



Esther

Sharon E. McKay

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Told as fiction, **Esther** portrays the remarkable, nearly incredible life and times of Esther Brandeau, a young girl who lived in the eighteenth century, and who was the first Jew to set foot in New France.

That she did so disguised as a boy, and that the eventual discovery of her deceit became an international incident, is but one part of Esther's dramatic story. With an emerging Canadian nation as its backdrop, Esther's story encompasses the quest for gender equality and the larger quest for freedom—as real to a teenager in 1735 as it is today.

Esther Details

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Author : Sharon E. McKay

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From Reader Review Esther for online ebook

Nicole says

A very interesting story about a Jewish girl surviving in France and New France in the early 1700s. Reminiscent of Bloody Jack by Faber, actually, only Esther isn't as crazy.

Meg says

Excellent young adult book. Very good historical fiction that allows the reader to learn about the times, the culture, and the bravery of this bold young woman. It tells a part of Canadian history, and is a fictionalized account of a real person who came to New France.

R K says

This book was very well written. Esther Brandeau is a real life person who is known as being the first Jew to step into the "new world" a.k.a Quebec, Canada. Very little is known about the real Esther but Sharon McKay has masterfully woven a tale incorporating the little we know about her. The plot and setting was immersive. I never once felt that people were out of place or character. Every character acted according to society at the time. The book focuses mainly on the harsh life Esther had to endure due to her religion and gender. Time and time again the reader is subjected to the sad reality of life as a Jew in 1700's France. McKay does a really cool thing, that I admired, where she would compare life for those who were not part of the white/French/Catholic majority. But she would also show how class would cause discrimination and violence between those who were part of the white/French/Catholic majority. Life was tough if you were not part of the rich society and McKay does a good job showing the hunger that traversed across the poor. You as the reader can see how she effectively paints the situation of France right before the French Revolution in 1789.

Esther herself was an admirable character. She never broke down and lamented about her problems. She never gave up, lost hope, or submitted to the will of others. She stood steady and quickly adapted to whatever life threw at her, but at the same time she never felt too mature. Obviously teenagers in the 1700's were forced to grow up much more quickly than the teenager's of today and I felt that McKay stayed true to this fact. I really admired Esther. She is a female protagonist who really brings a charming light to the YA female characters. A refreshing light. Not to mention her friendship with Phillippe was precious. Two friends in a time where one is not wanted. (It gave me Leviathan Feels). Not to mention their relationship was truly authentic to the plot. No stupid sacrifice-myself-for-you in this book. No love-conquers-all trope (cause, no it does not!!!).

Truly splendid. Refreshing and Diverse.

Susan says

I liked this book. It is historical fiction taking place in the 1700s about a Jewish girl who disguises herself as

a boy, in order to survive.

Rox says

Je pense avoir un faible pour les fictions historiques... Que ce soit en série ou en livre, j'en raffole ! Lorsque j'ai découvert Esther je pavanais dans les rayons d'une librairie et mon regard a tout de suite accroché avec la couverture. Ecole des Loisirs n'étant pas réputé pour ses magnifiques couvertures, j'étais intriguée par l'illustration style toile représentant Esther Brandeau en marin (que je trouve très belle !). Depuis ce jour, c'est le livre qui faisait partie de mes livres à acheter ou offrir par la même occasion. Puis Noël arriva et ma grand-mère m'offre ce roman que j'attendais tant !

C'est la première histoire que je lis sur le sujet. C'est-à-dire une jeune fille française juive au 18ème siècle. La première chose qui me frappe en lisant, est le personnage. Esther ne vit que par envie de liberté mais est enfermée dans le quartier juif entourée d'une famille aimante mais ne la comprenant pas. Elle ne désire pas se marier et enfanter une dizaine d'enfants comme l'exigeait la coutume. Malgré son jeune âge, elle possède une volonté d'émancipation qui va lui attirer de nombreux ennuis. Alors quand vient l'occasion de devenir quelqu'un d'autre et pas n'importe qui, un homme à qui tout est plus facile, elle n'hésite pas et part vivre son destin. Le personnage m'a frappé par sa générosité, son amour, sa foi à toute épreuve et surtout son goût pour l'aventure !

