

Woman King

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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הוד מלכותה המלך

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המחלקה לאנגלית

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Aims and General Description:

Woman King will be a novel that explores the seam between polytheism and monotheism through the life of Belit-Neshiti, the only woman to rule a city-kingdom in Canaanite times, around 1350 BCE.

The novel will explore Belit-Neshiti's life in a series of flashbacks or hidden memories experienced by a second protagonist, Jasmine, a modern female archaeologist digging at the site that holds the remains of Belit-Neshiti's kingdom.

Two close third-person narratives will be interspersed with newspaper clippings, biblical passages, interviews and ancient correspondence written on stone tablets.

Conceptual Background

Influenced by historical fiction and books such as *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant, *Mary Called Magdalene* by Margaret George, *The Dovekeepers* by Alice Hoffman and *David and the Philistine Woman* by Paul Boorstin, my novel, *Woman King*, will attempt to open a window into a place and time, then juxtapose that era against a stage set with the better-known props of the modern age.

As in *The Dovekeepers*, *The Red Tent*, and *David and the Philistine Woman*, scene will play the role of hidden character, driving plot and developing principle protagonists. Minor characters will include gods whom the various communities worship and they will act as foils for the main actors.

While the Bible will help create setting in *Woman King*, plot will not be drawn from its stories, as it does in *The Red Tent* and *David and the Philistine Woman*. Instead *Woman King* will be created, and establish credibility, by relying on information archaeologists at the dig are willing to reveal, as well as ancient texts and literature. As a result, my novel will be steeped more in imagination than facts, to the point where it may fall only into the outside edge of what is characterized as historical fiction.

I won't have a skeletal story on which to embellish plot or character as Diamant did in *The Red Tent*, or Boorstin had in *David and the Philistine Woman*. *Woman King* will not have a well-known event for its backdrop such as the fall of Masada in Alice Hoffman's *The Dovekeepers*. The woman king whom archaeologists think may have ruled Beit Shemesh has yet to be named, and very little is known about her. There are those who don't yet believe completely that artifacts prove she was a woman.

So, while the novels I draw on for inspiration required research of a character believed to have lived in a certain time, mine will mean doing research into time and place in which to set my almost completely fictional character.

Diamant uses one protagonist to tell the stories of all the others through a first-person narrative that is in some ways omniscient, similar the narrator of the Bible who knows all. In *Woman King*, the modern character Jasmine will have a limited sense of omniscience, while Belit-Neshiti will have knowledge of her story only. In this way, the reader will be able to get both a true feeling of ancient life, and at the same time, see it reflected through the modern-day eyes of Jasmine.

Foreshadowing of life to come will be embedded in the tale of Belit-Neshiti, who will often appear to Jasmine in what the modern woman will feel as flashback as she steps deep into the subconscious of the ancient king.

My novel will attempt to follow in the steps of historical novels by Margaret George, who has used the genre of historical fiction to make women such as Mary, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy and Elizabeth I come alive. In one interview, she talks about going to Egypt four times to research Cleopatra, and spending a day in Alexandria to help her imagine what Cleopatra's palace looked like. I, too, plan to spend hours at the dig where my character Belit-Neshiti lived as woman king, to get a feel for what it might have been like and what she may have done with her time.

The dig has uncovered many rooms of a palace, including what is thought to be the main hall, where beautiful sets of glasses were found that I believe Belit-Neshiti may have used to host a pharaoh on an imagined visit. The palace sits on a hill that overlooks a plain, its geography

giving a certain security and false confidence that eventually leads to the downfall of its ruler. Sitting in the dusty remains of the palace and walking a thorny hilltop once the center of an ancient city-kingdom stimulates the imagination and allows the subconscious to “speak” with and feel the characters in their time and place.

As I live in the heart of the land of Canaan, with the Bar-Ilan library, its professors and Israeli archaeologists close at hand, I won't have to travel as far as George did for my research. I do plan to visit other sites in Israel with a timeline that coincides with the Beit Shemesh dig, places such as Megiddo and the Gezer that will offer more insight about the overall lay of the land, the culture and life.

