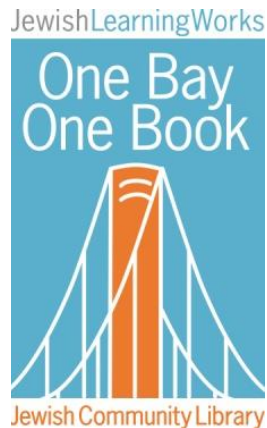
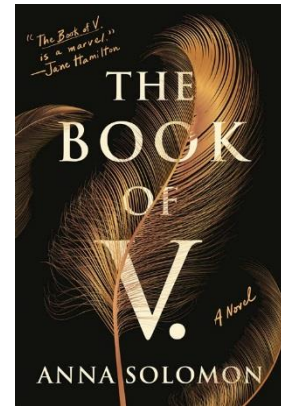


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Discussion Questions for Anna Solomon's *The Book of V.*



This guide offers things to think about when discussing Anna Solomon's *The Book of V.*, along with text citations and suggested questions.

Vashti's Legacy

For much of the novel Vashti is the oft-mentioned but unseen figure of Jewish text and lore. In the Book of Esther, Vashti appears as the original queen of King Ahasuerus who refuses the King's command to appear before him and all of the men of Shushan in her crown, and is banished as a result. Many interpreters, including Anna Solomon, read the text to mean that Vashti was asked to appear "[in nothing but] her crown." Some think she was banished, others think she was killed. In rabbinic texts, Vashti, a non-Jew, has often been scorned. But in some Jewish communities today as well as in other communities, Vashti has been seen as a heroine for her courage and fortitude in standing up to the king of Persia. Through the character of Vee in the 1970s, as well as of the original Vashti of ancient Persia, *The Book of V.* takes the reader through some explorations of what Vashti's circumstances, royal conundrum, and fate might have looked like.

"I think she knew everything," [Esther] whispers. "She knew he wanted her naked and she knew what would happen if she refused. She refused anyway. She got away. We're going to get away, too." (57)

Why do you think Esther takes this stance about what Vashti did or did not know? Given that she does not yet know what has happened to Vashti, why do you think she

assumes that the banished queen “got away?” Which other characters in the novel “got away?”

You thought she was Esther?

You wanted her to be Esther.

Oh. But that’s not possible. The queen and her child - soon to be children - can’t leave the palace. Only in a fantasy, a farce, could they be allowed another fate: return heroic, save the people, destroy the villain, etc. Happy coincidence, vengeance, reversal, rejoicing. There will be a story like that, but this isn’t the one.

She is Vashti. (234)

Why does the author tease her readers about wanting Esther to be the one who escapes? Why would we want or expect that? What does this passage tell us about the Book of Esther and the story as that text tells it?

Esther’s Legacy

Queen Esther has been valorized by many Jews around the world for centuries. She has been seen as the pinnacle of feminine strength and of modesty and humility. In *The Book of V.*, Anna Solomon both adopts and challenges some of these assumptions about Esther.

Not until this moment, in Kyla’s kitchen, did Lily connect what happened that night with the pageant in the Purim story, let alone see how neatly she and Adam and Vira fit into their respective roles. Had it been so strange, and so obvious, that they simply couldn’t see it? Lily had never been Eve, not even for a second. She had entered as Esther—in her plain hat, like the plain ribbon—and stayed Esther. The second wife. (79)

What do you think Lily means when she says she had always been Esther? What character traits and conditions might she be referring to?

Vashti and Esther

In the Book of Esther the two queens—Vashti and Esther—never meet and are treated as oppositional figures in Jewish lore. In Anna Solomon’s retelling, they not only meet but bond and come to support one another. In both tellings of the story, Vashti and Esther are each empowered in different ways.

