

A woman with long brown hair, seen from the back, wears a long green dress and looks out from a stone archway. The scene is set in a narrow, sunlit stone alleyway. The title 'BEYOND THE GHETTO GATES' is written in a large, dark red, serif font across the top. The author's name 'MICHELLE CAMERON' is in a smaller, dark red, serif font below the title. The words 'Book Club Guide' are in a large, black, serif font below the author's name. At the bottom left, a paragraph of text describes the guide's content.

BEYOND THE GHETTO GATES

A NOVEL BY

MICHELLE CAMERON

Book Club Guide

Your planning guide to a
book club event for
Beyond The Ghetto Gates, including
deleted scenes, fun food ideas, and more!

ABOUT THE NOVEL

When French troops occupy the Italian port city of Ancona, freeing the city's Jews from their repressive ghetto, two very different cultures collide. Mirelle, a young Jewish maiden, must choose between her duty—an arranged marriage to a wealthy Jewish merchant—and her love for a dashing French Catholic soldier. Meanwhile, Francesca, a devout Catholic, must decide if she will honor her marriage vows to an abusive and murderous husband when he enmeshes their family in the theft of a miracle portrait of the Madonna.

Set during the turbulent days of Napoleon Bonaparte's Italian campaign (1796–97), *Beyond the Ghetto Gates* is both a cautionary tale for our present moment, with its rising tide of anti-Semitism, and a story of hope—a reminder of a time in history when men and women of conflicting faiths were able to reconcile their prejudices in the face of a rapidly changing world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michelle Cameron is a director of The Writers Circle, an NJ-based organization that offers creative writing programs to kids and adults, and the author of works of historical fiction and poetry: *The Fruit of Her Hands: The Story of Shira of Ashkenaz* (Pocket, 2009), and *In the Shadow of the Globe* (Lit Pot Press, 2003).

Michelle lived in Israel for fifteen years (including three weeks in a bomb shelter during the Yom Kippur War) and served as an officer in the Israeli army teaching air force cadets technical English. She lives in New Jersey with her husband and has two grown sons of whom she is inordinately proud.

WHAT TO SERVE AT YOUR BOOK CLUB MEETING

Do you like matching your book club fare to the food served in the book? Here are some excerpts and a recipe that will help you serve up a suitable repast.

BREAD & CHEESE



BAGUETTES & FRENCH CHEESE, OF COURSE!

There are more than a thousand varieties of French cheese – including popular favorites Brie, Camembert, Boursin, and Blue d’Auvergne.

Bread and cheese were a lifesaver to the young soldiers of the French Army of Italy after days of deprivation:

Daniel’s pulse raced as the food carts rattled up. A cheer rose from the troops, and rumors flew through the ranks like wildfire. It seemed the new general had searched out the wagons before he arrived at camp and made sure the soldiers driving them knew where to go. There was enough food, the men exulted, to last at least a week.

“Small portions, men,” cried another officer, to boos and catcalls. He turned to the general. “Too much food after so many days’ privation will make them sick, sir.”

“Bread and cheese tonight, meat tomorrow!” the general ordered.

Daniel scrambled into line, eager to grab his small loaf of bread and cheese. After receiving his portion, he closed his eyes and muttered the prayer for bread, inhaling its fresh yeasty smell, along with the cheese’s sharp, pungent tang. Then he twisted off the crusty end and crammed it in his mouth. Nothing had ever tasted so good.

~From Chapter 2

ANCONA ORANGE CAKE



Ancona is known for a specific type of orange cake, once featured in *The New York Times* food section:

“... it wouldn’t be a party in Ancona without orange cake. I have a recipe I can give your cook.”

~From Chapter 45

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cups plus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour, plus flour for dusting the pan
- 3 eggs
- Grated peel of 3 oranges
- 4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) butter, softened to room temperature, plus butter for greasing the pan
- 1 cup plus 3 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons ouzo liqueur
- 1 tablespoon whole milk
- 2 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- 2 cups freshly squeezed orange juice, with 3 tablespoons sugar dissolved in it.

