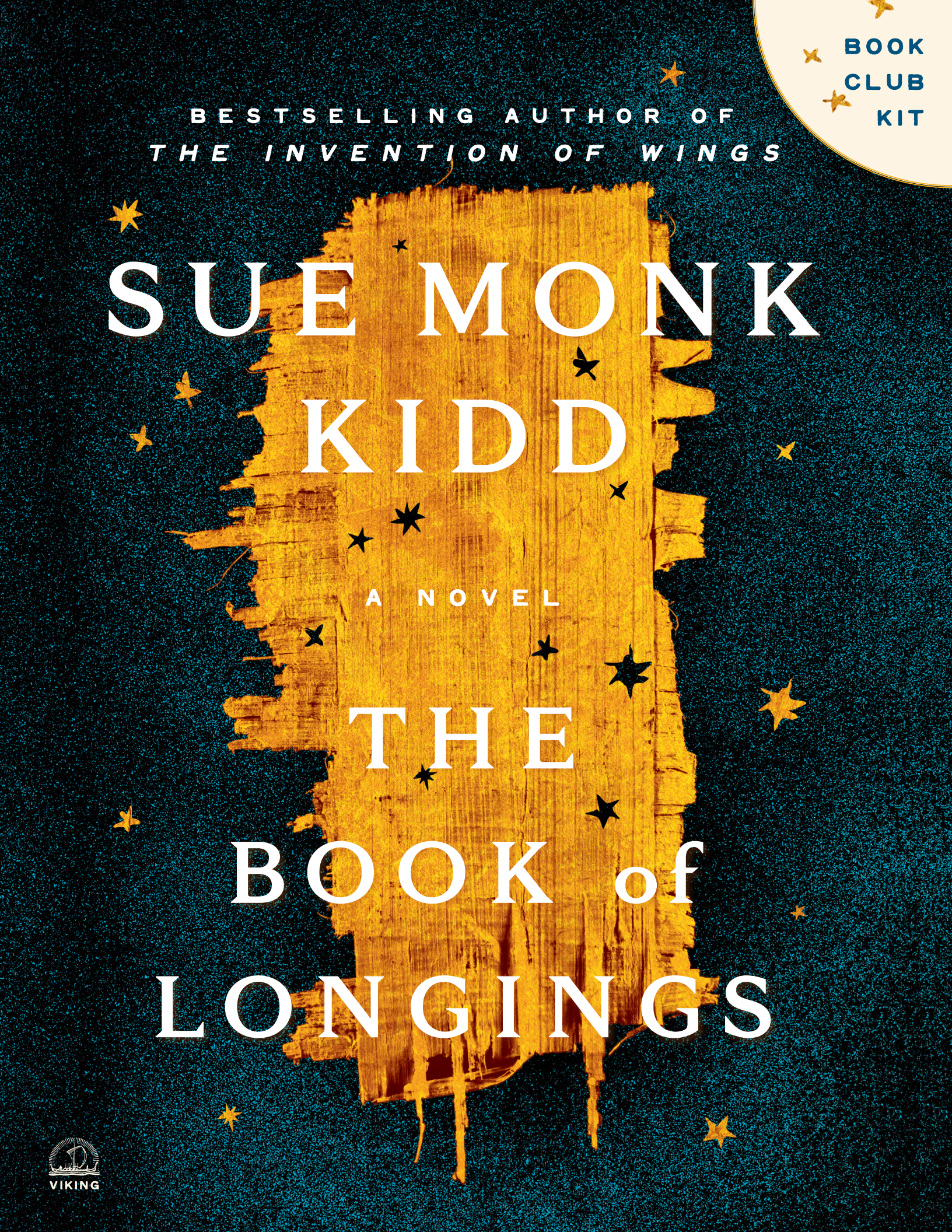

BOOK CLUB KIT
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE INVENTION OF WINGS
SUE MONK KIDD
A NOVEL
THE BOOK of LONGINGS
VIKING

Dear Reader,

You're about to meet Ana, a brilliant and rebellious young woman in the first century who becomes the wife of Jesus. Living in a time when women are marginalized and largely unheard within the histories of men, she struggles to realize her passion and potential and to have a voice. Remarkably, it is a story that has relevance even today.

