perhaps, that a missionary and a carpet dealer would encounter vastly different segments of a city's population." What kinds of people would both meet? Might their lives have crossed if they hadn't shared a cabin on the boat to Stamboul? Do you think their meeting was fate? Part of the prophecy surrounding Eleonora's birth? Do you believe in fate or destiny? How does choice impact fate?
10. Speaking of destiny, Eleonora pondered the losses she had suffered while rereading *The Hourglass*. "She had a small comfort in the sentiment that our paths in life are laid according to a plan more grandiose than we could ever conceive or comprehend." Do you share her sentiment? How does believing in this offer solace?
11. The city of Stamboul is more than just a backdrop to this novel. It is a character in itself. How did Eleonora imagine Stamboul to be? What were your impressions of the city? Has there ever been a place that has sparked your imagination as Stamboul did for Eleonora?
12. Early in her stay in Stamboul, Eleonora wished she could stay in the city forever. Do you think she does? Or will fate take her somewhere else? Can someone of her gifts truly hide in plain sight?
13. The sultan disagreed with his closest councilor on the methods of effective governance. For the sultan, "an effective ruler needed more than anything to maintain a proper distance from the events that occurred within his domain. If he allowed himself to fret over the particulars of every battle and infrastructure

project, he would never be able to focus on the decisions that truly mattered." Do you agree with this? Can a leader become too caught up in the details? But might ignoring details be detrimental for good leadership?

14. Why was the sultan willing to grant Eleonora an audience? What advice do you think she gave him? If you heard that the president met with someone like Eleonora, what would you think? What is the reaction in Stamboul after word of Eleonora's visit spreads?
15. When Eleonora discovers something incriminating about the reverend, she isn't sure whether or not to confide in the Bey. "Plato would seem to think she should. Truth is the beginning of every good to the gods, and of every good to man. Then again, there was Tertullian. Truth engenders hatred of the truth. As soon as it appears it is the enemy." Discuss both of these viewpoints. Which do you side with more? Why does the truth engender hatred?
16. Another philosophical debate Eleonora has is between doing something wrong and not yet doing the right thing. "Was there a difference between these two sins?" she wonders. How would you answer this question?
17. After her tragedy, Eleonora stops speaking. What does being "voiceless" offer her? If you chose not to speak for a few days, what might you learn? Do you think it would make you a better listener?
18. Is history important? Who ultimately writes our history? Do you think Eleonora changed the course of this particular empire?
19. Why did Eleonora make the choice she did at the story's end? Was she walking away from her "fate" or was she ultimately saving her life?

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Author Interview



What surprised you the most during the writing process?

What surprised me most was how much of myself is in the characters, even though they live such different lives than my own. Sometimes writing can feel like that scene in "Being John Malkovich," when John Malkovich enters his own mind and finds himself in a restaurant filled with John Malkovichs saying "Malkovich, Malkovich." I guess what I am trying to say is that we can't help but imbue our characters with our own thoughts, feelings, and characteristics, whether the character is a preternaturally intelligent orphan or the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. And that, in itself, is pretty surprising.

What would you be doing if you weren't a writer?

I think I would probably be a fourth-grade English teacher. I've always enjoyed teaching and I'm lucky enough to be able to teach a few days a week in addition to writing. When I first started teaching writing to children -- through an afterschool program called Take My Word For It! -- I was going through a bit of a quarter-life crisis. My students' wide-eyed enthusiasm and seemingly infinite imaginations helped me to regain my sense of wonder and possibility in the world. I also love that children don't second guess their own ideas. Last semester I had students writing novels about ghost dog tooth fairies and moldy pickles trying to escape the refrigerator. And they all worked!

What else are you reading right now?

I'm in the midst of reading three wonderful and very different books: "The Hummingbird's Daughter" by Luis Alberto Urrea; "The Buddha in the Attic" by Julie Otsuka; and "The Line of Beauty" by Alan Hollinghurst.

What's next for you?

I am currently working on a novel about the Jews of Cairo. The book, which is tentatively titled "The Forty-Third Name of God," tells the story of an Egyptian Muslim family charged with guarding the Ben Ezra Synagogue and its famous Genizah (a treasure trove of medieval Jewish manuscripts found in the 19th century by Solomon Schechter). A multigenerational chronicle, this novel will tell the story of the Genizah, its discovery, and the cosmopolitan Mediterranean world it sheds light on. It is a novel about Muslim-Jewish relations, Cairo, the hidden secrets of the Kaballah, and the sometimes conflicting ties of family and religion

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Other Links and Resources



Video Interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCERHBEACLc>

Share your thoughts with other readers!



DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: