



'Rebecca on the Parapet of Torquilstone Castle,' drawing by George Cruikshank (1837)



Portrait of Sir Walter Scott by Thomas Lawrence, c. 1826

'Rebecca of Ivanhoe'

Alison Bass's Jewish sequel to Sir Walter Scott's classic

By Shula Kopf

FANS OF Sir Walter Scott's novel *Ivanhoe* who yearned for more of the captivating Rebecca will be enthralled with Alison Bass's imaginative sequel, *Rebecca of Ivanhoe*. The book, published in November, picks up where Scott left off and manages to breathe new life into a beloved character that had too long been frozen in English literature's wax museum of 19th-century female protagonists. Rebecca, one of the first positive representations of a Jewish woman in English literature, is resurrected by Bass and follows

her on a mesmerizing journey through medieval Spain's sun-drenched, intrigue-laden landscape.

Bass fully capitalizes on the rich storytelling potential of following Rebecca and her father to Spain, crafting a narrative as complex and vibrant as the setting itself. Her meticulous historical research shines through as she paints a vivid picture of medieval Spain, where Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities navigated a fragile balance.

The sequel continues the beloved tale, and

Rebecca's voice rises anew in the winding streets of Toledo, transforming the beautiful Jewish healer into a full-fledged protagonist.

Scott's *Ivanhoe* is set in the end of the 12th century, right after the failure of the Third Crusade when many of the Crusaders were still returning to their homes in Europe. This period in England had become too dangerous for Jews, and Rebecca Manasses, who was almost burned alive as a witch until her rescue by the Saxon knight Ivanhoe, left England with her father for Spain.

Bass's book begins with a flashback scene to the kidnapped Rebecca shivering in her cell in the Templar monastery on the night before she was to be burned alive. We get to experience this famous scene from Rebecca's perspective, privy to her thoughts and feelings.

One of the novel's most impressive features is Bass's deft handling of Rebecca's past. The author weaves snippets and seg-



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Author Alison Bass

ments from Scott’s original story into the new Spanish setting with a remarkably light touch. As Rebecca recounts her English ordeals to curious relatives or reflects on her experiences, these flashbacks seamlessly integrate into the ongoing narrative. Rather than feeling like heavy-handed expositions, these moments offer organic glimpses into Rebecca’s history, enriching the current story while paying homage to its literary predecessor. This delicate balance allows new readers to fully engage with the tale, while rewarding fans of *Ivanhoe* with thoughtful flashbacks.

Echoing the historical theme of the “wandering Jew,” Rebecca and her father first arrive in Cordoba to join their relatives. They soon discover that Jews are persecuted in Andalusia by a fanatic Muslim sect, the Al-mohad. They move to Toledo’s Jewish quarter, hoping things will be better under the rule of the Christian king Alfonso VIII, the king of Castile and Leon. Rebecca builds a thriving practice as a skilled healer, earning respect across cultural boundaries. However, her growing reputation soon embroils her in local politics. Word of her skill reaches the ears of Rachel Esra, known as La Ferosa, the Jewish mistress of King Alfonso, an actual historical figure. Bass imagines that Rebecca becomes Rachel’s healer and friend, and through Rachel, Rebecca meets a handsome Jewish trader who helps her and her family during anti-Jewish riots instigated by the Catholic Church.

Warned of another impending attack, Rebecca and her family are forced to become refugees once again, this time fleeing to Cairo. Rebecca will meet a renowned physician, Moses ben Maimon, known as Maimonides.

Bass excels in her character development, allowing Rebecca to evolve beyond her role in *Ivanhoe*. Although Scott credited Rebecca

as having an “apt and powerful mind . . . beyond her years, her sex and even the age in which she lived,” in Bass’s sequel, she is no longer merely an object of desire. Rebecca emerges as a fully realized protagonist, grappling with questions of identity, faith, and purpose. In a masterful transformation, Bass reshapes Rebecca from a character to whom things happen – being desired, kidnapped, and nearly burned at the stake – into a woman who boldly seizes control of her destiny. Her struggle to reconcile her Jewish heritage with her place in a predominantly Christian society is poignant and relevant to modern readers.

Bass is an American journalist and author of three nonfiction books: her memoir, *Brassy Broad: How One Journalist Helped Pave the Way to #MeToo* (2021); *Getting Screwed: Sex Workers and the Law*. Her third book, *Side Effects: A Prosecutor, A Whistleblower and a Bestselling Antidepressant on Trial*, won the National Association of Science Writers’ Science Award, and its film rights were recently optioned.

This is her first historical fiction.

In her blog, Bass writes that she is often asked how she came up with the idea of writing a sequel to *Ivanhoe*.

“I often concoct stories as a way to get to sleep at night, and some time in early 2020, Rebecca, the healer in *Ivanhoe*, kept bursting into my mind. I had read *Ivanhoe* years ago as a teenager and didn’t remember much of her story, so I reread it,” writes Bass. “Near

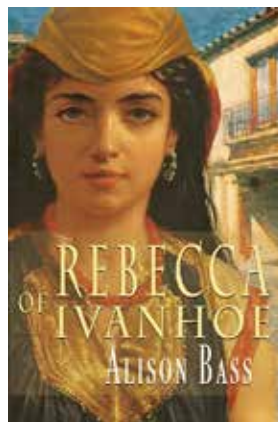
the end of his book, Walter Scott mentions that after *Ivanhoe* rescues Rebecca, she and her father flee to Córdoba, Spain, where he has relatives. And that’s when the lightning bolt hit me: Why not write about Rebecca’s life in Spain? I have visited Spain several times and was somewhat familiar with its sordid history of antisemitism and the centuries-long battle between the Moors in Andalusia and the Christians in northern Spain for control of the country. I had always thought that the Muslims were much more tolerant of the Jews living in southern Spain, and while

that was indeed true for a number of centuries (during their heyday in Spain), I was surprised to discover that a more militant sect of Muslims (the Almohads) had assumed power by the mid-12th century and were persecuting Jews in Córdoba and Seville.”

Bass writes that she was stunned to learn about King Alfonso VIII’s Jewish mistress, so she moved Rebecca and her father from Cordoba to Toledo so that the fictional Rebecca could meet the historical figure.

Bass’s *Rebecca of Ivanhoe* breathes new life into one of literature’s most intriguing secondary characters, transforming the beautiful Jewish healer into a heroine for the ages. This sequel to Sir Walter Scott’s classic dares to continue a beloved tale and weaves a rich tapestry of intrigue, romance, and personal discovery that stands proudly on its own.

Rebecca of Ivanoe is available on Amazon and wherever books are sold online. ■



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The cover of Bass’s new book