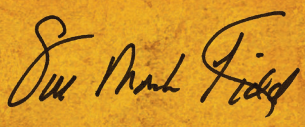
Ana, of course, came straight out of my imagination. From the moment the idea for this novel struck me, I felt the importance of at least imagining that at some point in his life, Jesus had a wife.

The premise evokes a fascinating question: How would the world be different if Jesus had married and his wife was part of the story? I suspect Christianity and the Western world would've had a different religious and cultural inheritance, especially when it came to the egalitarian roles of women.

Writing from a novelist's perspective and not a religious one, I wanted to portray the fully human Jesus, but most of all, this is Ana's story, the account of a woman who resists the invisibility and silencing of women and boldly decides her own fate.

My hope is that you'll find inspiration in her story.

My very best wishes,



Sue Monk Kidd

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the title of the novel. Ana is a character defined by her longings and aspirations. She is passionate about the power of writing, of narratives, of having a voice, as well as lifting up the voices of other women. How does the novel's theme of finding and expressing one's authentic voice unfold in the story? What forces work to silence contemporary women and what emboldens them?

2. What role does Ana's incantation bowl play in her quest to realize her longing? What is the importance of ritualizing one's faith or longings? If you were given an incantation bowl in which to inscribe your deepest longing, what might you write? What can our longings teach us?

3. Though fictional, *The Book of Longings* is also a deeply researched account of life two thousand years ago. What rules and customs surprised you? Which parts of the story feel especially relevant to modern-day life? Did you identify with Ana in any way?

4. Ana's aunt Yaltha is described as being as tough, clever, defiant, and daring as she is nurturing: "Her mind was an immense feral country that spilled its borders. She trespassed everywhere" (page 4). What do you think is Yaltha's most profound influence on Ana? Has there been anyone in your life like Yaltha? How do you think you have been shaped by the older women in your life?

5. Though Ana is born to a wealthy family and has been afforded some education, her parents have arranged for her to marry an older man whom she despises, and they expect her to give up her scholarly ambitions. Are there inhibiting cultural expectations placed on women today, and if so, how much do they differ depending on other factors such as race, class, and birthplace? How are these expectations represented in marriage ceremonies, then and now?

6. Discuss the relationship between Ana and Jesus. Were there moments they shared in the story that particularly resonated with you? What compromises did Ana make within the marriage? What does it mean to "belong" to someone? What does it mean to belong to oneself?

7. *The Book of Longings* renders Jesus in a way that foregrounds his humanity, from his struggle with the stigma conferred upon him by the circumstances of his birth to his smile, which is "a broad, crooked arrangement on his face" (page 86). Ana also finds him to be "a peacemaker and provocateur in equal measures" (page 143), a man who both

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

enlivens and emboldens her—even as his audacity also reminds her of her own comparatively marginal place in society. Do you think mainstream depictions of Jesus emphasize his divinity at the expense of allowing for his authentic humanity? Did the novel alter your perception of his character and his life on earth or enhance your existing idea of him in some way?

8. Likewise, discuss the novel's portrayal of Jesus's mother, Mary, a character the author describes, endearingly, as "a kind woman with graying hair, who is often weary from chores, a mother who did a superb job on her son, who taught him a lot that she didn't get credit for." How does Mary capture the mystery of the dual nature of being both human and divine?

9. Sue Monk Kidd has explored feminist theology for years, along with what she calls "the missing feminine within religion," which eventually finds expression through the character of Ana. What do you think about the relationship between feminism and religious belief? In what ways can feminism become a spiritual quest?

10. How do you think Ana's and Jesus's relationships to holiness differ, and how are they alike? Consider the significance of their names for God—Jesus speaks of "Father," while Ana speaks of "I Am Who I Am." How does Ana's concept of the divine evolve as the story develops? What power and allure does the feminine spirit of God, known as Sophia, hold for her?

11. When Yaltha confesses her private loss to Ana, Ana thinks to herself, "We women harbor our intimacies in locked places in our bodies. They are ours to relinquish when we choose" (page 186). What are some of the different ways the characters cope with loss and injustice? Consider the behavioral differences and the variety of coping mechanisms employed by the men and women in the novel. How do grief and grievance manifest differently in characters such as Ana, Judas, Yaltha, and Jesus?