Then there were people arguing over which woman was really the heroine of the story: Esther saved her people, sure, but wasn’t she a coward first, and before that a concubine? Hadn’t Vashti, not through outright revolt but simply by saying no, been a pioneer, standing out as *a sublime representative of self-centered womanhood*? But Esther, someone else argued, was the epitome of virtue; when

the king made his advances, she was passive, *like the ground*. No, argued someone else, Esther was not frigid, she had used her feminine wiles to curry favor with the eunuch Baraz and rise to queen and save her people and she had been right to do so. She had done what she had to do, just as Vashti had done what she had to do. Esther simply had better luck because she was a Jew and it was a story meant to make Jews feel good! She was like Judith, except that in Esther's case she got a lot of help from Mordecai. It was too bad, someone else argued, that Mordecai had to play such a big role. As for Vashti, wasn't she less a character than an absence? Wasn't it her absence that made the story possible? (p. 293)

How are the two characters different? Which character do you identify with more, and why?

Relationships Between Women

Vee and Lily each struggle with an internal conflict regarding the women they choose to associate with and befriend. In Lily's case, her regular group of friends and the "fancy" Park Slope women feel like they're from two different worlds, and Lily can't help judging each of these groups. But being helped by Kyla at the sewing party has a strong effect on Lily and her judgment:

Lily is sorry for her snarkiness. She is embarrassed, as her back relaxes into Kyla's stomach, at what she suddenly understands to be true: that although her friends, if they could see Lily in this moment, would crack a joke, every one of them would in fact like to be in Lily's spot. They tell themselves they don't care about being good homemakers. But they peek around each other's apartments just the same, commenting on how one person seems never to have any toys on her living-room floor, or how another has managed to put together nonvirtual family photo albums, or how another always manages to buy useful things like that magnetic calendar on her fridge or that cord organizer on her counter. They keep their tone flat, as if they aren't praising but merely observing, and then they move on to other subjects deemed more worthwhile, husbands or politics or the careers they've put on hold. It's in this way that they are different from Kyla's women, after all: not in their actual behavior—for they have all chosen to prioritize their children at this point in their lives, to "embrace" (that word, so redolent with resistance!) motherhood—but in their attitude. (73)

Why is Lily judging herself and the women at the party, and why is she embarrassed? What tension is raised in Lily's admission that her friends would all like to be in her spot? What does Lily's understanding of her friends' interactions tell us about these relationships?

For Vee, the [consciousness raising](#) or women's liberation group that she has been attending seems to be at odds with the wives of politicians that she entertains at her party:

[T]he women's-group women will be gathering soon with their hard embraces. There will be none of this restrained smiling, no lacquered hair or painful shoes or chit-chat, just a headlong launch into self-realization. If Vee were there, they would applaud her button flushing and cringe as she described the women at her party. (59)

This is where she belongs, she thinks, not among the women's-group women with their circle talk and their red wine and unmade faces. They seem impossibly distant to her in the moment, as gauzy to her as their skirts, as ineffectual as their marijuana. Ugly, too...Look at them now, wiggling at odd moments to the music and yelling to be heard. They are dazzling, these wives of politicians and company presidents, these tigresses who openly disagree with each other. They don't protect each other's feelings or pretend they don't love their power, their direct means of manipulating the leaders of the free world. Vee's grandmother was a governor's wife and her mother was a senator's wife and Vee is a senator's wife. Why should she think she might be anything else? She drifts from one argument to another, stirred to a smoke-swirled paroxysm of pride and satisfaction, thinking, perhaps aloud, Look at these women! They are not cross-legged on couches talking about liberation. They are already liberated, and she is one of them. (61)

At the party, Vee goes from wishing she were at the women's group meeting to disdaining them and their feminism. She relishes in the power she is now noticing in the wives of the politicians and company presidents, and imagines that that power is indicative of their liberation.

Given what happens before the party, on the kitchen floor, and what happens next—Alex's request of Vee and Vee's refusal and banishment—how do you think the reader is meant to understand this line: "They are already liberated, and she is one of them"?

