

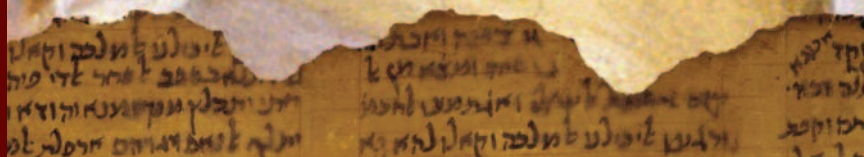


BY
FIRE,
BY
WATER

a
novel



MITCHELL JAMES KAPLAN



A READER'S GUIDE

Rence Rosensteel



MITCHELL JAMES KAPLAN has lived and worked primarily in Paris and Los Angeles as a translator, screenwriter, and script consultant. Currently he resides in Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania, with his wife and two children. This is his first novel.
www.mitchelljameskaplan.com



DEAR READER,

On a trip to the National Library in Paris several years ago I came upon a list of the sailors aboard Christopher Columbus's ships in 1492. All of the men and boys possessed skills and held positions deemed necessary for a long voyage aboard a fifteenth-century sailing vessel—except one.

Luis de Torres was not a sailor; he was Columbus's "interpreter." Columbus explained in his diaries that Torres spoke Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic, as well as Spanish. Why did Columbus need a translator who spoke Arabic and Hebrew? Where, exactly, did Columbus think he was going? What did "the Indies" really mean, to Columbus?

Given his linguistic skills, I surmised, Luis de Torres must have been a Jew from the Islamic kingdom of Granada, in the south of Spain. He would personally have experienced the three events that signaled the collapse of the medieval world order at the end of the fifteenth century: Isabella and Ferdinand's "reconquest" of Granada, the expulsion of all Jews from Spain, and Columbus's first voyage of discovery. But were these really separate events?

Seized by curiosity, I began tracing the various threads of Luis de Torres's, Columbus's, and their monarchs' stories. I found they all led back to one man, Luis de Santángel, the chancellor of the kingdom of Aragon. It was Santángel who urged Isabella to sponsor Columbus's voyage even after she refused the sailor's request three times. Luis de Santángel even offered to help finance Columbus's voyage, with no possible profit for himself and all benefits for the monarchs and Columbus. Why would any reasonable man—let alone a worldly, astute courtier—insist upon such an arrangement?

The answer turned out to be surprising, psychologically rich, and dramatic. Luis de Santángel was in many ways the prototype of post-medieval man, having to navigate between cultures and identities in a world not yet prepared for such ambiguities. The result, for Santángel, included both personal tragedy and fervent hope.

Combining elements of a passionate love story with a religious mystery, *By Fire, By Water* closely follows the contours of this crucial moment in history. I hope you find the material as compelling as I do.

