



Study Guide for **The Singing Fire** by Lilian Nattel

Lilian Nattel weaves a riveting story of two Jewish women, immigrants from different worlds in Eastern Europe, whose lives intersect in the teeming and impoverished West End of London at the end of the nineteenth century. Early in their lives both women suffer betrayal and victimization, but their fierce independence and desire to transcend the adversity in their lives takes them on separate journeys to personal redemption.

The paperback edition of *The Singing Fire* includes a set of Discussion Points at the end of the book (enclosed). You might want to select a number of these questions and base your discussions on them.



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There are many interesting themes that Nattel explores in *The Singing Fire*. Ask the participants to list them, and then decide which ones you would like to discuss. As you talk about these themes, cite passages, and perhaps even read them aloud.

(DP# indicates a Discussion Point adapted from the paperback edition.)

Theme I – Sisterhood/Motherhood

DP#3 Sisterhood is a major theme throughout the novel. Describe the relationships of the various female characters. How do the women support and nurture each other?

Sisterhood and female relationships: (Nehama/her sisters; Emilia/her mother; Nehama/Sally; Nehama/Minnie; Nehama/Emilia; Emilia/Mrs. Zalkind)

Motherhood: Who are the mothers? Which behaviors would you consider maternal, and which are not?

DP#4 How do you react to Emilia's abandonment of her baby? What other choices did she have? Nattel depicts her as unable to respond to her baby: "*She crouched in front of the orange crate where the baby lay, waiting to feel like the child's mother.... There should be a rush of love, a sense of duty, but she was so cold.*" (132)

Question: Do you think Emilia was suffering from what today is diagnosed as post-partum depression?

Theme II – Jewish Identity

DP#5 Jewish identity is one of the overarching themes in *The Singing Fire*. Discuss the different ways various characters identify themselves and one another, paying particular attention to how they identify themselves as Jews within their own community and within English society with its hierarchical class system.

Question: How would you characterize the religious upbringing of Nehama and Emilia in their homes prior to their escapes to London?

Question: How is the desire to "pass" such an important issue when talking about identity?

Historical note: Fanny Hurst's novel, *Imitation of Life* (1934) confronts the issue of "passing" in a period when Jews were loathe to discuss such matters.

Question: When Mr. Blink introduced himself to Nehama as a *landsmann* it was a ruse to convince her that he was connected to her and concerned about her. Why was this a reasonable assumption?

Historical note: One of the most commonly sought modes of connection for Jewish immigrants was through associations with other Jews, particularly from the same region. A "*landsmann*" was a person from your hometown. As the numbers of immigrants to the West escalated, these informal associations eventually became institutionalized in the form of *landsmanschaften*, organizations for Jews from the same town/region sharing common social, cultural and religious values that developed agencies to aid their members in settling into Western society.

Question: Jacob and Emilia seemed to grow apart in their initially similar attitudes toward Judaism. What was the trajectory of each, and how would you account for their divergence?

Question: The juxtaposition of Zaydeh Karpman and Reverend Nussbaum poses an ironic twist. What is it? How are the two rabbis depicted in the story?

Theme III – The Victimization of Women

Nehama and Emilia's relationships with men vary from one extreme to another, from the ruthless and heartless treatment by Mr. Rosenberg, Mr. Blink and The Squire to the loving and the redemptive relationships with their husbands.

How are these relationships depicted: Nehama/Mr. Blink; Nehama/The Squire; Emilia/Mr. Rosenberg; Emilia/Mr. Levy; Nehama/Nathan; Emilia/Jacob; Emilia/Zaydeh?

Historical Note: Nehama's betrayal by a *landsmann* is not historical fantasy. Between 1870 and 1939, Jews played a major role in *white slavery*, as the prostitution of that era was called. Not only was this participation con-

spicuous, but it was historically unprecedented, geographically widespread, and in an age of pandemic anti-Semitism, contributed to a more heightened and overt hostility to Jewish immigrant populations.

