



The Bones and the Book

Jane Isenberg

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In 1890, Aliza Rudinsk, a young Orthodox Jewish immigrant from the Ukraine, came to Seattle via New York's Lower East Side expecting to build a good life for herself. When Aliza's bones turn up in Seattle's underground streets in 1965 along with a book written in Yiddish, recently widowed empty nester Rachel Mazursky offers to translate the book. Aliza's surprising and poignant story compels Rachel to search for clues to the identity of the young woman's murderer, but her quest for the truth unearths disturbing secrets about her own past as well as Aliza's. The Bones and the Book carries the reader back to a far-flung outpost of the Jewish diaspora where gold, good table manners, and assimilating often trump Torah, tribe, and tradition. "Isenberg's story pulled me in right from the startling prologue. The twin historical stories of Aliza and Rachel are compelling and poignant. The lives of these women in 1900 and 1965 are beautifully woven together, the strands balancing each other as each discovers her strengths and revises her own identity as a woman and a Jew." - Sharan Newman, author of The Shanghai Tunnel

The Bones and the Book Details

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From Reader Review The Bones and the Book for online ebook

Jean Roscoe says

Great read! Set in 1965 Seattle, the story goes back and forth in time to early 1900 after a bag of bones is found in Underground Seattle. A Yiddish dairy is also found that needs to be translated that may lead to a solution to a murder mystery. I loved the Seattle history and the way we discover the lives of Two women from different times are connected.

Judith says

I would rate this at least 3.5. This was a really interesting, informational book - actually a book within a book or two stories of different times but with similarities of problems. Two women from 2 different time periods struggling with their lives, their place in the world, who they are and simply surviving, although the 1960s woman had family support. I had read several of this authors earlier books and enjoyed them; that is the reason I picked this one up. However, this might be characterized as denser. I might recommend it to my book club as there could be interesting topics of discussion.

Dina Tanners says

I really enjoyed this book.

While the story itself was fascinating, I think several things made it special for me:

1) I grew up in Seattle and graduated from high school in 1965. The book was set in Seattle in 1965, so I very much recognized a lot of the landmarks and "customs" of the times, especially in the Jewish community and the values of the people. It brought back memories that were worth reexamining. Some were quite poignant, including the division between the Eastern European Jews (my family) and the Sepharadim, many of whom I sent to high school with and several of whom I dated.. I've learned more about the German Jews recently but didn't interact with them much growing up. I very much enjoyed the way that the author interwove the history with the storyline.

2) The book was dedicated to Pam Waechter (whom I knew), the employee of the Jewish Federation who was murdered, and to those who were wounded physically and mentally in the attack.

The last third of the book seemed to become almost like a soap opera. However, given the amount of research that the author did, I believe that the story could have been plausible.

Melissa says

"The Bones and the Book" is a bit simple in writing style but the story line and the characters are quite compelling, especially for those who are interested in Seattle at the turn of the previous century, Judaism, and the American female immigrant experience.

Kirsten says

An immigrant's journey to America and across it lined up against a recent widow's experiences. Rachel is tasked with translating a diary found next to a female's bones buried in Seattle. It seemed to end abruptly though - like the denouement was somewhat disappointing.

Betty says

5 stars! The primary settings for this novel are Seattle and Ketchikan, set both in the late 1800's and the present. Bones and an accompanying diary are discovered in Underground Seattle. We read the diary of a young Eastern European as she makes her way through the many adjustments to the New World and as she tries to solve the mystery of the killer of the skeletal woman and why. She also matures and learns much about herself during this time. Fast reading.

Amy says

3.5 stars

a very interesting diary-style story (sort of a mystery) that taught me a lot about orthodox and reformed Judaism (and rich vs. poor Jews) in the early 1900's. Takes place in the Pacific Northwest where I live so that added interest for me.

Aside from the (likely well researched, I couldn't tell) depictions of life in this time, place and community, I really enjoyed those moments when the modern-day protagonist realizes the writer of the diary romanticized and cleaned-up the depiction of her own life, likely for the sake of future familial readers.

