

NAPOLEON'S MIRAGE

A NOVEL

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

for *NAPOLEON'S MIRAGE* including
research notes, fun food ideas,
and more!

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About the Novel

More than a year has elapsed since the ghetto gates were destroyed and Ancona's Jewish community liberated by Napoleon's troops in *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*. Yet Mirelle is ostracized—by the community, her erstwhile best friend, and even her mother—and labeled a “ruined woman.” As her efforts to nurture her family's legacy are thwarted, she realizes she might have lost her last chance at love.

Meanwhile, Daniel, now a lieutenant in the French army, and Christophe, the man responsible for Mirelle's disgrace, set sail to an unknown destination with General Bonaparte's forces. There, Napoleon and his men face a harsh and unforgiving landscape and new, implacable enemies, and Daniel's faith in and loyalty to the commander he once worshiped are put to the test.

Epic and rich with well-researched detail, *NAPOLEON'S MIRAGE* is a novel of misguided ambition leading to brutal warfare, failures of cultural appropriation, and a military defeat that just may have changed the course of history.

About the Author



Michelle Cameron's *Babylon: A Novel of Jewish Captivity*, published by Wicked Son (2023), was a finalist in religious fiction in the 2024 Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

Beyond the Ghetto Gates, published by She Writes Press (2020), was awarded a Silver Medal in Historical Fiction by the Independent Book Publishers, won First Place/Best of Category for the Chanticleer Goethe Awards, and was a Foreword Indies finalist.

The Fruit of Her Hands, published by Simon & Schuster's Pocket Books (2009), is based on the author's thirteenth-century ancestor, Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg.

In the Shadow of the Globe, published by Lit Pot Press (2003). Named Shakespeare Theatre of NJ's 2003–2004 Winter Book Selection, it was performed at the Stella Adler Studio's Shakespeare Benefit, among other line readings and performances.

A director of The Writers Circle, Michelle teaches creative writing to children, teens, and adults in NJ and virtually. Living in Chatham, NJ, with her husband, Michelle 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 described in the book? Yes, of course the Middle Eastern setting suggests humus and pita, as well as baklava. But there is more in the novel than just those! Here are some excerpts and suggestions that will help you serve up a suitable repast.



Italian Pastries

Mirelle, despairing of Daniel, agrees to be betrothed to Jacopo, an ambitious young baker:

He outlined an ambitious tour – through Verona and Milan, down through Florence and Rome, each time mentioning a distinctive pastry he wanted to sample – sbrisolone, pantone, schiacciata Fiorentina, tartufo.

“Then we’ll head to Sicily, where the sfogliatelle are” – Jacopo kissed his fingers and let them fly, dramatically, into the air. “And from there, it’s a short boat trip to my island of Capri. You’ll love Capri, Mirelle!”

“A baker’s dream of a honeymoon,” Mirelle said.

~From Chapter 43, Ancona

Turkish Coffee

When Ethan was in Constantinople, his host served him this beverage:

Ethan sat cross-legged on a cushion, watching the stream of thick coffee being poured from the long-handed ibrik. The servant, kneeling before them, wielded the copper coffee pot with artistic flair, raising it almost shoulder level before tipping the aromatic liquid into two tiny porcelain cups.

~From Chapter 6, Constantinople



Sachleb



Both Ethan and al-Jarabti love this Middle Eastern drink, which can also be prepared as a pudding:

On his way back to the inn, Ethan stopped for a cool drink of sachleb. Having first sampled the orchid root drink in Constantinople, he'd acquired a fondness for it.

~From Chapter 24, Acre

Al-Jabarti includes it in a letter he sends to Haim Farhi:

And just today, having a cup of sachleb with Nasū Pasha, I heard that another officer, a dragoon, was accepted into the Coptic faith, chiefly doing so to marry the niece of al-Jawarti..

~From Chapter 39, Cairo

Learn More About...

Historical novelists love research. Here are some facts that your book club enjoy learning.

Why Did Napoleon Go to Egypt, Anyway?

It's certainly a confusing fact that Napoleon decided to head to Egypt rather than stay in Paris. One reason was that the current government, the Directory, considered him a political threat and so he was encouraged to stage a military expedition very far from the seat of power.