12. When Ana is confronting motherhood and the choice to bear children, Yaltha tells her, "I don't doubt you should give yourself to motherhood. I only question what it is you're meant to mother" (page 196). How much do you think the idea that a woman's purpose is fulfilled by having children persists today? Are women's creative ambitions outside of the family still viewed as less fundamentally fulfilling somehow? Has motherhood impacted your passions and pursuits?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

13. Kidd revisits a theme she first wrote about in *The Secret Life of Bees*: finding a family where one least expects. Discuss the ways that Ana, Yaltha, Tabitha, and Diodora come together to form a family after Jesus's death. In what ways do the Therapeutae become Ana's place of belonging?

14. At the beginning of the novel, Ana writes in her incantation bowl, "*When I am dust, sing these words over my bones: she was a voice*" (page 13). Near the story's end, she composes her opus, *Thunder: Perfect Mind* (a historically real document that was found in the Egyptian desert in 1945). Later, Ana buries copies of it and all her narratives on the side of a cliff to preserve them for future generations. Do you feel she realized her longing to become a voice? What thoughts and feelings did the excerpts from *Thunder: Perfect Mind* (pages 335–36) stir in you? Could Ana's writings be considered sacred texts?

15. At the end of the novel, Ana ponders why Jesus's followers have removed her from the story of his life: "Was it because I was absent when he traveled about Galilee during his ministry? Was it because women were so often invisible? Did they believe making him celibate rendered him more spiritual?" (page 407). Why do you think Ana would have been silenced and erased?

16. If Jesus having a wife were a more accepted narrative, how do you think it would affect the religious and cultural legacy of Christianity?

17. Over the course of Ana's journey, *The Book of Longings* returns to the idea of the largeness within people. How do you conceive of your own largeness? What inspires it? What inhibits it? Do you agree with Yaltha that "it isn't the largeness in you that matters most, it's your passion to bring it forth" (page 353)?

A CONVERSATION WITH

SUE MONK KIDD

In *The Book of Longings* you take a bold approach to history in giving a voice to Ana, the wife of Jesus. What inspired you?

The idea to write a novel about the fictional wife of Jesus struck me one October morning in 2014. I was sitting at my desk, reading an article in *National Geographic* about a fragment of an ancient manuscript that had been brought to the world's attention by a Harvard professor. Named the "Gospel of Jesus' Wife," the manuscript contains a provocative reference in which Jesus speaks of "my wife." The fragment is now judged by most scholars to be a masterful forgery, but that would be irrelevant to the creative storm the article set off in me. My imagination was instantly ignited. Within minutes, this unknown wife had a name–Ana. I could almost picture her.

It wasn't the first time I'd been compelled by this idea–fifteen years earlier, I'd thought of writing a novel about the wife of Jesus. At the time, I'd been exploring feminist theology for years and writing about silenced and marginalized women and the missing feminine within religion. I can only speculate that the premise for the novel bloomed out of that exploration. The idea fascinated me, but it didn't seem like the right time to undertake it, and frankly I couldn't quite dredge up enough courage. When the idea resurfaced all those years later, I had the feeling it had been waiting around, hoping for a second chance.

Of course, I don't know if Jesus actually had a wife. The Bible is silent on the matter. There are reasons to support both the belief he married and the belief he didn't marry. But believing that Jesus had a wife was never the point. What mattered to me was imagining he had a wife. I think there is a

need in the human psyche to imagine this missing wife. In a way she symbolizes the missing feminine within religion. I was inspired by how reimagining the past, creating an alternate history, so to speak, might open up new ways of seeing and thinking. The largest inspiration, however, was the character of Ana herself. If Jesus actually had a wife, she would arguably be the most silenced woman in history. I woke up every day wanting to give her a voice.

While Jesus is a prominent character in the novel, this is Ana's story and journey. You portray her as a woman filled with longings. What is the deepest or most compelling longing in Ana's life? What is the significance of the incantation bowl?

It has always seemed to me that the soul speaks most clearly through longing. Whenever I begin work on a new novel, I want to know two things: who my character is and what she longs for. The essence of the entire story is contained in the answers. As I reflected on who Ana might be, a picture formed in my mind of a brilliant, rebellious, ambitious, daring young woman with rare abilities and scholarly leanings—traits and behaviors that would render her strange and out of place in her first-century Galilean world. What does Ana long for? Her parents expect her to marry a bitter, older widower, a prospect that horrifies her. Her longing, of which there are many, is to write narratives, to have a voice, to be a voice. She makes her own inks and begs for papyrus and tutors. Not unlike women today, she wants to bring forth what she calls the "largeness" in herself.