Lauri Holmes says

Every once in awhile I slowly emerge, bleary-eyed, from the land of faerie where I spend most of my reading life and take up a book set in the more mundane world in which I actually reside. *The Bones and the Book*, by Jane Isenberg, is the latest endeavor in that category. I first discovered this book in the review section of the Seattle Times. I have always been partial to books whose settings are familiar to me, and *The Bones and the Book* covers two different periods of Seattle's history, the turn of the 20th century and 1965, when I was a six year old just moved from Tacoma to Junction City, Oregon, in the heart of the Willamette Valley. This is the second book I have read in recent months that takes place in 1960's Seattle, the other one being *My People Are Rising*, a memoir by former Black-Panther Aaron Dixon. Both books have given me some insight into the world where my significant other spent his teenaged years. But I digress.

The Bones and the Book tells the story of a 45-year-old recent widow living on Seattle's Capitol Hill. The same 1965 earthquake which killed her husband of 20 years, also unearthed the skeleton of a woman in Seattle's Underground. Accompanying the bones was a book believed to be a diary written in Yiddish. Rachel Mazursky, the afore-mentioned widow, volunteers to translate the diary for the UW professor who has been left in possession of the artifacts and hopefully shed some light on the identity of the skeleton and how she ended up in a leather sack in Pioneer Square's notorious Underground. Along the way, she ends up working at the once beloved Frederick & Nelson and meets some very interesting people with connections to Seattle's immigrant Jewish community. There is some name-dropping, a former Madame named Nellie and a certain musician named Hendrix among them. There are also a few other places besides Seattle thrown into the mix, notably Ukraine, New York City, and Skagway, Alaska. Fanny (one of the several names used by the soul which was once contained in the skeleton) has a very poignant story which fascinated me. I cried some, I admit, while I turned one page after another, unable to put the book down. Rachel's story also resonated with me a great deal. Although one might tend to believe that a middle-aged, former WASP-turned-pagan-witch (me) would have very little in common with this child of Jewish immigrants (Rachel), one would be wrong. I like Rachel and Fanny a great deal, and I loved this book.

Shelly says

This book is not so much a novel as an historical sketch of what life was like for Seattle's Jews at the turn of the 20th century and in the early 1960s. There's a mystery of sorts, which is more or less solved in an unsatisfying manner. Lots of old Seattle landmarks are name-checked, and if you really put your mind to it you could probably figure out which prominent real-life families are reflected in the fictional ones. The exhibit a few years ago at MOHAI about the history of Seattle's Jewish community was much more enjoyable.

Diane says

I loved reading this book. The characters personalities are beautifully depicted and I really got into their lives. Would definitely recommend this novel to all my friends. Interesting information on the Seattle Jewish Community back in the 1800's as compared to today.

Andrew says

In 1965 Seattle, a Jewish woman, recently widowed, translates a Yiddish diary from a Russian immigrant girl who may have been murdered at the turn of the century.

The plot is mildly interesting, but the actual story is not well written nor very descriptive: major characters come in and out (eventually disappearing), places are mentioned in such a way as to make no sense to non-natives, and the conclusion comes from out of no where by huge coincidences. Might have been better as a longer book, but I might not have made my way through it. The only thing that kept me going was I have a mild interest in early Seattle history, which this did not really cover.

Rachelle says

An engaging and unpredictable plot that explores the Jewish immigrant experience and culture, Seattle history and what we all have to learn from the past.

Erica Cooper says

One of the best selections of my book club that I've read in a while. Fascinating snapshots of Seattle's past, and the author did an excellent job of weaving the story not only back and forth between two time periods, but added in the Jewish culture in several different regions of the US (and again, in time)

Joyce Yarrow says

This riveting and beautifully written historical murder mystery takes us on two adventures set in different timeframes - one takes place in the Gold Rush era, where the iron will of Feigele, a young Jewish immigrant, is tested at every turn and the other is set in the Seattle of the 1960's, where the recently widowed Rachel confronts many of the same horrific challenges as her deceased counterpart. The question of identity permeates both stories, which merge at the end with a brilliant solution to a brutal murder.

Jeannine says

It was just good enough to finish - I wanted to see what happened, though I can't say I really CARED that much....
