

# A CONVERSATION WITH MICHELLE CAMERON

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## **A Conversation with Michelle Cameron, Author of *The Fruit of Her Hands* from the Simon & Schuster Web Site**

1. Authors often remark that they put a little bit of themselves into their characters. How strongly do you identify with each of your main characters? How are you different?

*The idea of writing Meir's story was somewhat daunting at first. How could I, a 21st-century woman, possibly hope to identify with and create this brilliant 13th-century Talmudic scholar? I felt I needed to find someone I could relate to more easily to help me tell the story so I invented the character of Shira.*

*Shira is not me either, of course. Unlike her, I was not raised in a devout Jewish household. But she and I share a profound love of learning. While Shira's enthusiasm was channeled into studying the Talmud and helping her husband prepare his responses, mine takes the form of all the reading and writing that I do.*

*When I wrote about the characters, I often borrowed from events in my own life. For example, I immersed in a mikveh before my wedding ceremony, because I was married in Israel according to the Orthodox rite. When Meir's hand was hurt, I could empathize with how Shira felt as caretaker because my own husband suffered the aftereffects of a bad accident. I've drawn from my relationships with my two sons in describing Shira's interactions with her children, specifically Chaya and Ruth.*

2. Your novel is tremendously engaging and can be read fairly quickly, considering its breadth. Shira and Meir go through a whirlwind during the course of the book. Did you work on the book for a long time or did you write it very quickly?

*Thank you for that kind praise. I worked on the novel for about three years – including research and some false starts. In general, I write relatively quickly, but then I spent a great deal of time polishing, revising the novel comprehensively at least four times (including a final edit where I read every word aloud) before submitting it. And then the novel certainly benefitted from both my agent's and my editor's close attention to it.*

3. Please tell us about your experience writing your second book. Was it what you expected it would be? What surprised you?

*In order to explain the surprises in writing my second book, I have to go back beyond the first one. When I first tried to write professionally – more years ago than I care to remember – I aspired to become a novelist. So I wrote several novels, all of which I'm really glad never saw publication.*

*I had the highest hopes for a young adult novel about William Shakespeare. When that book did not find a compatible agent, I told myself my writing aspirations were over – I*

*had tried and failed. But I couldn't vanquish my compulsion to write. Since I was raising children and working full-time, my creative time was limited. I began to write poetry, which I could finish in days, not years. And, to my surprise, I began to successfully publish my poems.*

*My first book-length publication – In the Shadow of the Globe, a verse novel in which I took my years of research in Shakespeare's life and created a narrative around a series of interconnected poems – was published by a small literary press. I was absolutely thrilled to finally have a published book and was excited about the idea of continuing in this genre.*

*This is where the surprise comes in. When I started writing The Fruit of Her Hands, I tried to write it as a verse novel. The book absolutely refused to cooperate. I thought I needed a little more narrative scope, so I experimented with the form, attempting a series of letters or diary entries. None of these formats worked. The book flat-out wanted to be a fully realized historical novel. When I finally gave in to it, the writing began to flow.*

**4. Do you see your book as more of a story of Jewish history or a story about a strong woman? Why?**

*I would actually like it to be perceived as both. As a historical novelist, I started by discovering certain themes in my research that I wanted to bring into the work. This was a pivotal and very tragic period for the Jewish people, so of course I wanted to make sure that was clearly described. I also wanted to convey a sense of how the Jews survived so many years of discrimination, by immersing themselves in their learning and family life.*

*But I feel strongly that the best way to write historical fiction is through the characters who live that history, in this case, Shira and her family. It is because Shira herself undergoes the discrimination that her people as a whole suffer, that we can really understand what it must have been like.*

**5. What was your favorite scene to write? What was the most challenging scene?**

*I enjoyed writing about Shira and Meir's love for one another. Perhaps my favorite scene is the one where they leave the school together, heading towards William's Keep and possible danger. They know they should not be alone, but circumstances make it impossible for them to do anything else. Snow is falling around them, melting as it lands on their faces. In that moment, they first feel the deep connection between them.*