PREPARATION

1. Heat the oven to 350.
2. Put the flour, eggs, orange peel, 4 tablespoons softened butter, sugar and ouzo in a food processor, and run until all the ingredients are evenly amalgamated.
3. Add the milk and baking powder, and process again to incorporate into the mixture.
4. Thickly smear a tube pan with butter, and dust with flour. Put the cake mixture in the pan (it won’t fill it up all the way) and place the pan in the preheated oven. Bake for 40 to 45 minutes, until the top of the cake becomes a rich gold color.
5. When the cake is done, place the bottom of the pan over a tumbler or tall mug, using pot holders and push down to raise the loose bottom. Take the tube with the cake out of the hoop, work the cake loose from the bottom with a knife and lift it away from the tube. Place it on a plate with a slightly raised rim.
6. While the cake is still warm, poke many holes in it using a chopstick or any similar narrow tool. Into each of the holes, slowly pour some of the orange juice. At first the hole fills to the brim with juice, but this will subsequently — in about an hour — be absorbed by the cake. Serve at room temperature, with more orange juice drizzled over each slice.

TIP

You can keep the cake for up to 1 week in the refrigerator, fully covered by plastic wrap.

BISCOTTI



There is something quintessentially Italian about serving biscotti at any gathering. Also known as *cantucci*, these are Italian almond biscuits that are twice-baked and oblong-shaped. Dry and crunchy, they are the perfect cookie to dip into a cup of tea, coffee, or a glass of wine.

Biscotti crop up at least twice in *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*:

Anna entered, carrying a decanter of wine, crystal glasses, and a plate of almond biscotti.

~From Chapter 11

“Mirelle, you’re not a good friend to poor little Dolce,” Prudenzia scolded one morning as the ladies sat with Signor Morpurgo over coffee and biscotti. “You haven’t been to visit her in days! And with her feeling so poorly.”

Signor Morpurgo interrupted the strained silence. “Mirelle is right to stay away,” he said, calmly dipping his cookie in the coffee. “These are delicious, Pinina.”

~ From Chapter 36

LEARN MORE ABOUT...

Part of the fun of being a historical novelist is doing the research. Here are some of the facts that your book club may want to learn more about.



The Italian Campaign 1797-1799

NAPOLEON'S CAMPAIGN THROUGH ITALY

Revolutionary France was fighting wars on multiple fronts when the 27-year old General Bonaparte was dispatched to take command of the French Army of Italy. It is possible that no one expected his triumphant, whirlwind campaign against the Italians and the occupying forces of Austria:

The general was already accomplishing the goals set out for him by the Directory when he began the Italian campaign: wresting control of Austrian-ruled lands in Lombardy and severing the Sardinian-Austrian alliance. The young Republic feared reprisals from the Austrians for executing the French royal family, especially their native daughter, Marie Antoinette. By sending Bonaparte into Italy, they'd created a second front, crippling Austria's hold on their Italian possessions. Napoleon was also charged with preventing the pope from supporting the Republic's enemies. The French rampaged through Italy's cities like wildfire, staging lightning attacks against the Austrians, Bonaparte's unconventional tactics utterly confounding them.

~ From Chapter 7

In addition to the goal of setting up a diversionary front against the Austrians, Italy's wealth, including the artifacts and artwork in its monasteries and churches, tempted the Revolutionary French government to enrich its empty coffers. The lush Italian farmland gave rise to a famous Napoleonic saying: "the war must feed the war," and the looting of both valuable objects and of food was not only sanctioned but became the official policy of the French forces.

The Musee National ought to contain the most celebrated examples of all the arts, and you [General Bonaparte] will not neglect to enrich it with all that it may expect from the conquests of the future. This glorious campaign, while making it possible for the Republic to give peace to her enemies, should also repair the ravages of vandalism within herself and add to the brilliance of her military trophies with beneficent and consoling charms of the arts.