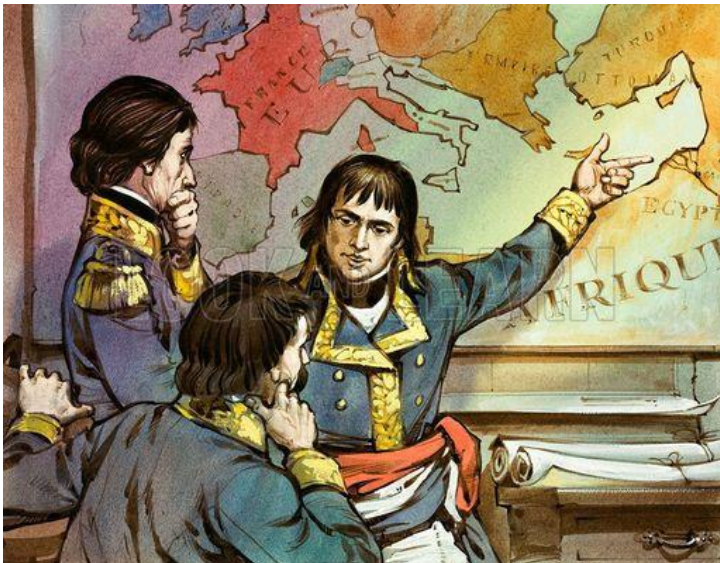
When Daniel wonders why they're heading to Egypt, his new friend, the artist Dominique-Vivant Denon, explains:

"Egypt?" Daniel asked Denon, confused. "Why Egypt, of all places?"

"It's a way of bedeviling the British," the artist explained as they stood on deck of *le Franklin*. "They think they control the entire Orient. We're going to show them otherwise." Denon swayed a little and caught hold of the railing as a swell pitched the frigate. "Certainly a better plan than attacking them head-on, which Bonaparte was ordered to do at first. I hear he spent some time in Calais and traveled up and down the coast. Upon returning from his reconnoiter, he told the Directory that they were crazed to think that the French could breach the island through Britain's naval defenses."

~Chapter 8, En Route to Egypt

But Napoleon himself has an even more detailed explanation for his officers once they reach Alexandria:



Bonaparte's eyes narrowed. "Do none of you see? Are you all that stupid?" He let out a long exhale before closing his eyes briefly, then started again. "Britain controls India and their valuable resources. Their exports from the East are the direct source of their wealth and strength as a nation – and are what allow them to invest in their military, especially the navy. They hold a monopoly over exports from India, shipping them through Egypt to England and other European countries. Through *Egypt*," he emphasized. "So what do you imagine would happen if we took this country. Blocked their trade? Weakened them in that way?"

The officers were suddenly paying close attention.

"And stopping the British won't only damage them but will strengthen the Republic."

~ Chapter 12, Alexandria

Did Napoleon Really Send Out a Proclamation to the Jews?

The big question of the book – namely, did Napoleon really issue a Proclamation to the Jews while in Egypt and Israel, offering support for the Jewish homeland – remains contentious. I experienced the controversy firsthand while attending a virtual panel at the Napoleonic Historical Society. During the Q&A, I revealed what I was writing next, and was astonished at the heat of the two historians who took either side of the question and debated it on the spot.

If it did in fact happen, here is the text Napoleon sent out:

Rightful heirs of Palestine!

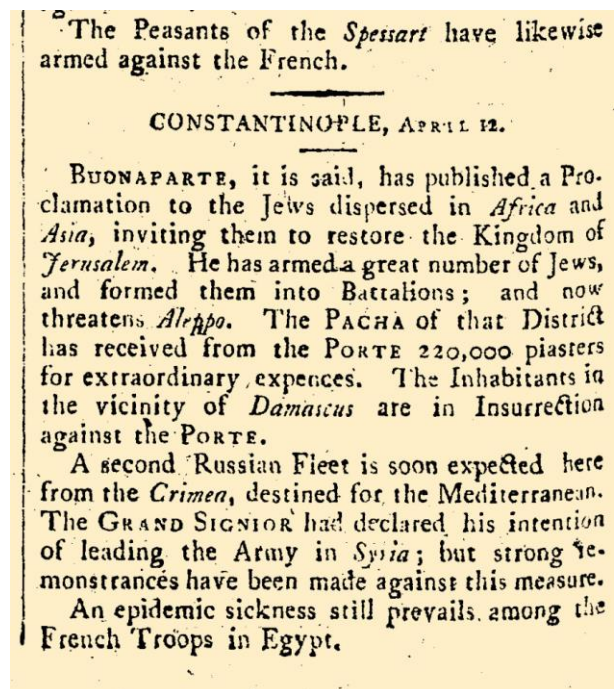
The great nation which does not trade in men and countries as did those which sold your ancestors unto all people (Joel, 4:6) herewith calls on you not indeed to conquer your patrimony; nay, only to take over that which has been conquered and, with that nation's warranty and support, to remain master of it to maintain it against all comers.

