



The Forgetting River: A Modern Tale of Survival, Identity, and the Inquisition

Doreen Carvajal

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The unexpected and moving story of an American journalist who works to uncover her family's long-buried Jewish ancestry in Spain.

Raised a Catholic in California, *New York Times* journalist Doreen Carvajal is shocked when she discovers that her background may actually be connected to *conversos* in Inquisition-era Spain, Jews who were forced to renounce their faith and convert to Christianity or face torture and death. With vivid childhood memories of Sunday sermons, catechism, and the rosary, Carvajal travels to the south of Spain, to the centuries-old Andalusian town of Arcos de la Frontera, to investigate her lineage and recover her family's original religious heritage.

In Arcos, Carvajal is struck by the white pueblo's ancient beauty and the difficulty she encounters in probing the town's own secret history of the Inquisition. She comes to realize that fear remains a legacy of the Inquisition along with the cryptic messages left by its victims. Back at her childhood home in California, Carvajal uncovers papers documenting a family of Carvajals who were burned at the stake in the 16th-century territory of Mexico. Could the author's family history be linked to the hidden history of Arcos? And could the unfortunate Carvajals have been her ancestors?

As she strives to find proof that her family had been forced to convert to Christianity six-hundred years ago, Carvajal comes to understand that the past flows like a river through time –and that while the truth might be submerged, it is never truly lost.

The Forgetting River: A Modern Tale of Survival, Identity, and the Inquisition Details

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Sirin Artan says

I was very excited when a friend mentioned this book about "hidden Jews". However, I couldn't enjoy the book because it needs a lot of editing. In addition, there was hardly any mention of how the author found out about her roots. On the other hand, too much about the town of Arcos in Spain, where her family was originally from (present day Arcos) and too much scattered information that did not seem to be relevant.

Meredith says

This is a book that I really wanted to love. The first few chapters drew me in very quickly and I was intrigued by the subject.

Doreen Carvajal, is a journalist and it shows with this book, which reads as individual columns in a series. My problem with this is that single threads of the book are separated from each other by other threads. The chapters are mostly quite short and it's disrupting to become interested in something only for it to end abruptly and the subject to pick back up in three chapters.

The chapters could have easily been consolidated into three or four main sections of the book, and I can only imagine that the author wanted it to feel more like her own journey. This makes for a very unsatisfying book though, and if I hadn't received this to review I don't think I would have finished, to be honest (and I rarely put down a book without finishing it). Every time I felt myself start to enjoy the book again the chapter would end and the moment, the focus, would be broken.

There are also a few chapters toward the end which really don't have anything to do with the book's subject. They seem to be stories she just wanted to tell and then sort of vaguely related to her subject at the end of each story. They were yet another barrier between the reader and any sort of conclusion.

Carvajal's writing is very good, her interpretations seem valid, her instincts are good, and the subject is fascinating. It is only the organization of this book which allows all of those positive aspects to falter. While this aspect doesn't seem to have bothered other reviewers it meant I couldn't fully immerse myself in the book.

--I received this book through an early reviewers program.

Stephanie says

This book is the underside of history. Religious persecution in Europe from the Crusades through the Holocaust. This talks about the amazing perseverance of the Jewish people and culture. Helps to remember why we don't want religions to rule countries. Someone once said that the fact that Christianity had survived so long gave it validity. I would argue that the validity of longevity is compromised when a religious culture survives through active persecution and coercion of others, and through keeping silent during such action.

On the other hand, Judaism's survival despite repeated systematic and widespread attempts at extermination and persecution, earns Judaism much validity and reverence.

Elise says

An interesting premise and many interesting and beautiful descriptions, as well as tidbits about Spain and Spanish history. Disturbing stuff too. But I was never quite sure what the author was reaching for and I found the ending unsatisfying. Maybe she did too, who knows. She was waiting for that moment when she would feel/realize she was Jewish, and it didn't happen. Which made for a much less dramatic book, even though it was honest.