Troublant personnage qui va braver le monde dans toute son injustice et part vivre une quête identitaire à travers la France jusqu'au Nouveau Monde. Elle passe par toutes les professions en tant que jeune femme et jeune homme, de l'apprentie boulangère à marin en passant par courtisane ou encore messenger d'un couvent. Elle rencontre toutes les classes sociales jusqu'à posséder un portrait de la part du roi lui-même ! C'est un aspect du roman que j'ai beaucoup apprécié. En effet, on l'accompagne dans chacune de ses aventures. Elle porte des masques différents en fonction de ses besoins et surtout pour sa survie. On apprend sur les différentes conditions en fonction des métiers qu'elle pratique comme les marins, les courtisanes ou encore les petits commerçants. Mais elle va aussi se faire de véritables amis (Perle, Philippe et Madame La Grange) qui sauront être là pour elle.

Ce qui m'a le plus touché dans ce roman est l'évolution d'Esther en tant que femme, en tant que juive et en tant que jeune française. La jeune fille qui est en elle refuse et accuse la condition de femme et éprouve une telle liberté en se travestissant qu'elle en vient à envier les hommes. Esther est de confession juive et l'être à cette époque est aussi dangereux qu'une femme se baladant sans protection. C'est un aspect de sa personnalité qui est le plus marquant car la France catholique est pressante presque oppressante et malgré cela Esther garde la foi. J'ai trouvé cela très bien amené, juste et assumé dans le texte.

J'ai apprécié l'écriture de son roman. L'intrigue est bien menée sous forme de récit raconté par Esther elle-même à l'intendant de la Nouvelle France en 1738. On désire savoir ce qui a pu se passer pendant ces années et comment elle est parvenue jusqu'au nouveau monde ! Autre particularité, certains passages nous offrent un aperçu des points de vue de certains personnages. Comme le récit est à la 3ème personne, c'est assez troublant mais terriblement intéressant.

Pour conclure, j'ai beaucoup aimé ce roman. Je lui attribue un joli 4,5 étoiles. C'est une bonne fiction historique qui traite de sujets importants comme celui de la femme, de la religion, de l'aristocratie et bien d'autres. Je le conseille fortement à tous ceux qui souhaitent une bonne lecture historique qui touche comme elle peut faire rire, pleurer et étonner.

Beatrix says

I like reading books about history - historical fiction.

I learned about Esther Brandeau. It is really funny.

Emily says

A novel chronicling a truly strong female character. It'll have you crying for justice and rejoicing with her success as Esther navigates her way in a world that wants her mind and body, but not her heart.

Couet13 says

A travers le personnage d'Esther, jeune adolescente, et de sa vie nous découvrons les mœurs et la société du XVIIIème siècle. Il n'était pas bon d'être une femme, qui était considérée comme une usine à produire des enfants, de n'être pas d'une bonne condition sociale, en gros de ne pas faire partie de la haute qui gravite autour de Louis XV, et en plus de ne pas embrasser la religion d'Etat, le catholicisme.

Esther cumule ses mauvaises conditions, mais les refuse et décide de contrer ce à quoi elle est destinée: mariage arrangée, soumission, faire des enfants, tenir la maison... Suite à des retournements de situation, elle s'arrange pour garder la main sur son destin, et de prendre des décisions réfléchies par elle même. Esther est une émancipatrice avant l'heure!

Esther est un personnage qui a réellement existé. L'auteure a réussi à partir de traces d'archive, à romancer la vie de cette jeune fille.

Emily says

I loved this book! It is one of my favourite works of historical fiction. Esther is such a strong female character. She's feisty, intelligent and very determined. Esther goes through so much; *spoilers* losing her family, disguising herself as a boy and being the only Jew in New France. But she still stays true to herself. I couldn't put this book down!

A.M.G. says

Rating: 2.8 / 5

Maybe it's because I just spent the last two days reading five-star novels, and so my expectations for books in general are pretty high at this point. But, of course, that doesn't guarantee that expectations will be met, and in this case, mine certainly weren't.

It was a decent read, to be honest, but I lost interest about two-thirds into it. The events were so-so interesting, but...well, no matter how far I read ahead, there were two major issues that constantly bothered me:

1) The fact that this book advertises a feminist point of view, emphasizing the role of a girl struggling to fit in to a male-dominated world.

Where is that? Seriously, I didn't see much of that present in this book, to be honest, not even when Esther dresses up as a boy, finally. There is a brief instance of her "body betraying her" via a monthly occurrence that all of us women abhor, but that's it. Other than that, the only struggle that I saw for Esther was more as a Jew living in a Christian France rather than a girl in a male-dominated society. The fact that she's trying to survive and thrive as a Jew is more the issue here than the fact that she's a girl, seriously. If this book wanted to take on a feminist view, as the summary indicates on the back, then it really wasn't necessary to go into all of the religion-based details and issues, and just stick to the sex aspect. Unfortunately, McKay didn't do this, and thus, I claim false advertising on the back summary.

