



Exploring family roots leads Chatham woman to pen a novel

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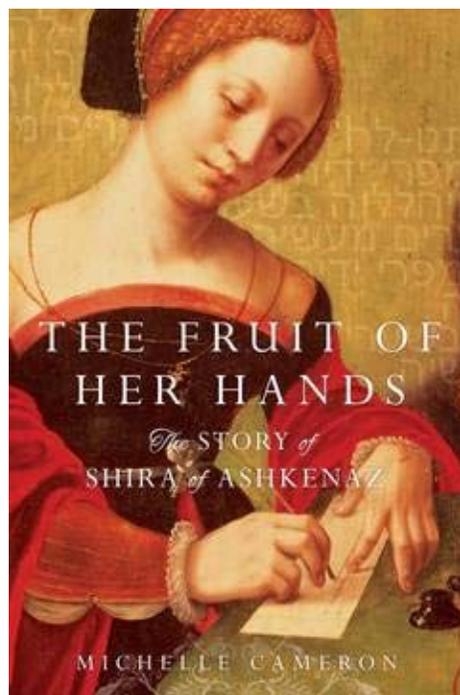
THE BOOK AND ITS AUTHOR — Michelle Cameron is the author of "The Fruit of Her Hands," based on the story of Meir of Rothenberg — a distant relative who lived in the 1200s. She spent three years researching and writing the book and another two to find an agent and publisher, but it was worth it. She is now a published author on her first book tour in the metropolitan area.

By Marianne Ivers

CHATHAM — When Michelle Cameron explored her family's history, chance led her to discover a person of historic importance. As it turned out the person, Meir of Rothenberg, was Cameron's distant relative. The intriguing discovery prompted her to write a novel "The Fruit of Her Hands" based on the story of Meir of Rothenberg. The story is narrated by Meir's fictional wife Shira.

Cameron's cousin did the genealogical research of Cameron's family and compiled the extensive family tree into a book which he called "The Estate by the River Bug."

"The family estate was located in an area that was part of Poland one day and part of Russia the next. While most Jews were impoverished, my family was actually quite wealthy until World War I, when the forests they owned were cut down so that the timber could be used in the war effort," Cameron explained.



Cameron's initial interest was concentrated on the woman she was named for. According to a family legend, she used her beauty to help the family fortunes. "It was while I was looking for information about her that I stumbled across the brief article about Meir of Rothenberg. My mother had always said we could trace our family roots back to the 1200s, and this article supported that claim," she said.

"The events of Meir's life just cried out to be put into a historical novel. He witnessed the burning of the Talmud in Paris in 1242, which was one of the pivotal events marking the deterioration of relations between the

Jews and Christians of medieval Europe. His wisdom and the way he conducted himself made him the foremost rabbi of his time – and his teachings are still referred to today by Jewish scholars. And he had the

courage and audacity at the end of his life to defy King Rudolph I, who wished to confine his Jews and tax them mercilessly. It was an incredible opportunity to discover such an amazing ancestor, especially as this was a story most people knew nothing about," Cameron told the Independent Press.

Cameron admits that she knew very little about medieval life before "embarking on this novel." She had studied history as a minor in college where she took a course on the Middle Ages. According to her "that was the extent of my prior knowledge."

"Luckily for me there is a great deal of wonderful scholarship about the Middle Ages, including the life of medieval Jews. I list the most useful of these books in my Author's Note at the back of 'The Fruit of Her Hands.' I also used the Internet, though I was always very careful about the credibility of these sources. The web was incredibly useful in giving me a sense of place — I couldn't afford to travel to do research on the spot, and the Internet was a great source for maps, photos, and more," she explained.

To the question of rewards and challenges of writing an historical novel she replied, "The rewards and challenges of writing historical novels are very much interconnected. You have to love research — but to know when to stop researching and start writing. You have to avoid what I've heard called a 'research dump' — putting in facts that you find fascinating but which divert the reader's attention away from the main narrative. And you have to be able to integrate the facts you do have — how people dressed, what they ate, what their homes were like — so that they become a natural extension of the novel. It isn't easy, but when you do it well, it's incredibly rewarding."

It took three year for Cameron to write the book and another two years to find an agent and a publisher. She wrote the book while working at her regular job as a Creative Director, at a digital agency, Interactive Media Associates, in Parsippany. She wrote much of the novel while her two sons, the older now a senior at Carnegie Mellon and the younger son a sophomore at Williams College, were still in high school. "Finding time was a real challenge. I actually set my alarm clock for 4:30 a.m. so that I could have a solid, silent two hours of writing time before getting ready to go to work. It's made all the difference!" she said.

"My agent submitted the novel to some 16 editors. The reception they gave the novel was generally kind, though they contradicted one another when they came to reject the book. For instance, some loved the plot but criticized my writing style — others praised the writing but said they didn't think the story was marketable. Several editors wanted to publish the book but they couldn't convince their editorial boards that it was worth taking a risk on."

Despite the challenge of finding an interested publisher, Cameron's agent had a saying through this whole process, "It only takes one." The one turned out to be Pocket Books "who took extraordinary care throughout the long process of publishing and promoting the novel," she said.

The book was launched on Sept. 13 at Sages Pages Bookstore in Madison. Another book signing and reading event followed on Sept. 23 at the Barnes and Noble store in Livingston. Cameron also spoke about her book at the Chatham Library in early October. She is now on an extended book tour in various synagogues in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Philadelphia.

When it comes to the reception of her book she said: "It has been phenomenal — I couldn't be happier. It's been an extraordinary experience to hear people tell you that they couldn't put the book down, that they stayed up into the night to read it. That's how I judge a really good novel, so it's exhilarating and a little surreal to hear someone say that about my work."

Cameron has lived in Chatham for 13 years with her husband Steve, who teaches in the Communications Department at Caldwell College. Her sons graduated from Chatham High School.

In addition to *The Fruit in Her Hand* she had a verse novel about William Shakespeare's life and loves, called "In the Shadow of the Globe." This book was brought out by a small literary publisher, Lit Pot Press, in 2003. She is currently working on a new historical novel, this one set during the Judean Babylonian Exile. More information can be found on her website michelle-cameron.com.

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