In the description of the Kents' party published in *The National Enquirer* (119-20), the other women at the event essentially throw Vee under the bus. *How do you understand their responses?*

In Esther's time, there is also both friendship and antagonism between the women who have been brought to the night station to be prepared to be called for by the king:

They hide, they steal, they sabotage one another. They also braid each other's hair, and take turns putting on finger-shadow plays about the king and Queen Vashti, and make each other laugh. They have to, or they'll go crazy. Another Old Story. They have to despise and depend on each other. (51)

What is it that forces the women at the night station to both despise and depend on each other? How does being in competition to be chosen as Queen impact these relationships?

Later, when Esther is Queen, she struggles to bridge the gap between her and Lara:

Esther fought off tears. Why had she started with an accusation? She did not want Lara to hate her. She didn't want to go back to her chambers, alone, to sit upright through dinner, playing queen. What she wanted, she realized, what she wanted almost as much as she wanted Lara to help her bring a message to the camp, was for Lara to lie down with her like they used to, when they were still waiting. Lara's smell was as it had been, eucalyptus and salt. Esther would lie behind Lara and scratch her back, and then Lara would lie behind Esther and do the same, and all the while they would trade stories, until one of them fell asleep or got called off to some useless task. Esther's longing for this closeness was almost embarrassing in its intensity, as bodily as thirst or hunger. But what could she do? It was Lara who had spurned her, not the other way around. It would have to be Lara who came forward. In the absence of that, Esther would have to act as if she didn't care. (151–2)

Esther imagines that her relationship with Lara is different, since she believes that neither of them wants to be queen and that all they both want is to be released. *Given Lara's betrayals—first as she appears at the pageant and later as it's revealed that she was the one who had erased Esther's tally of days—how are we to understand her relationship with Esther and Esther's own perspective on that relationship? Why doesn't the relationship endure?*

Sexual Violence

Three of the female protagonists in *The Book of V.*, as well as other characters, are forced to contend with unwanted sexual attention from multiple sources. The ways in which they cope with and understand these situations mirror each other across time and geography.

In one of the first scenes in which we meet Vee, we find Vee being coerced into intercourse with her spouse, Alex, against her wishes, and conflicted about her desires vis-a-vis the incident as it is happening.

...she says, 'Let's reconvene tonight,' but already Alex is inside her, and she doesn't fight him, not because within her in some squishy feminine core she is all right with having a baby (she isn't) and not because she knows her fighting him wouldn't matter (spousal rape—if that's even what this is—being legal in those days) but because his not listening to her, his force, turns her on. She will hate herself for this fact as soon as it's over. She will think how ashamed she would be to admit such a thing to the women's group she has been attending once a month. (11)

What do you think is happening in this scene? Is it, in fact, spousal rape? If so, why does the author treat Vee's narrative as she does? Why does Vee feel ashamed about the fact that Alex's aggression turns her on?

Later, the wife of the “suitcase man” approaches Vee at the party and tells her about their distaste for Alex:

She has no idea what the woman is so hung up about. *Not a gentleman...*Vee doubts it's anything he hasn't done to her. If she isn't always willing, she usually gets into it. (67)

Given what you already know about Alex and Vee's relationship, how do you interpret Vee's assumptions about what he may or may not have done to Diane Fiorelli?

“The women at the Jewish consciousness raising group—clearly Philip cannot say *consciousness raising*—loved Vee because Rosemary, without asking Vee's permission, told them Vee's story, the same story the two friends had still not discussed in any detail, and one of the women said, My goodness, you're Vashti! And all the others oohed and aahed. Apparently Vee was living the story of some queen banished a million years ago in ancient Persia. But Vee did not know or care about any of this and was peeved that Rosemary had offered up her story. (205)

Why is Vee upset that Rosemary told her story at the group without asking her first? What chord does Vee's story (as told by Rosemary) strike for the group members? How is the story different for Vee?

Meanwhile, in ancient Persia, Esther's uncle, Marduk, objectifies and lusts after her.