While researching the novel, I happened upon a photo of an ancient incantation bowl. What captivated me about it was that over two thousand years ago a prayer had been inscribed in a spiraling fashion inside the bowl. It didn't take long for Ana to have an incantation bowl of her own. She writes her deepest longing in it and sings it as a prayer as she turns the bowl. I love having the bowl in the story because it makes her abstract longing tangible and real. It is a visible symbol of something inward and unseen. It is Ana's longing that propels her on her tumultuous journey, and when she loses hope, her aunt Yaltha tells her, "Return to your longing. It will teach you everything."

The idea of a married Jesus goes against centuries of dogma and tradition. Did you feel any trepidation about writing a novel with this premise? How did you approach writing the character of Jesus?

I didn't take on writing about a married Jesus lightly. At times it may even have kept me up at night.

Sometimes in order to imagine a married Jesus, one has to dig through layers of internal resistance. There is, for instance, the tenacious old fear of stepping outside sanctioned beliefs or of questioning religious authority. There can also be a personal reluctance to see Jesus as fully human. Or the resistance can come from a centuries-old division between spirit and flesh, in which sexuality is viewed as unholy. Toward the end of the novel, Ana poses the question, "Did they believe making him celibate rendered him more spiritual?" It's a probing question to ask ourselves.

A relatively small group of writers have written novels about Jesus—D. H. Lawrence, Nikos Kazantzakis, Norman Mailer, José Saramago, to name some—all of which stirred controversy and debate. I expect

The Book of Longings will encounter a bit of controversy, too. That's ok. My own longing was to write this book, and that's what I did. I once stenciled the words WRITING IS AN ACT OF COURAGE on the stair wall that led to my study. Writing is always that; it is ultimately a series of small daily braveries.

My primary approach in fashioning the character of Jesus was to portray him as fully human. I wanted to depict what the late historical Jesus scholar Marcus Borg called "the pre-Easter Jesus." It has long been a doctrine of the church that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, but over the centuries his humanity diminished as people accentuated his divinity. Writing from a novelist's perspective and not a religious one, I was primarily interested in his humanity. And what an extraordinary human being he was. I depicted him as a rabbi, social prophet, messiah, and nonviolent political resister, whose dominant message was love, compassion, inclusion, and the coming of God's kingdom within the hearts and minds of people. Someone who read the novel told me it had stirred a new appreciation in her for Jesus and his teachings. I was touched by that.

The relationship you created between Ana and Jesus is described as one of love and conflict. How did you envision and create this relationship?

I tried to depict the humanity in their relationship–the common moments, the tenderness, the tensions, the humor, but most of all the love. I wanted Ana and Jesus to share an uncommon love, one of physical closeness and spiritual depth, and also one unique and singular for the time. They bring each other alive. They influence and learn from each other. They bless the largeness in each other. They give each other intimate nicknames–she calls him Beloved and he calls her Little Thunder. It felt important to me to create a relationship in which Ana meets Jesus fully as his partner, one in which she has her own magnitude and passion.

Their marriage, however, isn't without conflict, which is part of its humanness. Much of the conflict is interjected by the social norms of the day, by religious dictates about women, and by the expectations of Jesus's family. Though feminist in his leanings, even Jesus isn't always able to override these constraints and enable Ana to abandon her domestic duties and pursue her longing. The contrast between his freedom and her confinement, among other things, becomes a quiet and occasionally not-so-quiet tension.

You did a lot of research for this book. How did you go about it? Did you uncover anything especially impactful or surprising?

Researching a world that existed two thousand years ago was both overwhelming and exhilarating. For over a year, I filled notebook after notebook with research notes. I created storyboards, watched documentaries and videotaped lectures, and gathered and read a tiny library of books on a multitude of topics: the historical Jesus; ancient Jewish betrothal and marriage; the religious, cultural, political, and geographical background of first-century Galilee and Judea; scriptural commentary; biblical figures; biblical archeology; Egypt, the Roman Empire; and so on. Many nights, I fell asleep with a book

lying open on my chest. I often came upon some nugget that excited me and informed the plot. I vividly remember when I stumbled upon an article about the Therapeutae, a community of male and female Jewish philosophers who lived near Alexandria, Egypt, at the time of Jesus–I could barely contain myself. I felt like I'd discovered a new direction for the story. It turned out I had. The same goes for the day I came across the image of the incantation bowl. As I gazed at it, the beginning of the book fell into place. I spent a great deal of time exploring the historical Jesus. I wanted to create his character based largely on that scholarship.

