

## TAMARA WALKS ON WATER

By Shifra Horn

Translated by Anthony Berris

First published in Hebrew by Am Oved, 2002

English translation published by Piatkus, 2003

Study guide by Ilana Kurshan

### ABOUT THE BOOK:

This novel, set in Jaffa in the early decades of the twentieth century, is the story of a girl's coming-of-age in a city plagued by political and religious tensions. As a young girl, Tamara pieces together her family history from the stories told to her by her fiercely independent maternal grandmother Simcha, who raises her after her mother Nechama dies in childbirth at the age of thirteen. We learn about Tamara's Sephardic paternal grandmother Rashella Abulafia, who sews beautiful wedding dresses in Neve Zedek; her maternal grandfather Fishke, who works in a carpentry shop and frequents the local whorehouse religiously on Friday nights; and her great grandmother Widow Ziso, who rents out rooms in her home to two idealistic young bachelors. Tamara narrates her family's past and her own present, which are interwoven with the life of the city: the cholera epidemic that spread to Jaffa from Gaza; the Turkish officers who terrorize the city and impress young boys into their army during World War I; the Arab riots in which Tamara loses many neighbors and friends. When Tamara is old enough to leave home, she rents a tiny windowless room in the Old City and finds a job in a ladies' dress shop, where she falls in love with a zealous Christian monk. Filled with lush and exotic local color, this novel unfurls the story of a rich family history like a grand tapestry.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Shifra Horn is the author of four bestselling novels, two books for children, and a nonfiction book called *Shalom Japan*. In 2002, she was nominated Literary Woman of the Year by the financial daily, Globes. She has also been awarded the WIZO Prize (1997), the Book Publishers Association's Gold and Platinum Book Prizes, the Prime Minister's Prize (2005), the ADAI-WIZO Prize (Italy, 2006) and the Brenner Prize (2006). She has worked as a spokesperson for the Ministry of Absorption, a journalist, a lecturer and TV host, and she now manages her own independent public relations firm in Jerusalem.



## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What are the various professions of Tamara's family members? How do her grandmothers, father, and other relatives make a living? What does this teach you about the economic and cultural life of Jews in Jaffa in the early part of the twentieth century?
2. Is Tamara's family religious? Or is being Jewish more of an ethnic identity for them? Who are the most religious characters in this novel?
3. How autonomous were the Jews of Jaffa at this time? Consider the incident of the purchase of a new Jewish cemetery (p. 15) and the Arab riots (p. 141), among other examples.
4. How does World War I affect the Jewish inhabitants of Jaffa?
5. How do the worshippers of Theos, Allah, and Adonai relate to one another in Jaffa? Where does Tamara's family fit in? How does Tamara respond to the cacophony of church bells, shofar blasts, and muezzins?
6. Why is the Turkish bathhouse forbidden to Tamara? How do the Jews of Jaffa feel about this place? How does it differ from a traditional mikvah [Jewish ritual bath]? Why are those who leave Jaffa proud to live in a city with no bathhouse (p. 120).
7. To whom does Simcha sell her borscht and bread? How does her clientele change over time, and what shifting political circumstances does this reflect?
8. Avigdor ben-Ari serves as an unofficial teacher for Tamara. What does she learn from him? What is unique or unusual about his perspective on the world?
9. Reread Avigdor ben-Ari's history of the Arabs of Eretz Yisrael (p. 123). How does this differ from your knowledge of this history?
10. What is it about Cristodolos that attracts Tamara, in your opinion? What does he represent for her?
11. How does Yosef's piety affect his decisions throughout the book? How does Tamara relate to his religiosity?
12. What is Simcha's last secret? How does this put the pieces of the story together? Does knowing her secret better help you understand her behavior throughout the book?
13. What does Jerusalem represent to Tamara? How is it different from Jaffa? Why does she keep returning to Jaffa even after she and Yosef have begun a new life together?



## REVIEW QUOTES:

Consider these quotes individually. What does each add to your understanding of Horn and her work?

"A wonderfully lush novel reminiscent of Isabel Allende...compulsively readable."

--*Jewish Chronicle*

"Poignant, earthy and engaging." --*Daily Telegraph*

"You will find yourself unable to put the book down." --*London Jewish News*

"Spanning the generations Shifra Horn spins a magic web." --*Jewish Telegraph*

"A rich and magical tale." --*The Bookseller*

"Delightful - a hypnotic piece of storytelling." --*Good Book Guide*

"A novel filled with magic and rich imagery." --*OK Magazine*

## OTHER BOOKS BY SHIFRA HORN AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH:

*Shalom Japan* (Kensington Books, 1996)

*Four Mothers* (St. Martin's, 1999)

*The Fairest Among Women* (St. Martin's, 2001)

*Ode to Joy* (Piatkus, 2005)

