

Wiseman, Eva. *The Last Song*. Toronto, ON: Tundra Books, 2012. Print.

Set in Inquisition-era Spain, Wiseman tells us the story of Isabel, a young woman about to be married to a villainous young man from a wealthy and well-established Catholic family. Isabel has lived a life of privilege in the historically tolerant Spain until, in the late 15th Century, the monarchy embraces Catholicism and seeks to eradicate all other religions by any means necessary. As the Inquisition, led by the truly evil Torquemada, storms into Toledo, Isabel thinks she is impervious to the violence she passively witnesses on the streets, believing her family to be devoutly Catholic. In an unsurprising twist, we discover that Isabel's family has converted to Catholicism from Judaism, yet surreptitiously practices their faith. Isabel does not have the crisis of conscience that one might expect, and begins to adopt Judaism immediately. Disguised as a boy, she sneaks into the Juderia to attend Torah classes and learn about the religion she previously scorned. Although the theme of self-discovery would generally welcome such dedication, it is not written in such a way that it is compelling or believable. As her malicious fiancée, Luis seeks to destroy her family and family friends begin to abandon them, Isabel and her parents search for a means of survival in a town torn apart by hate, greed, and ignorance.

The characters, even the protagonist, are static with minimal development. The majority of the Catholics are depicted as cold and heartless, while the Jews are kind and generous. Although one might assume that people in Spain were, at the time, terrified of being falsely accused of punishable crimes and therefore were predominately on the offensive, this was not explained in the book and someone unfamiliar with the time period may not arrive at those conclusions. Isabel has the potential to be a truly great protagonist, yet she falls flat.

I appreciate Wiseman's ability to build tension, however a series of contrived coincidences underpins the plot. The story tackles a brutal historical period, but does so only superficially. It gently introduces the reader to the Inquisition and to dealing with blind hate, but does not delve into the depths of the animosity that tore apart 800 years of peace. The root of the issue is barely addressed, and not in any meaningful way.

An opportunity to raise awareness about this incredibly significant and tragic time was lost. After reading Wiseman's previous novel, *Puppet*, I expected more from this book. It held so much promise, but failed to deliver.

I would recommend this novel for early teens interested as a safe introduction into the Inquisition and the history of Judaism in Europe.

Recommended with reservations: 2 out of 4 stars

Reviewer: Jorden Smith