At times, my research was like falling down a rabbit hole. When my daughter noticed how much time I was devoting to the agricultural cycle of Galilee, she held a small intervention and gently suggested that I move on. It's the accuracy and richness of detail that give a story its sense of authenticity. It's what makes the world inside the novel seem real and allows the reader to disappear into it. But after a year of researching, I had to ask myself if research had become an excuse not to start the actual writing. The first twenty-five pages of a novel are always the most difficult for me. Never-ending research can be an excellent way of avoiding them.

Have you been to any of the places you wrote about?

My mother, my aunt, and I traveled in Israel, Jordan, and Egypt back in December 1979 and January 1980, so long ago that I didn't think the experience could be of any real help. However, when I read my travel journal, along with my mother's small diary, and watched the slides on our antique projector, I realized they were a small treasure trove. There were hundreds of photographs I'd snapped of places that would turn up in the novel–the Jordan River, Nazareth, a Galilean cave, olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane. As a bonus, I came upon photos of my now ninety-eight-year-old mother riding about the pyramids on a festooned camel and crossing the Petra canyon on horseback. I'd also written dozens of passages in my travelogue describing an array of things–the streets of Jerusalem's old city, the colors of the Nile, vineyards, date palms, faces, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and the smell of just about everything from spices to camels. I wrote two pages about Galilean stones. The photographs and journal entries tapped vivid memories of landscapes, sensory details, stories, and emotions. Some of the descriptions in the novel evolved from those images and passages. I had an unexpected moment while reading my travel journal when I realized that the ancient city of Petra that I'd visited was actually the heart of the Nabataean kingdom, which would play a role in the novel. I'd been doing research on the trip without knowing it.

You have included a number of real biblical characters in the story, such as Jesus's disciple Judas and Jesus's mother, Mary. How did you go about portraying them?

One of the biggest questions in the Christian story is why Judas betrayed Jesus. I wanted to give him a motivation for his betrayal, to humanize him, too, and cause our thoughts about him to be less black-and-white and more complex. In my imagined version, Judas is Ana's adopted brother who was

orphaned when his father was crucified and his mother sold into slavery after a failed Jewish revolt against the Romans, a historically real insurrection by the Jews of Sepphoris in 4 BCE. I portray Judas as a child consumed with hatred for Rome, as a radical Zealot, and as an ardent disciple who believes Jesus is the Messiah destined to deliver them from Rome. His betrayal of Jesus is a piece of intricate and earnest political theater. It speaks, I think, to the danger of hyper-idealism, how a person overly possessed by a principle can begin to justify almost anything for his cause.

I loved having the chance to bring Mary to life on the page. I've had fantasies over the years of writing a one-woman play in which she tells all. Writing about her in the novel appeased at least some of that urge. My interest in her goes back to my childhood when the outdoor, life-size nativity scene at our church caught fire and our Baptist minister rushed in to save baby Jesus, leaving his mother to burn. Somehow I never forgot that.

For over twenty years, I've had a painting of the Black Madonna hanging over my desk. I think of her as a sacred feminine image and a kind of muse. In *The Secret Life of Bees*, I portrayed Mary as a powerful divine icon, inspiring women toward bravery, autonomy, dissidence, and compassion. In *The Book of Longings*, however, Mary is utterly human. She is a kind woman with graying hair, who is often weary from chores, a mother who did a superb job on her son, who taught him a lot that she didn't get credit for. It was gratifying to portray the human Mary, just as it'd been gratifying to fashion the mythic Mary in *Bees*. It was as if she'd found her other half.

I understand there was a particular question that fascinated you as you worked on the novel. It addressed how the world might've been different if Jesus had had a wife. Would you tell us how you answered it?

As I set my imagination free to imagine Jesus not as a bachelor but as a husband, it occurred to me that if he'd been married, history would likely have evolved differently. I found this fairly riveting. I wrote the question on a slip of paper and set it on my desk, where it remained throughout the four-and-a-half years I wrote the novel: How would history have been different if Jesus had had a wife who'd been part of the narrative through the centuries? There are only speculative answers, but it seems likely that Christianity and the Western world would have had a somewhat different religious and cultural inheritance. If Jesus had had a wife, a genuine partner, who had her own story, perhaps women and their stories would have found more inclusion and importance. Perhaps our relationship with sacredness and sexuality would've been less polarized. Sex might not have been viewed as quite as sinful. And it's a fair bet that virginity would not have become one of Christianity's higher virtues and that celibacy within the priesthood would not exist.