Jaylia3 says

Doreen Carvajal was raised Catholic, but like Madeleine Albright she began to suspect that her family used to be Jewish. In Albright's case this wasn't ancient history, her family's religious shift happened during WWII, but Carvajal had reason to believe her ancestors may have been forced to convert during the Spanish Inquisition. Even more surprising to Carvajal, it wasn't until she was well into adulthood that she realized that while outwardly Catholic some older members of her family were quietly practicing aspects of Judaism or covertly honoring their Jewish heritage 500 years later. Long after the need for secrecy, this aspect of their lives still wasn't something anyone talked much about, and asking questions didn't always provide Carvajal with answers.

The Forgetting River chronicles Carvajal's quest to find out the truth about her family's history. To do so, she spent time in and then moved with her husband and daughter to the centuries-old town of Arcos de la Frontera in the Andalusian part of Spain. This tiny settlement's culture, music, art and residents are still deeply influenced by the past, and Carvajal's richly descriptive account of her life there suggests an ambiance of sunny skies and ancient stones. While she was looking for clues to her family's history Carvajal found lingering traces of Spain's formerly substantial Jewish population and the Inquisition that tried to eliminate the practice of the Judaism within the country's borders.

The chapters of The Forgetting River are a series related articles that skip around in time but slowly build their case. The concluding piece of information that finally convinced Carvajal of the truth of her family's Jewish heritage seems arbitrary, and more like a device to bring the narrative to a close than an incontrovertible bit of evidence, but this was Carvajal's personal journey so what finally tipped the scales for her may be based on something more primal than logic. On the whole this is a fascinating, thought provoking book--part history, part travelogue, part family memoir, part social commentary.

I received a copy of this book for possible review from the publisher. I was under no obligation and the opinions are mine.

Kim says

Amazing! It was one of those books that you hate to end.

"The Forgetting River" has something for everyone. I originally picked up this book because of the genealogical aspect, but found that it is so much more! The descriptions of Arcos de la Frontera are wonderful and when I went to the Internet and looked at the images of this medieval city it was just as Carvajal had written. This book is a beautifully written memoir and encompasses all aspects of the author's incredible search for her family's roots. Sounds, sights, food, arts, and culture are wonderfully depicted and as a reader, I simply delighted in the journey!

I will definitely keep this book on my shelves. I just know that I will pick it up and read it again someday.

Carmen says

The writing style was a little melodramatic for me, but this story of a woman attempting to discover proof of her family's pre-Inquisition Jewish ancestry is actually rather suspenseful. She introduces us to the town of Arcos de la Frontera in Spain's Andalusia region, and to its unique residents, secrets, and history. To attempt to discover 500-year-old family history seems like an insurmountable obstacle to me, but I was cheering for her all the way.

Suzanne says

This was a fascinating book about a woman who grew up in California now trying to trace her lineage back through Costa Rica and from there back to the days of the Inquisition in Spain. She started following the trail of occasional stories, symbols, and other handed-down clues to unearth the secret most of her family didn't want to confront directly: whether or not they were descended from Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity during the Inquisition or face torture or death for their faith. She spends time in Arcos de la Frontera in southern Spain where she uncovers many threads of the story, as well as some resistance to telling it. (To actually see this town, see Rick Steves' travelogue "Andalusia, Gibraltar, and Tangier." He has a section on Arcos de la Frontera, "the queen of the white towns," whose whitewashed houses "smother its hilltop, tumbling down its back like the train of a wedding dress." A great visual for the story and fitting backdrop to Carvajal's evocative descriptions of the town and its people.)

