

OLIVE DAYS

READING GROUP GUIDE

by Jessica Elisheva Emerson

About the Book

A smoldering debut novel about a young mother in an Orthodox Jewish community of Los Angeles whose quest for authenticity erupts in a passionate affair following a night of wife swapping

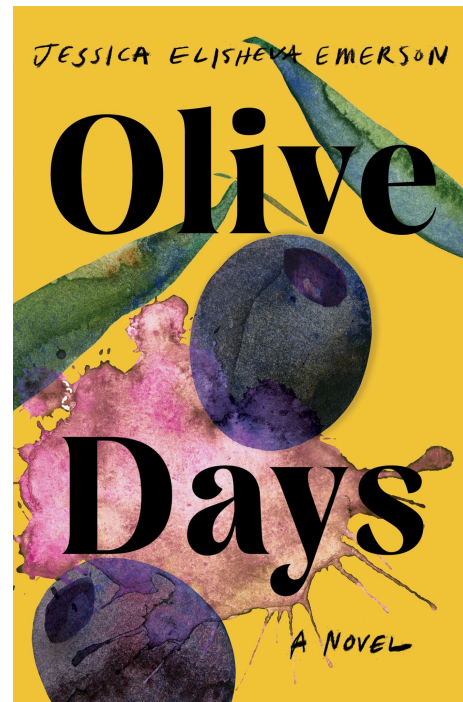
Rina Kirsch is a young mother and Modern Orthodox Jew in the Pico-Robertson neighborhood of Los Angeles. Dutifully keeping to the formidable expectations of a traditional household connects Rina with generations past and those to come. But a contradiction burns at her center: Rina is an atheist. She is also stymied in her life and marriage.

Hoping to reinvigorate their relationship, Rina's husband convinces her to partake in a night of wife swapping with other Orthodox couples. Rather than preserve her marriage, however, the swap plunges Rina down a heady path that begins with a rekindled passion for painting and culminates in an intoxicating affair with Will Ochoa, her married art teacher. Clandestine rendezvous and stolen moments of ardor awaken Rina to an existence beyond the confining parameters of tradition, offering a glimpse at the possible life she left behind in the olive groves of her youth. As the blush of erotic thrill comes into sharp contrast with the complications of living a secret life, Rina must decide if it's worth sacrificing everything she's ever known to fully inhabit the uncharted landscape unfolding before her, one where her needs take precedence.

About the Author

Jessica Elisheva Emerson is obsessed with cooking beans, growing food, eating pie, sleeping in on Shabbat, and working toward a better world. A Tucson native, Jessica spent twenty-two years in Los Angeles before returning to the Sonoran Desert, where she lives with her husband and children. Her stories and poems have been published in numerous journals, and she's a produced playwright.

“Effervescent. . . Emerson provides a fascinating picture of Rina’s commitments as a Modern Orthodox woman and goes deep into the psychological battle between her duty to uphold tradition and her life-affirming desire. The result is titillating and thought-provoking in equal measure.” —*Publishers Weekly*



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Discussion Questions

1. Do you think this book is primarily about the tension between duty and desire? Have you ever felt torn between them?
2. Why do you think the wife-swapping night changed so much for Rina?
3. Did this book change your perspective on current conversations about non-monogamy?
4. Why do you think marking the passage of time is so critical to Rina?
5. How much of Rina's conflict do you think was based in religion versus issues all mothers face?
6. Why do you think Rina was drawn to each man in the story? David, Anshel, Will?
7. How do you think Rina's changing beliefs animate the direction her life takes?
8. In the very beginning, Anshel comes to a realization that people, and not god, have mandated all the laws that govern his life. How does that theme show up throughout the book?
9. What role does Rina's art play in the story and her trajectory?
10. What role does food play in the story, and in what ways does food show up similarly or differently in your own life?
11. Why do you think it was important to be thrust into Will's point of view in the middle of the book? How did this change the narrative for you?
12. In what ways are Rina's and Will's exploration of identity similar? How are they different?
13. Rina is constantly surrounded by women but seems to have few central friendships with other women. How do you think this might impact her life?
14. How did Rina's life get pushed by her own decisions versus occurrences completely beyond her control?
15. Why do you think Rina made the choices she did in the end? What would you have done?