And I may have only scratched the surface.

In this new novel, you've returned to another signature theme in your work: women's friendships and bonds. How would you describe Ana's relationship with her aunt Yaltha? Who are some of the other women in Ana's life, and why is this an important and recurring theme for you?

Of all the characters I've created in my novels, Ana's aunt Yaltha may be the most unique. She's educated, fierce, impertinent, subversive, and wise, and she is Ana's lifeline. Everything you need to know about Yaltha is summed up in these two lines from the novel: "Her mind was an immense feral country that spilled its borders. She trespassed everywhere." Those are perhaps my favorite sentences in the entire novel. Part of Yaltha's role is to encourage Ana's longings and inspire her audacity. The bond between them is a deeply woven, sacred alliance. Yaltha acts as Ana's stand-in mother, soul friend, guide, and spiritual midwife.

Ana also has a small hive of female friends. It's possible there is more sisterhood in this novel than in *The Secret Life of Bees*, and that's saying a lot. There's Phasaelis, who is the Nabataean wife of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee; and Tabitha, her close friend, both of whom have their own longings and perils. Ana is sustained by her friendships with Jesus's sister, Salome, and his mother, Mary, as well as others. These female characters awaken, support, inspire, and transform one another. To be fair, I should mention there are also women in the story whose relationships with Ana are vengeful and adversarial.

Like Ana, I, too, have female friends who awaken, support, inspire, and transform one another. For more than fifteen years, three friends and I have gathered annually for a week and shared our stories and blessed the largeness in one another. These women have nurtured the creative seeds of my novels and made me braver. The bonds between women find their way into my characters' lives because of the sisterhood in my own.

You have written several memoirs, as well as other books of fiction, and *The Book of Longings* is a real melding of those worlds. Your memoir *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* is your personal story of religion, spirituality, and feminism, and you continue that story in *Traveling with Pomegranates*. How do the themes and stories in these memoirs inform the novel? Are there aspects of Ana in you?

These two memoirs seem to resonate in *The Book of Longings* more than in any of my other novels. When my husband finished reading *Longings*, he surprised me by saying, "I recognized you in Ana." Until then, I hadn't really considered which aspects of myself I'd woven into Ana's character and story. The obvious one is her longing to write, to have a voice in the world and create stories of women. But I also realized that Ana is engaged in a spiritual search for self, a feminist-like quest, which has overtones of my own feelings and experiences that I describe in these two memoirs. Of course, feminism didn't exist in the first century, but there were undoubtedly women in every era who yearned for the freedoms and opportunities their brothers had, who rebelled against the limitations placed on them, women with immense abilities like Ana, who "wanted for so much."

Ana's awakening, like mine, like most, begins with a sense of loss. In the novel, Ana says, "I discovered that God had relegated my sex to the outskirts of practically everything." In *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter,* published twenty-four years ago, I chronicle my awareness of this very thing. The memoir describes my collision with the exclusion, devaluation, and silencing of women, with a misogyny perceived to be mandated by God. It was sort of like a two-by-four between the eyes.

Ana also wishes for a female image of God, for a God who looks like her. This, too, spilled into the story from my memoirs. In *Traveling with Pomegranates*, which I coauthored with my daughter, I wrote, among other things, about my own search for divine feminine imagery. The pages are filled with our travels to Black Madonnas in Greece and France and of their impact on me.

There are numerous ways that Ana's longings and concerns show up in women today. I received a note from the French publisher of *The Book of Longings* in which she wrote, "Even though the novel is set in the first century, it was one of the most modern books I read this year."

What do you want people to take away from reading *The Book of Longings*?

I hope readers will consider their own longings, the ones that, like Ana's, are held deepest inside. I would like it if a conversation got stirred in them about bringing forth their own largeness. And, as with every novel, I hope readers will take away an empathetic experience, to enter the lives of the characters and feel what it's like, for instance, to be relegated to the periphery or to love someone greatly.

Over the years, I've found that people read a book through the lens of their own experience and need. They will find their own takeaways. I trust them to do that.

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