The appearance of Jewish procurers, prostitutes and pimps resulted from the social, economic and religious upheaval of the late nineteenth century. Due to the large-scale displacement caused by massive waves of immigration, young Jewish women traveling alone were tricked, seduced and kidnapped by Jewish men (and even some women) into this commercial vice that fanned out across four continents, from India and Constantinople, to Argentina and London and New York. For more on this, see Edward Bristow, *Prostitution & Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery, 1870-1938* (Schocken: NY, 1982).

Theme IV: Jewish Institutional Life at the Turn of the Century

Question: A role of Jewish institutions was to Anglicize the Eastern Europeans as quickly as possible. How is this reflected in the narratives about the Jewish Free School and Jewish Board of Guardians?

Board of Guardians: “Oppression, close up, was rather rank, and there was concern that English gentiles might not be able to distinguish so well Jews of one type from Jews of another...The need was great, the money never enough, the newcomers vastly outnumbering the established community that was attempting to help and subdue them.” (186)

The Free School: “I expect you girls to lead your elders to English ways of feeling...Speak well, and that means you must not speak the Jargon, you know I mean Yiddish, not even with your parents.” (209)

Historical note: Beginning in 1881, millions of Jews immigrated to Western countries (two and a half million came to the United States between 1881–1924) from Eastern Europe. The settlement and integration of this immigrant population was of concern the those Jews of Central and Western Europe who had arrived and established themselves in previous decades. The cultural chasm between these two communities, the traditional Jews of Eastern Europe and the more cosmopolitan and secularized Jews of Central and Western Europe, widened causing no small amount of internecine strife. The earlier immigrant communities had begun to create vibrant Jewish communal infrastructures that they trans-

formed into vehicles for “civilizing” this last and largest wave of immigrants.

Question: How did you interpret the comment by Mrs. Zalkind to Emilia: “But it’s a *mitzvah* to bring a Jewish girl into a Jewish home. God knows what would happen to her otherwise, a maid among the yoks.”

Historical note: One of the means by which young immigrant women were educated and given a means to support themselves and their families was by training them to be serving girls and housemaids. It was a way in which the class system was maintained by the Jewish upper classes, although it was always clothed in altruism. For an interesting perspective on this, read Anzia Yezierska’s *Arrogant Beggars* (1920).

Question: While a number of the Jewish institutions were motivated by the need to integrate the immigrant population, the Yiddish theatre remained a staunchly Jewish and ethnic institution. What was its role in the community of the West End? Was it uniformly embraced by all the characters?

Question: What would you suggest accounted for Jacob’s desire to write a Yiddish play?

Historical note: Yiddish, otherwise referred to as Jargon, was generally disparaged by assimilated Jews who saw it as a throwback to a less civilized world (although they often spoke it in the privacy of their homes). Moses Mendelssohn (late 18th century), considered the father of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), understood that the first step in Jews being accepted as members of the host society was the abandonment of the *mama loshen* and the acquisition of German as the language of discourse, education and literature.

A vibrant new Yiddish culture emerged in Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century, including the Yiddish press, *belles lettres* and literature, that soon was in competition with the parallel emergence of modern Hebrew. At one point, Zionists argued about whether Yiddish or Hebrew should be the spoken language of the new Jewish state. But eventually Yiddish language became the fault line along of the class divide, with traditionalists and socialists claiming it as a sign of Jewish cultural nationalism, on one side, and integrationists and elitists seeing it as regressive, on the other.

General Questions

Question: How is the intermarriage issue confronted in the novel? Are you surprised by the almost blasé attitude of the Zalkinds toward their son's "Christian" fiancée?

DP#10 *The Singing Fire* contains many supernatural elements. What is the role played by the deceased spirits who look after Nehama and Emilia?

DP#2 What roles do song and fire play at different points throughout the novel? What is the significance of the title, *The Singing Fire*?