~ Order of the Directory, May 7, 1796



KETUBOT FROM ANCONA

(Ketubah is singular; Ketubot plural)



Ketubot (Jewish marriage contracts) have been used since biblical days, beginning when Abraham's servant asked Rebecca if she would marry Isaac and sealed the deal with a bride price of jewels and rich clothing. The earliest actual document was traced back to around 440 BCE, found in Egypt and written on papyrus. The text of the document has not changed much since then, guaranteeing the bride her marital rights – as well as financial recompense if the marriage failed.

One of the great surprises in writing *Beyond the Ghetto Gates* was discovering how important the city of Ancona was to the manufacture of ketubot. In fact, it turns out that the first illuminated ketubah was created there, and that the artists and scribes of this Italian port became the world leaders in ketubah creation and sale. Some of these

ketubot were so luxuriously appointed that the Jewish authorities had to establish a maximum permitted price.

Mirelle was used to ketubot of all types, decorated with flowers and intricate spirals, biblical heroes, medieval creatures, signs of the zodiac, and exotic animals. Colors ranged from vivid crimson and sapphire, rich violet, and deep emerald to lighter pastels—soft pinks and yellows, celadon green, and sky blue. Some took on a darker aspect: inky black backgrounds overlaid with lacey patterns bemusing the eye. Others were spare, the white vellum untouched, a single sprig of wildflowers, perhaps, or a simple scroll. But all encircled the same text, which read:

Be my wife according to the law of Moses and Israel. I will work, honor, feed, and support you in the custom of Jewish men, who work, honor, feed, and support their wives faithfully. I will give you the settlement of _____ as well as your food, clothing, necessities of life, and conjugal needs, according to the universal custom.

~From Chapter 1

One of the distinctive marks of the ketubot from Ancona was the pointed upper border, known as an “ogee arch.” This distinction made it possible for Michelle to easily identify examples of these ketubot in such far-flung exhibitions of Judaica in Toronto, Edinburgh, London, New York, and, of course, New Haven's Yale University.

THE MIRACLE PORTRAIT OF THE MADONNA



“REGINA DI TUTTI I SANTI”
Sacra immagine venerata nel Duomo di Ancona

In Ancona’s Romanesque Cattedrale San Ciriaco (the Cathedral of Saint Cyriacus), the Chapel of the Madonna in the north transept contains a sumptuous Baroque altar by Luigi Vanvitelli, built in 1739. Hanging there is a portrait of the Madonna which, according to eyewitness accounts, moved its head, wept and laughed. As chronicled in a Vatican investigation, the first instance of the “prodigy” – the term used by the Vatican to describe miracle art – was on June 25, 1706 and the first witnesses were Francesca and her daughter, Barbara:

“Mama.” Barbara tugged at her arm. “Look at the Madonna. Why is the painting doing that? Moving its eyes?”

Francesca opened her eyes. “Barbara,” she muttered, “hush—”

“But Mama,” the girl whined, her voice carrying through the high-ceilinged room. “Look!”

Unwillingly, Francesca turned her head toward the features of Our Lady Queen of All Saints, the image of the gold-crowned Mary, red dress peeking out of the folds of her blue mantle. This sweet face had graced Francesca’s growing years, blessed her marriage to Emilio, witnessed the christening of their daughter, the girl who was once again tugging at her sleeve and whispering, “Do you see, Mama?”

And then she did see it. Her body throbbed with shock as the Virgin’s downcast eyes looked directly at her and shed a single tear that fell from her right eye and trickled down her pale cheek.

~ From Chapter 10

When Bonaparte’s forces came to loot the cathedral, there is an anecdote that the general faced down the portrait – and was disturbed by what he saw:

“Your Lady wears a veritable treasure about her neck,” Bonaparte said. “While most of what we take is destined for France as war booty, I’ve heard of a local hospice in urgent need of funds. These gemstones can supply that.” He touched the necklace. “Think of the men and women who, nearing their final reward, will bless the residents of Ancona for giving up these precious—”

He stopped mid-sentence, his face drained of color. He drew in a deep breath and let the string of gems fall back against the Madonna’s chest. He grabbed an embroidered gold cloth from the lectern and dropped it so it completely hid the portrait.

“Everyone out! Now!” he cried, gripping the lectern with both hands, his knuckles white.