Arise! Show that the former overwhelming might of your oppressors has but repressed the courage of the descendants of those heroes whose alliance of brothers would have done honor even to Sparta and Rome (Maccabees 12, 15) but that the two thousand years of treatment as slaves have not succeeded in stifling it.

Hasten! Now is the moment, which may not return for thousands of years, to claim the restoration of civic rights among the population of the universe which had been shamefully withheld from you for thousands of years, your political existence as a nation among the nations, and the unlimited natural right to worship Jehovah in accordance with your faith, publicly and most probably forever (Joel 4:20).

Why the mystery? The fact is that very little proof that the text ever existed. – one in Germany, another in Turkey. Yet newspaper reports from France, England, and Germany all seemed to support that he actually did send one out.

As a writer of fiction, of course, I am free to imagine that Napoleon did send out his proclamation – and hope that some of my fictional solutions to why there is so little evidence of this will satisfy my readers if not the historians.



Who Were the Mamelukes?



The Mamelukes (alternate spellings: Mamluk or Mamaluk) were a warrior class of slave-soldiers. They were ethnically diverse, mainly from Turkey, the Caucasians, and Eastern and Southeastern Europe. As enslaved mercenaries, slave-soldiers, and freed slaves, they were assigned high-ranking military and administrative duties, serving the ruling Arab and Ottoman dynasties in the Muslim world.

Under the Mameluke Sultanate of Cairo, Mamelukes were purchased while still young males. They were raised in the barracks of the Citadel of Cairo. Because of their isolated social status, with no social ties or political affiliations, and their austere military training, their rulers trusted to their loyalty. When their training was completed, they were discharged, but remained attached to the patron who had purchased them. Mamelukes relied on the help of their patron for career advancement, and the patron's reputation and power depended on the success of his recruits.



By the period of *Napoleon's Mirage*, Mamelukes had grown powerful enough to, in effect, be the de facto rulers of Egypt.

In 1798, the ruling Directory of the Republic of France authorized a campaign in Egypt to protect French trade interests and undermine Britain's access to India, which was why Napoleon Bonaparte led the *Armée d'Orient* to Egypt. While Napoleon thought the sultan would welcome their attempt to wrest control of Egypt out of Mameluke hands, Directory Minister Talleyrand failed to notify the sultan as he had promised he would do.

The French defeated a Mameluke army in the Battle of the Pyramids and drove the survivors out to Upper Egypt. But upon learning of the French incursion, the sultan dispatched al-Jazzar to confront and defeat Napoleon – which he did in Acre.

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. In *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*, my readers were astonished to learn of Napoleon's liberating the Jews of Italy from their restrictive ghettos. His next adventure, heading to Egypt and Israel, is also largely unknown to readers, who picture him only as the general conquering his way through Europe. The possibility that he offered the Jews of Jerusalem a homeland there is still wildly contested by historians. What could be more fun to write about?

2. What was it like writing a sequel?

It's a balance between giving readers who didn't read *Beyond the Ghetto Gates* enough information so they wouldn't feel lost, while not giving so much that it would bore or irritate the readers of the previous novel. Not always easy! But among the advantages was that I knew the characters already so well – with a few new exceptions – so I could bypass a lot of the character analysis that is so critical to recognizing what they want and how they'd act in any given situation. And I really enjoyed the fact that I could draw on what I already knew about my characters to move their narrative arcs forward.

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 wide 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 way. So, I read historical novels written by contemporary authors and learned from them how to move events along quickly, focusing on the perspective of different characters to encompass the full story.

4. This book deals with Jewish characters and issues. What do you think someone who is not Jewish would get from reading your novel?

In fact, *Napoleon's Mirage* is probably the least Jewish novel that I have written. While certainly some of the characters are Jewish, the issues presented here are more about the evils of warfare, Napoleon's ego getting in his way, and his attempt to manipulate the Egyptians by pretending to be Muslim. It was also my first attempt to include a Muslim main character – and I was careful to engage an Egyptian Muslim sensitivity reader to avoid any foolish errors. In this novel, Napoleon did offer the Jews a homeland in Jerusalem in return for their support – but I do note in my Author's Note that this fact is still being hotly contested by historians.

