

# **BOOK CLUB IN A BOX**

## **Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for Lilian Nattel's novel The River Midnight**

Novel published by Alfred A. Knopf Canada, Toronto in 1999, by arrangement with Scribner, New York. ISBN: 0-676-97153-9

Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the hardcover edition of **The River Midnight**. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion for **The River Midnight** has been prepared and written by Marilyn Herbert, originator of Bookclub-in-a-Box. Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed., is a teacher, librarian, speaker and writer. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

### **Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for The River Midnight**

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Lilian Nattel's *The River Midnight*

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# BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX

## Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

### You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

## How to Begin

**Relax and look forward to enjoying your bookclub.**

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide's interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more 'hands-on' support, feel free to contact us. (See Contact Information)

## What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.

**INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.**

## **Do We Need to Agree?**

**THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.**

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group's alternative findings and experiences with us. You can respond on-line at our website or contact us through our Contact Information. We would love to hear from you.

## **Discussion Starters**

There are as many ways to begin a bookclub discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

Ask for people's impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)

- Identify a favorite or major character.
- Identify a favorite or major idea.
- Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (not necessarily from the novel)
- Discuss the historical information of the novel. (not applicable to all novels)
- If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
- Use the discussion topics and questions in the bookclub-in-a-box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

**Above All, Enjoy Yourself**

# **INTRODUCTION**

**Suggested Beginnings**

**Novel Quickline**

**Keys to the Novel**

**Author Information**

**Historical Background**

# INTRODUCTION

## Suggested Beginnings

1. Nattel's novel explores a time period in Jewish history not conventionally portrayed in books. Instead of writing about the Holocaust or the pogroms of the late 1800s, Nattel deliberately chooses to navigate a time period nestled in between these two tragic events; a time relatively free of violence and conflict.

**What is Nattel's purpose in doing this? How successful is she in achieving it?**

2. The role of women in Jewish society is a major topic of the novel. The book is evenly divided into three sections: "The Women", "The Men", and "Misha".

**How does Nattel portray the women, particularly the four "vilda hayas" (wild animals), and is her portrayal historically accurate? What is Nattel's purpose in dividing the book up like this? What is her point about the role of women and their freedoms in Jewish society of the times?**

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3. In literature and film, the shtetl is often seen through rose-colored glasses. Nattel shows that many of the controversial issues (e.g. homosexuality, censorship) facing society today were present even in the shtetl.

**Does this information surprise you? Consider Nattel's book in relation to other presentations of the shtetl that you have come across.**

4. Protection of the most vulnerable members of society and strangers is an important concept in Judaism.

**Given this, what would you make of the treatment of strangers, such as the Golem Players, in contrast with those on the margins of society like Alta Fruma and Riva?**

5. Misha is an intriguing character. She flouts social conventions, holds the secrets of many, and her skills are unique. She is also the only character to have her own section in the novel.

**Discuss Misha and her role in the novel.**

6. The novel is divided into sections, each told through a different perspective. As a result, the same incident is repeated more than once.

**Consider the effect of such repetition on the reading experience of this story.**

## Novel Quickline

The novel revolves largely around the friendship of four women – the vilda hayas – who are born and raised in the shtetl. Their friendship is the metaphorical marketplace of the shtetl where everyone interacts and everything comes together in a central location. The individual characters we meet represent the diverse qualities and attributes of this particular segment of Jewish life. With solid research, Nattel has opened a window into Jewish history at a particular time, in a specific location.

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Nattel portrays a period of time in history that is nestled between tragic events. By using the fictional population of Blaszkza, set more or less peacefully on the fictional River Polocna, Nattel gives us a kind of day-to-day diary which includes information about the shtetl inhabitants: their roles and positions; what they did for entertainment; what they ate; who they loved, how they got along; how they embodied Jewish values and traditions, and how they functioned within a non-Jewish setting. In short, this book offers a slice of Jewish life not overshadowed by the Holocaust.

## Keys to the Novel

### The “River Midnight”

- It lies at the transition point – the midnight – of two centuries. It is the pivotal point between the old life and the new.
- The river, a symbol of the fluidity of time, represents Nattel’s ability to sweep the reader into both the past and the future from the vantage point of the present.
- The river is a purifying and soothing source, a keeper of secrets.
- The river signifies the continuity and connection of Jewish history to the river of life.

### Characters

- Each character represents a different social role and position found in the shtetl (e.g. water carrier, midwife, baker).





**Thanks for previewing this  
Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.**

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print or PDF format, just visit:**

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