I do plan to use motifs and themes used by others, such as Diamant's use of blood in *The Red Tent* to signify death, hope and new beginnings, or Hoffman's use of sex in *The Dovekeepers* as a tool to contaminate, intimidate and give pleasure. Belit-Neshiti will use sex to keep order in her universe, blood will signify birth, death and a plea for help. Water, both necessary for life and purifier, will also play a role as it does in nearly all of the biblical historical novels mentioned here.

In *The Red Tent*, Dinah is told she will find joy by living next to a river, and tells her son he will find pleasure next to the sea. Her final acceptance of herself is when she learns to swim, taught by her second husband Benia. In *The Dovekeepers*, the absence of water reflects the starkness and hardship of life in the desert as characters try to suck the lifegiving fluid out of pools of mud. Belit-Neshiti's city will depend on an advanced underwater channel for sustenance. When it is sabotaged, the god of Yam is called on for help, as is Athirat, the mother goddess.

The novel will attempt to critique modern civilization in the way that Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Alias Grace* and *Oryx and Crake* are commentary, but will try to avoid becoming part of political biblical discourse that attempts to use ancient ruins as evidence of rights over territory. *Woman King* will strive to portray Canaan before monotheism took hold in as objective a way as possible, through literature that leans on scientific rather than religious texts.

I hope to draw inspiration from novels by Marge Piercy such as *Woman on the Edge of Time*, where the main character communicates with the year 2137 and must deal with two totally different ways of life, and *City of Darkness, City of Light*, that tells the story of the French revolution through the parts woman played in changing their world. And like Piercy's *He, She and It*, a novel based in the future, *Woman King* will have to recreate a landscape no one really knows, and a society that archaeologists are only beginning to understand.

Shape of Project:

The first 100 pages of the novel, approximately six chapters, will make up the thesis project.

Chapter 1 will set up the tensions and main themes of the novel by introducing Jasmine, a confused young secular Jewish woman who arrives in Israel to volunteer at an archaeological dig. Themes will include coming of age, power, change versus tradition in female roles, convention and rebellion, displacement and empowerment alongside quest of discovery and the role of religion. The young would-be archaeologist, Jasmine, isn't quite sure what she is doing in the desert, and although she is Jewish, being in Israel means nothing to her. The sand snakes, ants and desert flies make her miserable, and unlike the others in her group, she isn't enthusiastic about discovering artifacts that might link the land back to biblical stories. This chapter will be interspersed with real and fictitious articles about the dig to create a sheen of authenticity around the story that will make readers think perhaps it all really happened.

Chapter 2 will introduce Belit-Neshiti, who comes to Jasmine in a dream. In the dream, Belit-Neshiti entertains young Pharaoh Akhenaten on one of his rare visits to the district. Belit-Neshiti listens to the pharaoh's endless talk about the one god he has insisted Egypt adopt, the one god mightier than all the rest. She reads poetry with him, and although she tries, finds it difficult to get him to talk about matters of the kingdom. Finally, she takes him to bed, only to discover he is neither male nor female. It is an unsettling discovery, but his openness with her gives her a sense of comfort. When she calls for his help, he will answer.

This chapter will be interspersed with replications of Egyptian art that display the oddity of Akhenaten's physicality and doctor's notes from the time discussing what his possible ailments might be.

In Chapters 3 and 4 Jasmine will mull over the dream, seeking more information about the woman king. She will try to recreate for herself, in a diary, Belit-Neshiti's childhood that led to her becoming the sole woman king of that age. These chapters will be will supplemented by photographs and sketches of actual pieces of ancient cuneiform that will be printed alongside their translations to tell the stories of that time.

Chapter 5 will focus on Jasmine, giving the reader a chance to see how her discoveries are impacting her life. She will start a minor fling with one of the college men on the dig and there will be an article about her finding a clay fragment depicting some kind of pagan sexual rite, one she believes Belit-Neshiti led and perhaps even initiated.

Chapter 6 will put the reader into Belit-Neshiti's consciousness. She is alone, her city increasingly encroached by bandits. She wonders about Akhenaten, his strange body and outlandish beliefs and writes him letter after letter begging for help. Here, the novel will include photos and translations of the actual clay tablets believed to be sent by the woman king of Beit Shemesh to the pharaoh. This brings us about half-way through the novel, and to about 100 pages.

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