*Because of the nature of this book, there were several challenging scenes. Writing about the discovery of the little Christian boy down the well was difficult. Portraying Meir in prison at the end of his life was heart wrenching. But the scene that was the hardest to write, emotionally, was what I tend to describe as "the heart of the book" – the burning of the Talmud in the Paris market square. I couldn't stop crying as I wrote about those books being brought to the square and put to the torch.*

6. As you relate in your author's note, much of the book is centered on actual history. What was your research process like? How does your research directly or indirectly affect your writing?

*I did a great deal of research on the period, creating a timeline that laid out a solid chronology. I also researched customs and day-to-day living during the 1200s in France and Germany. I began writing only after I felt I understood the period. But I still had to interrupt my writing many, many times to discover specifics. For instance, what did people eat at a medieval Jewish wedding feast? How would Shira have made ink? When you are writing a novel like this one, you want it to be as true to the time period as possible.*

*But where research doesn't provide answers, imagination gets to step in. We knew Meir must have had a wife, for example – but because the medieval record didn't tell us anything about her, I got to invent her completely, from her desire to be a scholar right down to her name.*

7. How did your personal connection to Rabbi Meir ben Baruch affect your writing of the book?

*First and foremost, I felt a great responsibility to get the facts straight and to convey a sense of what the man might have been like. This was my own story, my family's story, so there was a great deal at stake for me in doing it justice. I remembered how proud my mother had been when she told me we could trace our family roots back to the 1200s. Having the personal connection infused the writing with a certain degree of duty – but also of joy. As I read more about Meir and the type of man he was, the decisions he made, I grew to better understand the source of my mother's pride. It wasn't just the fact that my family tree extends so far back that was so exciting. It was also the thought that Meir – in how he lived and what he accomplished - was an ancestor anyone would be happy to call her own.*

8. Who is your ideal reader of the book? What do you hope they take away from your novel?

*The ideal reader of my book is someone who loves historical fiction, who wants to learn more about a period that isn't often dealt with, and who will be fascinated by learning more about Judaism during the Middle Ages – whether they are Jewish or not. I hope that, upon finishing the book, not only will they understand the difficulties of Jewish life during this time period, but also have taken joy from those aspects of life that helped the Jews survive as a people.*

9. To what other writers would you compare your writing style? Who do you enjoy to read? What books influenced you to become a writer?

*I would love to think my writing style has something of Emma Donoghue or Sarah Dunant, both of whom I enjoy tremendously. Obviously, I read a lot of historical fiction. I'm a fan of Phillipa Gregory's brilliantly researched novels, particularly because of my*

*background on Shakespeare. I also enjoy Tracy Chevalier and Brenda Rickman Vantrease, among dozens of others. Among novelists who delve into Jewish subjects, I've enjoyed reading books by Chaim Potok, Gwendolen Brooks, Anita Diamant and Maggie Anton.*

*I've read books since I can remember and I wanted to be a writer most of my life. Probably the first historical novel I ever read, Annemarie Selenko's *Désirée*, about the woman who was Napoleon's first love and who became Queen of Sweden, had the biggest effect on my wanting to write this particular genre.*

#### **10. Do you have plans for your next book?**

*My next book is well on its way. It actually began from Shira's reflections as the carts laden with volumes of Talmud moved past her. To comfort herself, she thought back to ancient Babylon, to the psalm, "By the waters of Babylon..." and considered how Jews had experienced rich periods of scholarship and culture in their lives despite exile and discrimination, starting all the way back to the first exile by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.*

*That idea fascinated me, so I began to research the lives of the exiles. My next book is a multi-generational novel that begins with the destruction of the First Temple and ends with the return to Judea when Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed the exiled peoples of the world – the Judeans among them – to return to their original homes.*