~ From Chapter 28

READ AN “OUTTAKE” FROM BEYOND THE GHETTO GATES

You have won battles without artillery, crossed rivers without bridges, made forced marches without shoes, and bivouacked without liquor and often without bread...only the soldiers of liberty could have endured what you endured. ~ Napoleon Bonaparte to the French Army of Italy

When Michelle was faced with cutting some 15,000 words from her original manuscript due to publisher constraints, she looked first for entire sections that could be deleted without affecting the plot. This required her to lose certain “darlings” – a writer’s phrase for well-loved writing that are extraneous to the plot.

One entire chapter was – to use a term of the day – guillotined from the story, despite being one of Michelle’s favorites. She’s delighted to resurrect it here:

Italy, 1796, Bonaparte’s Italian Campaign

After the conquest of Milan, some of the French soldiers, Daniel ben Isidore included, were rewarded for their willingness to tramp double-time from town to town, from battle to victory, with a fresh pair of boots.

The company was marched into the cobbler’s shop and the cobbler ordered, at musket point, to fashion them all new footwear. Every soldier in Daniel’s unit knew General Bonaparte’s motto, “The war must feed the war.” The general moved his men too quickly to rely on the supply line, so troops grew accustomed to foraging for food wherever they were. If that meant stealing chickens and eggs from a villager’s coop or taking possession of a wagon-load of freshly picked produce bound for the market, so be it.

Daniel had grown inured to the protests of the villagers forced to surrender their provisions for no pay. Having lived for too many months on an empty stomach, he no longer had qualms about appropriating food from the Italians. *Thou shalt not steal* would sometimes buzz in his head as he held a farmer at musket point, but he trained himself to ignore it. Survival now trumped every other feeling. But taking the boots felt different.

The little boy’s eyes would always haunt him. As the cobbler took the last scraps of his precious leather for their boots, his son, who couldn’t have been more than eight or nine, sat on a bench, a small miniature of his father’s, and watched solemnly. When Daniel took his turn on the cobbler’s stool, he handed the boy a peach, still warm from the spring sunshine, one of a pair that he’d plucked from an orchard just outside the city. The boy let the perfect piece of fruit drop to the floor with a thud.

“I don’t want it,” he muttered, hate glowing in his wide black eyes, the kind of hate that a little boy should not yet know.

Daniel’s Italian was better than most of the other men in his company. Somehow, he mastered language quicker than the rest. “It is *bella*. You take it. A gift from me.”

"I don't want it. We don't want you here." The boy manfully swallowed back tears before flinging himself from his stool and scrambling out the back door. Daniel watched as he ran straight to a woman, throwing himself against her apron, wracked by sobs. She surrounded him with comforting arms, casting a dark glare at the dim interior of the shop.

"I apologize for making your boy cry," Daniel told the cobbler, shifting uncomfortably.

The shoemaker, busy hammering rivets to fasten the sole of the boot to the soft leather upper, just shrugged. He kept his eyes lowered. Daniel wondered if he concealed a glimmer of his own hate under hooded lids.

Finally the cobbler spoke. "He is young. He doesn't understand that you won't kill us if we give you what you demand. His mama cried when I was ordered to make all the boots, knowing it would mean a hungry summer for us all. He didn't like seeing his mama cry."

Daniel didn't know what to say, so he sat in silence. The cobbler finished the second boot. "All done, *soldato*."

Daniel looked toward his officer, whose back was turned as he spoke to some of the other men. He could do nothing for the cobbler, but his heart yearned toward him and his family. He quickly slipped his hand into his pocket and brought out a few paoli. "For the boots, Signore," Daniel said.

The Italian shook his head. "I cannot..."

"For the boy, then," Daniel interrupted, anxious that he take and hide the silver before the officer turned around.

The cobbler quickly palmed the coins and slid them in a leather pouch that held some of his tools. "It is kind. Grazie."

But even so, every time he laced up the boots, Daniel remembered the hatred buried deep in the boy's black eyes.



INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

1. **What prompted you to write about this little known part of history?**

I love writing about periods of history that few people know about. It's been said that most Jews focus on their ancient past, ending with the Roman conquest, and then skip over much of the rest of their history until the pogroms of the 19th Century, the Holocaust, and finally, the establishment of the state of Israel. My first Jewish historical novel, *The Fruit of Her Hands*, focused on the rise of antisemitism during the Middle Ages. After the horrors of that novel, I went searching for that rare happy epoch of Jewish history – and found it with the story of Napoleon breaking down the ghetto gates. While Jews and non-Jews alike may know a good deal about Napoleon's conquest of Europe after he became Emperor, his rise to fame in Italy will be relatively new.

2. **Did anything surprise you when you were researching this period?**

I based the novel in the harbor city of Ancona, because I had learned (from Michael Goldfarb's *Emancipation*) that this was the first time Napoleon tore down the ghetto gates. As I continued researching, I was fascinated to learn that Ancona was the world leader in ketubah (illuminated Jewish marriage contract) creation. Clearly, my heroine's family had to be involved in ketubah making. Then, in continuing my research, I stumbled upon the story of the miracle Madonna in Ancona's cathedral – and the anecdote about Napoleon's extreme reaction to it. How could I possibly resist including that episode?

3. **What challenges do you face in writing historical novels for a 21st century readership?**

You need to balance the history – which you want to remain as accurate as you can make it – with the expectations of a 21st century reader. If you read historical novels written in the 19th and even 20th centuries, they are slower to get started, have far denser descriptions, and often rely on an omniscient narrator to help cover the wider scope that a historical novel often needs. I love those books but recognize I would severely limit my readership were I to write in that mode. So I read historical novels written by contemporary authors and learned from them how to move things along from the start, as well as to focus on the perspective of different characters to be able to encompass the full story.

In addition, Mirelle was not always as “feisty” as she ended up being. I always resist making my heroines proto-feminists, because that means they are not true to the age they live in. But they still need to “speak” to the women readers of today, who want to project themselves into the characters they root for. A passive heroine, though perhaps truer to the age, simply won't do.

4. **This book deals with Jewish characters and issues. What do you think a non-Jew would get from reading your novel?**

While the novel is set largely in a Jewish ghetto and I hope Jewish readers will embrace it, I don't believe it's limited to that audience. Just as I read and empathize with other cultures, I'm sure non-Jews will do the same. And, of course, I'm telling the story of a certain time and place which is not, in and of itself, merely a Jewish story. The conquest of Italy and the politics surrounding that; the religious response to the Enlightenment; the Catholic story of the miracle Madonna and the issues of faith it raises are all part of the wider tapestry of the novel.

Finally – and this is important to me – I've been careful to craft both positive and negative aspects of the characters, both Jewish and Gentile, who people the novel. Even the most villainous of characters has a reason for his deep-rooted antisemitic feelings. (Not that I'm condoning his actions...)

5. **Are there particular themes that unify your writing?**

As a secular Jew who can trace her ancestry back to several Chief Rabbis in Europe, culminating in a grandmother who was a Socialist Zionist, I've always been fascinated by the different flavors Judaism has taken on as a result of shifts in history. The temptations of assimilating versus the need to preserve our religious traditions is a common thread in my writing. In *The Fruit of Her Hands*, Shira contemplates how simpler life would be if she had been born a Catholic. In a yet unpublished novel about the Babylonian exile, my characters are challenged to remain true to their God when they have been vanquished and faced with the riches of Babylonia. In *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*, both Mirelle and Daniel see the advantages of assimilating into the wider culture, but recognize that, just perhaps, they are losing some part of their tradition and even soul by doing so.

In addition, my novels explore the roots of taught prejudice and whether one can overcome it through exposure to "the other." In *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*, Christophe's mother typifies someone who cannot transcend her early prejudice, and who tries to pass on her virulent antisemitism to her son. More specifically, the relationship between Francesca and Daniel allowed me to delve into this issue in all its complex messiness.