But quaint town aside, it's appalling to read about the vicious ways Jews were treated during the Inquisition, and the discrimination that followed even those who converted. I've actually been reading another book at the same time, one that couldn't have sounded more different when I started it: "The Perfect Nazi: Uncovering my Grandfather's Secret Past," by Martin Davidson. I was, however, astounded to see the similarities as I got into them. They both involve present-day authors who want to uncover and understand how antisemitism in its most virulent forms played out in their family histories, and how it could possibly have ever happened. In "The Perfect Nazi" Davidson distances himself from his grandfather and his actions while trying to uncover secrets that no one wants to tell, and to understand how it ever could have been so. In "The Forgetting River" however, Carvajal looks at the victims of the evil--from centuries ago down to the present day--and tries to forge a connection with them and find her own identity. A moving, thought-provoking, engrossing, fascinating read.

Ruthie says

I came to this book fully expecting to love it. I am Jewish and I grew up in Spain, so I have always been very interested in conversos or crypto-Jews. I'm afraid I was very disappointed. There were a few interesting facts and I loved reading about Arcos, a town close to where my mother lives, but the writing and organization are horrendous. It reads like a first draft that has yet to encounter an editor. An appalling lack of structure, terrible grammar and a lot of repetition. Do yourself a favor and don't read it. Instead read *The Mezuzah in the Madonna's Foot* by Trudi Alexy.

Mike Davis says

The "river" of the title is the passage of time which has swept away links between Spanish Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity by the Spanish Inquisition and their modern day survivors, many of whom are not aware of their former Jewish roots. The author takes us on a personal genealogy trip to determine her own background and in the process turns up the horrors of the persecution of Jews by the Catholic church and subsequent loss of identity and even records that were destroyed or altered to protect Jewish families.

The book is well written and no doubt as historically accurate as possible. I would caution readers that it is a search for identity with many references to Spanish locations, and Catholic and Jewish rituals and practices. Within that framework, it is a good read.

Hillá says

This book needed an editor. The topic is fascinating, but sadly, I found it extremely poorly written. It doesn't come together, it feels just like fragments and musings, and it's extremely hard to read, or at least put together. I found it more indulgent than interesting.

Edi says

A writer's journey of discovery places genealogical research and history lessons in a very personal context. This may be more than you ever wanted to know about the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsion of Jews, then gypsies, then Muslims. Even an occasional wealthy noble, whose property seizure by Inquisition officials and anyone with a grudge to point at them, could be put to torture and execution, all to "purify the faith." This true story was viscerally disturbing, yet the music playing in my mind and the scents of the cuisine described were also a comfort.

Courtney says

I received this book as part of the First Reads program. It explores the author's journey to find out more

about her family history spurred on by many clues along the way that suggest her Catholic family actually has roots in Judaism. I think I found it particularly intriguing because I, too, have ancestors that left Spain around the time of the Inquisition with little hints here and there that they may have been Jews. More than anything, *The Forgetting River* sparked my interest in that personal history and the Spanish Inquisition in general. Well written, though I found the decision to tell the story non-chronologically defused the momentum and emotions of the journey and discovery.

Brina says

Based on reviews I read here I was hoping that this book would be greater than it was. Doreen Carvajal is a possible descendant of conversos who goes to Spain in hopes of tracking down clues to her family history. Instead of definitive answers and chronological genealogy we get chapters that read like human interest newspaper articles. The articles I admit were interesting and probably would have read better in the paper or in a blog. In book form there is just that one thing missing.

In the end we never know for sure if the Carvajals are Jews. The one thing she has is a funeral card with Psalm 92. Yes this is traditionally Jewish prayer but non Jews also recite it, so how can the author view it as concrete evidence. Then she never follows up by saying if she chooses to remain Catholic or pursue Jewish conversion.

All in all the story line was interesting just disjointed at times. I'm not sure I would necessarily recommend it because it took me awhile to motivate myself to read the last quarter. I would read the author's newspaper columns because I am guessing in short form they flow better and leave the reader with a slightly better mood.

Lisa says

I was mildly disappointed in this book. Having read the great reviews, I was expecting much more. The premise is that the author suspects she may be the descendent of converso Jews and I was expecting a much deeper exploration of who the converso Jews were and their place in history. There are long descriptions of the residents of the Spanish village where the author has a summer home and not that much on her quest for her converso Jew roots.