...He cannot allow himself to be alone with her. She is seventeen. She is Marduk's niece, left in his care when his brother died, and she is the source of Marduk's holiest anger, the frustration that heats his blood until it hurts. Her name is Esther. (16)

Marduk thinks of selling her into slavery. He thinks of killing her. He loves his niece, he hates her. He loved his brother, he hated his brother...Marduk cannot kill his brother's daughter, and he cannot sell her into slavery. He can't even climb on top of her, though he knows most other men would. He is a good man, Marduk. This is what his wife says to his children when they run from his flexed palm. And he is. How could a man who was not good grow such sweet, perfectly formed fruit? (17)

Why is Marduk considered a “good man?” What is the bar for that consideration? If he is not a good man, what kind of man is he? How does Esther being given to the pageant “save” Marduk? Is it different—for Esther—from being sold into slavery?

[The minister] traps her in corners. He pretends to whisper in her ear, then licks. Once, under the table at a banquet, he drew the king's golden scepter—a thing she had never seen the king so much as touch—up under her robes until its tip

arrived at her entry point. After that he decided anytime she was brought before the king, the king had to point the scepter at her before she could approach. And now the king does this. (196)

She teaches the minister. He does not touch her during their lessons, a pleasant fact she understands has nothing to do with humility; he is simply unexcited by the prospect of molesting her without the king present. (220)

When we first meet Vashti in the novel, she has been living underground for three years, waiting for her opportunity to escape.

Early on, when she was first trapped, it was true that she thought nonstop. Her thoughts made a frantic loop of regret and fury as she flailed and scratched at the walls: *should have done what he wanted; should have spit in his face; should have killed herself; should have turned the guards on Ahasuerus; should have done what he wanted...* She knocked her head against her walls. Her thoughts would have destroyed her if she had not shut them down. She shut them down. (235)

What do you make of Vashti's litany of "should haves"? Why does Vashti experience so much regret, self-blame, and pain? What is her solution to that "madness" that she experiences?

Power and Privilege

Both the Book of Esther and *The Book of V.* have much to say about the varieties of power one may or may not experience, and how power can be gained and lost.

He could not unbest her. He could not unshame himself. Knowing this made her feel weaker—a softness for him knotted in her breastbone—and also more powerful, because she understood that he was weak, too. (157)

Esther both draws power and feels weaker because of the incident in which she was able to transform herself into a beast. How do you understand this dichotomy? What is it that makes her feel softer towards the King? What does it mean for them to both be weak?

She shouldn't be surprised anymore by the power she lost when she went from being a night-station girl to being queen. Esther has been low, too. She knows being low can make a person righteous, and if righteousness isn't power exactly, it's power's kin. (162)

What does Esther mean by "the power she lost" by becoming Queen? What is the relationship between power and righteousness that she is describing? Do you agree with her; why or why not?

Later, Esther makes explicit her feelings about her captivity and those responsible for it:

What she doesn't understand is keeping a thing that you know wants to escape. Keeping it, dressing it, feeding it, praising it, and all the while, you know it doesn't want you. It seems to her it would be a great humiliation. (194)

What does this passage tell us about Esther's views on the powerful?

Gender Dynamics and Role Expectations

In her mid-forties, with two young girls, Lily turns down a position as a professor at Grinnell College, her alma mater, and finds herself as a stay-at-home mom in Park Slope, Brooklyn, feeling ambivalent about her role.

Lily and Adam have discussed her going back to work. But their conversations always circle back to the same grim reality: adjunct teaching—and adjunct is all she'll get within a hundred miles of New York City—barely pays enough to cover childcare. (33)

Lily's unhappiness with her situation and her perceived failures in her role cause her to keep going back to the fact that she believes Adam to be a good man:

Every day, it becomes clearer that most men are pure dick; they're selling ten-year-old girls and stealing and raping even younger girls and drugging women and reaching their hands up women's skirts and tugging on choir boys and forcing people to look at their stuff, which makes Adam, in comparison, a very good man. If, for instance, Lily and June wind up thirty minutes late to pick up Ro today, and owe twenty-five dollars, and Lily were to tell Adam, Adam would tell her to get her shit together, but then, because he does not want to be a man who says things like that to his wife, he would kiss her and insist he's happy, because she's happy. This was the plan, he likes to say. Enjoy this time. Enjoy the girls.