6. **How has the rise of antisemitism affected your work? Are you at all nervous about being singled out as being a Jewish writer?**

There's never been a more important time to write about Jewish culture than right now, as we see the resurgence of antisemitism in the US and in Europe. Our history has shown that we gain nothing by hiding our religious identity. While my primary objective in writing a novel is to present a story that engages and entertains rather than serving any ideological or educational purpose, *The Fruit of Her Hands* provoked readers to tell me that "I never knew that" about medieval Jewry. Perhaps the same will be true here.

As for nervousness, with alt-right and other attacks on Jewish institutions, it's a tough time to stand up and tour synagogues and Jewish community centers. But as a former officer in the IDF, no one's going to stop me from so doing.

7. You've been published by a small literary press, one of the big five, and now a hybrid press. What were the differences in your experience with all three?

It was never my intention to become what is now called a "hybrid author." I always wanted to be traditionally published and felt, when Pocket / Simon & Schuster accepted *The Fruit of Her Hands*, that I had accomplished that. But publishing is a strange beast, subject to market forces in a way that doesn't always support authors. That has certainly been my experience.

With Lit Pot Press, who published *In the Shadow of the Globe*, I knew what I was dealing with. My editor/publisher was clear that she had no distribution and no marketing beyond her own website. But I was a full participant in the creation of the verse novel, including working with an artist friend to create the interior and cover designs. It was a labor of love and, with lowered expectations of fame and fortune, I thoroughly enjoyed its trajectory.

Naturally, I was beyond thrilled when Pocket Books accepted *The Fruit of Her Hands* – and in many ways disappointed in how that turned out. Publishing during a recession year (2009) meant I was orphaned before the book hit the store shelves, leaving me without an advocate in the publishing house. The publisher didn't even bother to bring out a paperback, which would likely have made a difference to my sale numbers. But while I have regrets, I am also tremendously proud of that novel – and delighted to have the imprimatur of a major house on my work.

Publishing with She Writes Press, which operates like a traditional publisher with one major difference – that being my own financial investment in my novel – has thus far been the best of both worlds. There's greater transparency in the process than by the major publisher, and I've been much more involved in such aspects as cover design. However, they have the clout of their distribution and sales force. It's early days yet, but thus far, this has been my most satisfying publishing experience yet.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Like many girls of her time, Mirelle was raised to be wed to a wealthy suitor. Yet some Jewish women were allowed to work, particularly if their husbands were Talmudic scholars. Do you think Mirelle's parents – especially her mother – were justified in their expectations? Why or why not?
2. Do you think Mirelle's father should have given in to the rabbi's demand that she be forced out of the workshop? What could he have done instead?
3. Francesca's husband is abusive, brutal, prejudiced, and eventually murderous. Yet the Church and Catholic society dictate that she stay with him. What would you have done in Francesca's place?
4. Daniel is often uncomfortable as a soldier, particularly when it comes to taking food, looting wealthy artifacts, and, of course, killing enemy combatants. But he also yearns to be considered a hero. How does he reconcile this quandary? Do you agree with his rationalization?
5. Mirelle makes a promise to her brother to maintain her family legacy yet considers abandoning it out of love. How would you have handled this choice?
6. Both Mirelle and Daniel have to contend with the new sense of assimilation that the French Enlightenment brings them yet recognize that it can conflict with the traditions they've been brought up with. How do you deal with this issue in your own lives?
7. Do you feel Christophe's feelings for Mirelle were genuine? Why or why not?
8. Napoleon's reaction to the Madonna portrait is extreme. Mirelle and Daniel have their own explanations for why he was so affected by it. Do you agree with them, or do you have another possible reason?
9. Napoleon used the press to promote himself as France's great hero. How does the media today play a similar role for our politicians, no matter what your personal political leanings?
10. What do you make of Francesca and Daniel's relationship? Francesca was raised to despise Jews, yet she grows to trust and possibly even like the young Jewish soldier. Do you believe that getting to know someone personally can help overcome taught prejudice? Why or why not?
11. Dolce starts out as Mirelle's best friend – something which changes dramatically by the end of the novel. Was Dolce ever truly Mirelle's friend? Should Mirelle have confronted her earlier than she does?
12. Mirelle is pursued by two – possibly three – suitors. Who do you think she should have ended up with?