2) Esther herself is NOT a compelling character, as she only acts sometimes, but the reader never gets much insight into how she thinks or feels.

Maybe writing this from a first person's POV might've been better. That's really not for me to say. But, from what I read, Esther herself isn't interesting as a character. We hardly get any insight into what she's thinking, or receive all that many indications of what her overall personality is. I just got the sense of her being "average", and that was it, despite the members of her Jewish community pointing her out as quite the oddball. Besides the fact that she's sometimes foolish and simpleminded, this doesn't at all hold true. (And being foolish and simpleminded never made a character interesting, as far as I can recall.) So, yeah, "average Esther" was my conclusion upon her personality. As for how she reacts emotionally to events, it's pretty bland and expected: she loses her brother, so she panics; she eats a piece of pork, as a Jew she feels disgusted; she's set up by a matchmaker, she doesn't want to marry the guy. Typical, typical, typical. So, in short, no originality. As for her actions, she does most definitely act at some points, but on most, it just feels like someone else, other her mother or benefactors, are just maneuvering her around and she's not doing much about it. Like a doll. In fact, almost exactly like a doll, she's given more "perfect" qualities and hardly any true defects, which in turn takes away any amount of relatability from her character.

In short, because of these two reasons, I just lost interest in the book and set it down. It got boring, bland, and just in general didn't make me care about what happened next. And, if I don't care, I move on, simple as that.

Cynthia says

Esther is beautiful. Literally. I think she is one of the strongest female heroines I have ever read about. Strangely, I got through the book in one flowing note - which is somewhat audacious ever since I've read some heavier novels (*like Daughter of the Forest*) - barreling straight through until the very last page. Of course, I would hate to spoil any points but hey! Writing a review means sharing some of the themes and without sharing some spoilers, the point of a review would be utterly useless.

Pointing to the fact that Esther is a Finalist of the Governor General's Literary Awards in Canada, I picked the book up with a clear heed in mind - Esther is about a girl who tells her story over a span of a few years while she learned to cross dress and dazzle many girls and boys. Now, I can typically summarize what is needed for any book to be essentially considered for any kinds of literary awards:

1. The mention of culture clashes

Jews and the French. A very good clash between the Christian and Jewish religions. Demonized check.

2. Setting the timeline somewhere far, far away in the future or in the past

Having the books set in the life and times of the 18th century is a very good check. Good job for watching these items.

3. Isolation of the main character

Esther's family think's she is dead and she is thrown around all of France like a rag doll. Good enough for isolation's purposes.

All in all, the ingredients were all considered before the creation of this novel leaving it very...finished. I love that the author added a cliffhanger, but even with all the major points of consideration, Esther did not leave me wanting for more. I just feel unsatisfied. If there was one point that I could have made, it would be with her character. In the synopsis, it says that Esther is remarkable. And I agree...that she could have been. More of display of Esther's character could have made her go from this cookie girl:

To this pirate girl:

Get what I'm saying?

Dale White says

I wouldn't have read this book if a teacher friend hadn't said she was thinking of using it as one of her novel choices in Grade 10. Esther is based on an actual historical character, Esther Brandeau, who was the first Jew to arrive in New France. There is not a whole lot of actual historical information on Esther. She did make a statement to the Intendant of New France when not only her religion but her gender as well was discovered after her disguise as a boy was revealed. So this is very much a fictionalized account of Esther's life.

I quite enjoyed the book on its own, but immediately into the novel, I reverted to my past teaching days and thought of all the different ways that the book could be studied. There is history and religion. There are clashes between cultures and socio-economic classes. There is family dynamics and the role of women. There is friendship and betrayal and freedom, hope, and choice.

So back to my teacher friend. While it may not be appealing to every student in Grade 10, there is plenty to

offer those students who choose to read it.

Emma Blue says

Sharon E. McKay's book is filled with pain, but all in all Esther's quest for freedom is inspiring. Though I believe the book's events went a little too long and were a little too depressing. I love authors who give a character (a woman or girl usually,) who had no place in history, magically transform to seem like the ONLY person in history.

Serina LovesReading says

An absolutely wonderful and beautiful book. The story is adventurous, heartrenching and mysterious.

Amy Mathers says

<http://amysmarathonofbooks.ca/esther/>