Emilia's Butter Cake

1 pound butter
1 pound flour
1 pound raisins

"...each slice was worth a pound of flesh on one's hips" (237)



A SCRIBNER READING GROUP GUIDE

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Set in the teeming streets of London at the end of the 19th century, *The Singing Fire* follows the paths of its two heroines, Nehama and Emilia, fiercely independent Jewish immigrants connected by the child Emilia gives birth to and Nehama raises, and divided by the vastly different worlds they choose to inhabit after leaving their homes in Eastern Europe. What do you think of Lilian Nattel's decision to have two central characters? In what ways are the two women alike and how are they different? How are the choices they make in forging their new lives in London driven by the lives they left behind in Poland and Russia?
2. Why does Gittel imagine heaven as a kind of coffee house where men place bets and study Torah but "among the women there would be singing"? What roles do song and fire play at different points throughout the novel? What is the significance of the title, *The Singing Fire*?
3. Sisterhood is a major theme throughout the novel. Describe Nehama's relationship with the various female characters. Do you think that Nehama's relationship with her own sisters influenced the relationships she had with women in London? If so, how? Discuss the ways in which the women in *The Singing Fire* nurture one another.
4. How did you react to Emilia's decision to abandon her daughter? What other choices does she have? Nattel pictures her stroking her baby's tiny hand, waiting but unable to feel like the child's mother. Do you think Emilia was suffering from what today would be diagnosed as postpartum depression? Why do you think that as she searches for the hidden message in her mother's postcard she concludes that she must run away "because if she stayed, she would be a person in endless mourning, unable to bathe or comb her hair"?
5. Identity is one of the principal themes in *The Singing Fire*. Discuss the different ways various characters identify themselves and one another, paying particular attention to questions of Jewish identity, English society, and class divisions. From Richard Wright to Wilkie Collins, passing has been an important subject for writers exploring identity and the social constructs that divide people. Nattel puts an ironic twist on this perennial theme. Discuss.
6. Jacob Zalkind and his friends discuss the "Jewish question." What is the "Jewish question" and are there any political situations today over which there are similar debates?

7. Both Nehama and Emilia are betrayed by men, yet both women manage to find kind, decent men to share their lives with, but still they are afraid to tell their dark secrets. Talk about the evolution of these relationships, the ways in which their husbands respond when their lies begin to unravel, and the redemptive power of love.
8. In *The Singing Fire*, Lilian Nattel explores many difficult subjects and depicts many dark realities. Do you think she was successful in weaving these ideas into a compelling narrative? How does Nattel use humor to lighten the mood of the novel and to transmit wisdom from one generation to another and from the deceased to the living?
9. *The Singing Fire* is set in the heart of London's Jewish ghetto in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. How successful do you think Nattel is in bringing to life that vanished world? What literary techniques does she employ in re-creating the sights and sounds, rhythms and cadences of the market stalls, brothels, and sweatshops of the East End, where Nehama struggles to survive, and the chic West End, where Emilia settles?
10. Lilian Nattel's first novel, *The River Midnight*, won plaudits for the magical/mystical qualities of its portrait of the fictional *shetl* of Blaszka. *The Singing Fire* is not without magical elements of its own. Discuss the role played by the deceased spirits who look after Nehama and Emilia. Do you believe it is possible to communicate with loved ones who have passed on? Is it necessary for the reader to believe in ghosts in order to appreciate the scenes in which they appear? Why or why not?
11. Nehama's resourceful grandmother seems a natural choice for the guiding spirit in Nehama's life, but why do you think the author chose the first wife of Emilia's cruel father as the protector of Emilia? Why does Emilia's mother beg the first Mrs. Rosenberg to accompany her girl to London? When the ghost slips into the carriage beside Emilia, she declares, "The dead can still make promises to the living. They can keep them if the living will allow it." Discuss the significance of this statement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lilian Nattel is the author *The River Midnight*, which was published to international acclaim and won the Martin and Beatrice Fischer Jewish Book Award. She lives in Toronto with her husband and two daughters.