

★ **A Fool's Kabbalah**

Steve Stern

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Steve Stern's *A Fool's Kabbalah* is a crushing, startling novel about intellectual and spiritual defiance in the face of unbearable cruelties.

On a scholarly scavenging expedition through Europe, famed kabbalist Gershom Scholem gathers the textual detritus of his ruined community. With each stop to gather such scattered light, his belief he'll be able to refill the broken vessels of Jewish lore diminishes. Each recalcitrant city and skeletal town he enters is cause for deeper grief—or greater nihilism.

In Gershom's not-so-distant past, Menke, his shtetl's jokester, returns home to care for his mother, bringing with him desperate news of what's happening to Jews beyond their town. Few believe him, though. By the time his neighbors realize "their peril, the borders were closed, visas were no longer available." When Gershom arrives in the same place later, "the negative space they'd once inhabited [threatens] to swallow him up." From the town's remnants he rescues a mysterious volume, once used by the rabbi to call forth the messiah; the incantations on its pages can't reach him, though.

Set before and after a time when "cruelty was now a virtue, kindness a sin" and written in the cynical poetry of the sages, the novel is variously heartbreaking and dazzling. Menke's fate seems certain from the first; whether Gershom will be able to recover from the horror of the ashes remains in question. And while Menke hopes to draw comedy from the tragedy he's living through, Gershom, overwhelmed, loses his ability to see evidence of occult miracles at work. Delicate waifs and innocence crumble in the face of banal brutalities—but still, some light creeps through.

A Fool's Kabbalah is a powerful historical novel about the kinds of communal wounds that even mystics struggle to soothe.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (January / February 2025)

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