Enjoy me.

This last bit he never speaks aloud, but the sentiment oozes from him, his longing for Lily to be not only present but satisfied. His first wife, Vira, was neither...She didn't want children. She didn't want, he says in summary, or used to say, when he spoke openly of Vira: *She didn't want to be a wife.* (35)

How do you feel about Lily's generalization about what "most men" are like? What does it say about her relationship with Adam that this is the comparison through which she views him? Why do you think she prefaces her assertion of Adam's goodness that way?

What do you think Lily means when she says that the sentiment "enjoy me" oozes from Adam? How does Lily feel about Adam's desire for her to embrace her role as a stay-at-home parent? What would it mean for Lily to be "not only present but satisfied?" What

does it mean—to each of them—for Lily to be a wife and mother, and how does that compare or contrast with Adam’s responsibilities?

Ruth is saying: “The way [Adam] looks at her—it took my breath away. Same way I felt when I saw him hold her after she was born”...Her mother’s sappiness is grating and worrisome—since when does Ruth use phrases like took my breath away? Since when does she reminisce in plaintive tones? Lily is certain now that her mother is dying. “You do realize that’s setting the bar pretty low,” she says. “No one has ever looked at a woman holding her baby in a loving way and said, *What a good mother!* You never said to me, *The way you look at your daughters just takes my breath away.*” (171)

How does Lily feel about her mother’s comment? Why is Ruth’s sappiness worrisome to Lily? How does it lead Lily to conclude that her mother is dying?

[Ruth] has told Lily the dresses are a torture device she’s invented for herself, that she should give up, use scarves, buy something online. And yet, without a hint of apology, she casually mentions she can sew?...Lily is mortified...she cannot imagine accepting help from Ruth. (166)

How does Lily respond to her mother’s mention of her ability to sew, and why does she respond this way? Why do you think it’s so hard for her to imagine accepting help from her mother?

As her mother is in the process of dying from cancer, Lily muses to herself about the complexities of her mother’s identity and life choices:

Why should it surprise her, Lily thinks, that Ruth used to sew? She lived in that house for decades; she’d lived there before Lily was even born. The woman Lily has imagined to be her mother is the one who came after her father: the woman smoking in those short shorts, and then in her long skirts; the woman who pushed her way into the inner circles of the local synagogue until she’d forced a shift toward egalitarian language in the prayers; the woman who for a time brought a book called *Let’s Talk!* To the breakfast table and tried to engage her children in frank discussion about their bodies; the woman who drove south to beg Lily not to give up her work. Yet even that woman was in the kitchen each day when her kids got home from school. She never worked a paying job. She was a woman who could not tell her parents that she was the one who had chosen divorce. (174)

What is Lily noticing about her mother? How do you think she is trying to understand her? Do these various parts of Ruth in fact conflict with each other?

Ruth’s illness also prompts Lily to reevaluate her relationship with her late father just as she tries to understand her mother in new ways:

...she remembers the sensation of being with him; she remembers feeling when she was with him that authority existed, that whether she liked it or agreed with it it would continue to exert and produce itself. She remembers feeling comforted by this. She can see now that this feeling was a delusion, an internalization of the patriarchy, or perhaps the patriarchy itself, but that doesn't change the fact that she still thinks of her philandering father, dead for a quarter of a century, as a comfort. (164-5)

How would you describe Lily's understanding of and relationship with the figure cast by her father? How does it seem to be changing?

[Her father and grandfather] could not comfort Bee, like her mother or her grandmother, but neither did they become real to her in the way her mother and grandmother did. The women's realness came with a cost; it made them impossible not to hate, in a way—their comforting and combing and correcting, their bodies and hair always near. The men never got close enough to ruin the illusion of their omnipotence—they were immortal, somehow, even in death. (178-9)

How have Lily's relationships with her father and grandfather differed from those with her mother and grandmother? What does she mean when she says that the women's realness "made them impossible not to hate?"

