

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **Kaaterskill Falls**

### **By Allegra Goodman**

#### **Introduction**

Rav Kirshner is the revered and accomplished leader of a community of orthodox Jews. They have followed him from Germany (leaving Frankfurt just before Kristallnacht) to make a new beginning in Washington Heights, in New York City. Almost forty years after the original move, the Rav is aging and ailing. His health, and the succession to the group's leadership, become of paramount importance.

Kaaterskill is a Catskill Mountains community in upstate New York, where the Kirshners have long been accustomed to summer. Some have bought property with German reparation money; others rent, seasonally. The little Orthodox group, with their shul and their synagogue and their day camp, makes a striking contrast with the laconic Yankee year-rounders, and with the lush, wooded natural environment of the town and the spectacular Kaaterskill Falls.

The novel is a quiet, mannered account of the life of the Kirshner community, as it ebbs and flows between the City and the mountains. Action is slow, and crises are minimal. Most attention is paid to Elizabeth, British-born wife of Isaac Shulman, and mother of five young daughters. When a day camp frees her from constant child care, she conceives the idea of operating a small kosher grocery store in Kaaterskill Falls, so the summer residents won't need to bring everything in from the City, two hours away. She gets official permission from the aging Rav, arranges to rent some space in a somnolent general store, makes her arrangements, works hard, and does well.

The Rav, in the meantime, is dying. His wife has been dead for years; his two sons are still at hand. Jeremy, the eldest, is a university professor. Scholarly, brilliant, he is much of what his father (and mother) had hoped for, but he would never marry, and he has increasingly distanced himself from the community. Isaiah, the second son, is the Rav's second-in-command. With the help of his pushy wife, Rachel, he arranges the daily operation of the community. Not as bright or as flashy as his brother, he is loyal, thorough, and dependable. He is heir apparent, on the basis of having done the work. Jeremy is the son who is cut closer to the father's pattern, but who has taken himself out of the running.

Andras Melish is a successful importer who comes to Kaaterskill Falls to spend time with his sisters, Eva and Maja. Andras' wife, Nina, is from Argentina; she is busy trying to make her life fall gracefully into the kind of patterns she thinks are appropriate. Her daughter, Renée, has come to the age of small rebellions – she resents the

homogeneity of her possible friends, the limits on her horizon, the need to work at pointless skills like playing the piano. She teams up with a free-living summer girl, Stephanie, who encourages her to look for answers within herself, rather than her community.

The Rav dies, and his son Isaiah takes over. The old man's personal library, however, is left to Jeremy, much to the dismay of Isaiah and Rachel. Elizabeth's mercantile activities have taken her slightly further than the Rav's permission authorized; when she talks to his son about the coming year, he takes the permission away. Elizabeth is stung by the Rav's rebuke, but the birth of a sixth daughter occupies her considerably, as does the work she begins at Grimaldi's, a neighborhood store in Washington Heights.

It is a significant achievement that the record of these fairly pedestrian events is unflinching and engaging, and that when we come to the end of the road, we don't feel short-changed by the length of the trip, but impressed by the quality of the arrangements.

(*Novelist*)

## About the Author

Allegra Goodman was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1967, but grew up in Hawaii. Her father had taken a position as professor of philosophy at the University of Hawaii, and her mother also worked there as an administrator. Ms. Goodman has always been interested in literature; she tells us that she began writing at the age of six. By the time she enrolled in college (Harvard), she was getting ready to write for publication. Her first published short story appeared in *Commentary* while she was still an undergraduate. She received her bachelor's degree from Harvard, and -- almost simultaneously -- saw the publication of her first book of short stories, *Total Immersion* (1989), when she was just twenty-one. She went on to graduate school at Stanford, where she earned a Ph. D. in literature, focusing on the Renaissance. She has since published another book of well-received short stories, *The Family Markowitz* (1996). Her first novel, *Kaaterskill Falls*, came out in 1998.

*Kaaterskill Falls* is a departure and an extension. It is Goodman's first fiction of greater than short story length. It investigates in greater detail many of the themes and issues that occur in her earlier stories. To call her a Jewish writer is accurate but incomplete. She is familiar with the Jewish religion and Jewish society, and she finds them to be useful ways of examining the larger world. She writes of what she *knows*, not necessarily what she *is* -- she is not herself Orthodox. "I was interested in portraying a strand of the American Jewish community" is how she situates her novel. The world she creates is carefully crafted, full of closely observed detail and subtle event. In many ways -- in terms of scale and finish -- her novel is reminiscent of the description of an Orthodox Jewish world view that one of her characters offers: "smooth, small, delicate, useless as a robin's egg" (p. 65). Although *useless* does not apply very well in either context, and *useless as a robin's egg* is not a concept that would mean very much to a robin.

Without being autobiographical, *Kaaterskill Falls* contains many elements that have been part of Ms. Goodman's experience. In her youth, she summered with her

grandparents in a Jewish community in the Catskills. She is married to a mathematics professor (she has two young sons), and she spent a year at Oxford. All the personal experience has been successfully transmuted into material that is widely accessible. The unexpectedly mainstream appeal of her writing has been evidenced by the national awards she has received. *The Family Markowitz* was selected as a Notable Book of the Year by the *New York Times*; *Kaaterskill Falls* was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1998.

*(Novelist)*

## **Reviews**

“Goodman, author of the best-selling short story collection *The Family Markowitz* (1996), renders a finely drawn portrait of an insulated community in this debut novel.” – *Booklist Review*

“In knitting the minutiae of individual lives into the fabric of community, she produces a vibrant story of good people accommodating their spiritual and temporal needs to the realities of contemporary life. She does so with the virtuosic assurance of a prose stylist of the first rank.” – *Publishers Weekly*

“You don't read Goodman for thrills, but for rich characterizations and faultless evocation of a cloistered culture--pleasures in ample supply here.” – *Kirkus Review*

## **Further Reading**

*The Romance Reader* by Pearl Abraham

*Jupiter's Bones* by Faye Kellerman

*Big League Dreams* by Allen Hoffman

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. The community of the Kirschners takes everything the Rav Elijah says to be the final word in how they live their lives – and treats him as someone very close to God. Does the Rav see himself that way?
2. Why do the members of this orthodox community stay so close to the teachings of Rav Elijah – even when they go against their own inclinations or desires? What is so important to them about this community?
3. Why is Elizabeth so dependent on Isaac's support to open her store? If she could have seen the Rav by herself, would she still need Isaac's blessing?
4. Why is Isaac so ready to support Elizabeth in a new job – after her store has been shut down and she gives birth? What does this say about the way he views her – and her role in their family?
5. Andras and Nina's marriage was also of their own choice, yet it has been unhappy for many years. Why?
6. How has Andras' relationship with his sisters both helped and harmed him over the years? Was he too dependent on them to become a true part of his own family – with his wife and children?
7. Jeremy has been a confirmed bachelor throughout his adult life. How much of that is out of rebellion to his family and community?
8. Isaiah's wife, Rachel, is more vocal about the Rav's mistreatment of her husband. Her ambitions for her husband are high – but she still holds the position of Rav in reverence. How can she respect someone she's so angry with? How does she reconcile those feelings – or does she?
9. How are Cecil's rebellions – marrying Beatrix, speaking out for Zionism, having a naming ceremony for his daughter – different from Jeremy's? Why do people accept his behavior more readily than Jeremy's and why is he happier?
10. Elizabeth and her daughter Chani are both rebelling against the conventions of the community in their own ways. Will this make it easier on Chani if she decides to go to Israel?

*(Random House)*