5. What was the most difficult part of writing this novel?

I believe what I've written is an anti-war war novel. Both Napoleon and his opponents were both extremely cruel in how they treated their adversaries, including slaughter, wholesale pillage and even rape. These were grueling scenes to write, and I was careful to base them on reliable sources. They were a reliable depiction of war at this time, which made them no less gruesome.

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 a startling and frightening resurgence of antisemitism in the US and in Europe. Our history has shown that we gain nothing by hiding our religious identity. As for nervousness, with overt attacks on Jewish institutions, it's a frightening 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.

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

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 Books / Simon & Schuster accepted *The Fruit of Her Hands*, that I had accomplished that dream. But publishing is a strange beast, subject to market forces in a way that doesn't always support authors.

With Lit Pot Press, which 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*. However, 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 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.

As for *Wicked Son*, I was delighted to have picked up once more by a more traditional press, albeit a smaller one. With distribution back with my old publisher, Simon & Schuster, and with direct access to the publisher, who tells me he "loves" the novel, it was a wonderful experience.

Publishing with She Writes Press, which operates like a traditional publisher with one major difference – that being my own financial investment in my novel – was in many ways the best of both worlds. There's greater transparency in the process than with a 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. Working with them again on the sequel has been a joy.

Questions for Discussion

1. As was common during this time in history, when it became known that Mirelle had slept with a soldier without marrying him, her reputation was ruined. Clearly, our sensitivities are different now. What do you think Mirelle could have done to change her “ruined” status?
2. It is historic fact that Napoleon managed to conceal that he planned to invade Egypt from most of his troops – who were still eager to follow him – as well as the savants who had no idea where they were heading. Can you conceive of so many men blindly following a military leader today? Do you feel their loyalty was warranted? Was this blind faith in one man dangerous?
3. How could the outcome of Napoleon’s expedition have changed had Robespierre delivered on his promise to inform the sultan that the general was only seeking to free Egypt from the grip of the Mamelukes? Do you think the sultan would have accepted this excuse? Should Napoleon have heeded Ethan’s (fictional) warning that the sultan was not informed?
4. Napoleon is considered one of the world’s greatest military strategists and tacticians. Did his many mistakes in Egypt and Israel – marching through the desert with woolen uniforms and no water, for instance – change your mind about this assessment?
5. Napoleon’s own troops – including his general staff – were frustrated by his mistakes. Yet his charisma meant that he kept tight control of the expedition, despite the complaints he fielded. Daniel and Christophe differed greatly in their attitude toward the general as a result of these mistakes. If you had been a young officer in Napoleon’s army, how would you have reacted?
6. Al-Jabarti was actually a real-life person, and many of his thoughts about the French are contained in his *Chronicle of the French Occupation*. What did you think about this character? How much was he influenced by his own bias when it came to describing the French?
7. Napoleon, whose views on religion were primarily dictated by pragmatism and military expediency, tried to win over the Egyptians by pretending to be an adherent to Islam. Why wasn’t he successful?
8. Do you believe that Napoleon actually issued his Proclamation to the Jews? Historians differ fiercely on whether this actually happened or not. Do you think he sent out such a document? And do you believe he would have honored this proclamation if he had triumphed in Israel?
9. Napoleon, who admired Alexander the Great, wished to head to India after conquering Egypt, particularly to rob his enemy, the British, of that country’s riches. Clearly he did not succeed. How do you believe world history might have changed if he had?
10. In *Beyond the Ghetto Gates*, we have very little sympathy for Ancona’s rabbi. Has his attempts to help Mirelle in Napoleon’s Mirage changed your opinion about him?
11. Mirelle breaks her engagement to the baker, Jacopo, when she discovers that Daniel couldn’t respond to her letters due to the British blockade of French ships. What do you think about her treatment of him?
12. The fact that the British blockade prevented Daniel and Mirelle from corresponding had a huge impact on their relationship. In this day of email, texts, video chats, etc., this is almost inconceivable to modern readers. Did you ever experience a time when you could not communicate with someone?
13. Toward the end of the novel, Napoleon was willing to poison his plague-ridden troops and then abandoned the entire army to chase his political ambitions. Did these actions change your opinion about him?

Michelle loves to connect with readers.

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