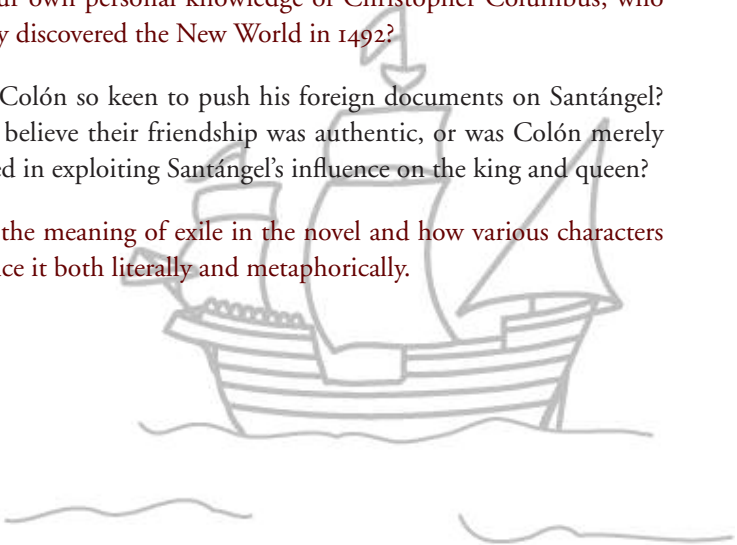
Best Regards,



READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What did you know about the Spanish Inquisition (1478–1834) prior to reading *By Fire, By Water*? How did this story influence or increase your understanding of this historical period?
2. In *By Fire, By Water*, trusting someone can lead to life or death. Discuss the various relationships in the novel that lead to both. What kind of trust do the characters have in God? How does trust vary depending on the character's social class or religious beliefs?
3. How do the female characters, living in a strongly patriarchal society, acquiesce to or rebel against their culture's expectations of them? How does Judith break the mold for female behavior in her community? What about Judith catches Santángel's eye, and later compels him to seek her out?
4. What kind of a father is Santángel? Early in the novel, he tells his son a story about a man with a "great treasure" who is unable to show it to anyone (pages 30–31). To what is this story alluding? Do you think Gabriel really believed his father was unfaithful to the church or was Gabriel trying to protect his father by staying away from him?
5. What compels Santángel to learn about the Jewish faith? What is each group member's purpose for joining his secret religious meetings? How does the small group help, support, or hurt its members?
6. Discuss the significance of the novel's title, *By Fire, By Water*.
7. The death of Felipe, Santángel's assistant, in many ways acts as a catalyst. Why do you think this is the breaking point for Santángel? How does his secretary's death affect his faith?
8. Why do you think Leonor, Felipe's wife, feels so protective of Santángel when he is the one who allowed Felipe to join the secret group, and thus, is partially to blame for her husband's death?

9. On page 97, Judith loses Levi for an afternoon and, in her search and worrying, reassures herself that, "History never repeats itself." Do you find evidence in the novel to support this claim?
10. What was your impression of King Fernando and Queen Ysabel? How do the monarchs differ from Granada's emir? What do they have in common?
11. What influence do religious leaders hold over the king and queen? How does this influence differ from that of Santángel and his money? Do you think any religious leaders have that sort of power today?
12. Letter writing, transcription, and written history play an enormous part in the novel. In what ways do characters use written communication to help them? In what ways does it haunt them?
13. What was your first impression of Estefan, Santángel's brother? How do the brothers' personalities and actions bring them to such different places in their lives?
14. How did the author's depiction of Cristóbal Colón contradict or conflict with your own personal knowledge of Christopher Columbus, who famously discovered the New World in 1492?
15. Why is Colón so keen to push his foreign documents on Santángel? Do you believe their friendship was authentic, or was Colón merely interested in exploiting Santángel's influence on the king and queen?
16. Discuss the meaning of exile in the novel and how various characters experience it both literally and metaphorically.



TIMELINE

• • • • •
The events listed below form the historical backbone
of *By Fire, By Water*.

October 19, 1469

Marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella

September 15, 1485

Murder of Pedro Arbués, first chief inquisitor
of the kingdom of Aragon

August 18, 1487

Auto-da-fé in which Luis de Santángel's cousin Luis
(his "brother" Estefan in the novel) was burned to death

April 14, 1491

Commencement of the Siege of Granada

January 2, 1492

Fall of the Islamic Kingdom of Granada

March 31, 1492

Expulsion Edict, aka the Alhambra Decree, ordering
all Jews to leave Spain

July 31, 1492

Final date for all Jews to depart

August 3, 1492

Christopher Columbus sets sail

October 12, 1492

Discovery of the New World

SPAIN IN THE 1400S

.....



FOR FURTHER READING

.....

- ❖ *The Medieval Spains* by Bernard F. Reilly
- ❖ *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience* by Jane S. Gerber
- ❖ *The Last Jew* by Noah Gordan
- ❖ *The Coffee Trader* by David Liss
- ❖ *Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry* edited by Eleanor Turnbull
- ❖ *The Dream of the Poem* by Peter Cole

“Kaplan, a screenwriter, sets his debut novel in 15th-century Spain, amid the Inquisition, the attempt to unify the kingdoms of Spain under Christian rule, and the voyage of Christopher Columbus to what the seaman expects will be the Indies. The action centers on the historical figure of Luis de Santángel, chancellor to the king of Aragon and a converso, a Jewish convert to Christianity at a time when the Inquisition sought to repress ‘judaizing’...Kaplan has done remarkable homework on the period and crafted a convincing and complex figure in Santángel in what is a naturally cinematic narrative and a fine debut.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Debut novelist Kaplan depicts a turbulent period in 15th-century Spain, focusing on the story of Aragon’s royal chancellor...Deftly moves through a complex web of personal relationships, religious zeal, and political fervor.”

—KIRKUS REVIEWS

“Beautifully written, *By Fire, By Water* is a powerful story of religion, love, and violence—timeless themes honed by Kaplan into an enthralling narrative that doesn’t let up until the last sentence.”

—SIMON READ, AUTHOR OF WAR OF WORDS

www.mitchelljameskaplan.com



OTHER PRESS

2 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10016
www.otherpress.com

For media and appearance queries please contact
Terrie Akers, publicity manager, 212.414.0054 x205,
terrie@otherpress.com