"With those tennis balls," she says. "I should never have done that. It was cruel of me. He was right to be angry."

"But you said he didn't try to stop you."

"That wasn't how a man like your father got angry."

"How did he get angry?"

"He slept with other women." (172)

"You should know that your father didn't leave. I kicked him out."

Lily thinks of Adam and Vira, and the fact that they fought not only about whatever they fought about but also about whether she left or he kicked her out. Does it matter? The result is the same. Lily's father is gone. Vira is gone. She wonders if her mother is trying to assure her in some way, or to warn her. Or maybe it's not about Lily at all. Maybe she just wants her to know. *This was something I did.* (173)

What does Ruth's confession about the tennis balls tell us about her and her marriage? How do you understand Ruth's explanation of her ex-husband's anger? How does Lily understand her mother's revelation?

Second wave feminism

Vee has found a doctor willing to keep her name to himself and refill her prescription for the Pill, which seems to her now, though she is not currently

having sex, as critical as food and water—like her own private armor. The library book [*Our Bodies, Ourselves*] agrees. The library book—which she couldn't check out; it was reference, and besides, she wouldn't dare be seen reading it; even in the library she had read it tucked inside a large dictionary—quotes a handbook that calls the Pill “the first drug to weaken male society's control over women.” (180)

How does the Pill serve as Vee's “own private armor?” What do you make of her fear of being seen with Our Bodies, Ourselves? In what way was the Pill “the first drug to weaken male society's control over women?” How have things changed—or not—since then?

Identity and Agency

Lily and Vee struggle to formulate a sense of themselves as individuals, apart from their expected roles.

The struggle is evident in Vee's response to the news that her husband wants her to return to their marriage:

Why not? This relieved part of her asks. Why not go back? Why not shrug it all off, as she might have done in the first place, go along with his request and get back to her life? This would be in keeping with a string of things she has argued to herself before: If she had stripped that night, it would not have killed her. She would still be in her marriage. She would not be so confused. Maybe they assumed she would do it because it was what she should have done...

She can't go back, she knows. She couldn't go along and she can't go back. Yet she wants to be able to. This is the problem. It's as if Vee herself—who Vee is, at her core, what her father and grandfather would have called her *character*, if she had been male—has not caught up with the life she's meant to live. She has always had questions, granted, niggles of ambivalence that kept her from being as good as Rosemary or her mother: her little secret with the Pill, her women's-group habit. But she never wanted to cause trouble. (185-6)

What forms do the struggles to take control of their own lives take for Vee, Rosemary, and Lily?

Care for oneself and others

All three of the female protagonists struggle to balance their own needs with the needs of those close to them: spouses, friends, children, and parents. Lily's mother says to her as she is dying:

Remember that column I used to like? The one the sampler came from—*A Well-Kept House Is a Sign of an Ill-Spent Life*? That same columnist—Letty Loveless, she was called—once wrote something like, *Take care of yourself. No one else will*. And it sounded so harsh, and like it couldn't possibly be true, like if you believed it were true you would just give up. But I don't feel that way about it now. Now I think it's meant to be hopeful. (137)

The Letty Loveless quote that is misquoted out of context comes up many times over the course of the novel as a motto that Rosemary lived by. *Why do you think the author chose to pose this twist, with Rosemary's motto being taken out of context from a column that her former friend wrote?* The other Letty Loveless quote resembles the old Jewish teaching from Hillel the Elder: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" What role do you think this wisdom plays for the various different characters in the novel?

History and Memory

The story of Esther and Vashti in *The Book of V*. explores and challenges ideas about how history is recorded and retold. In this passage, Vashti plays on Itz's understandable ignorance about royalty in order to prove her identity.

He does not know that ink is not reserved for the queen. None of them know this. They have never seen anyone's body adorned in such a way, and it is easy to believe, in their stunned state, that only a queen is given these markings. (This is one way people come to think they know things, which they then tell to other people, who tell them to other people, who write them down, and so the thing stands as truth in a book and later on a pixelated screen: "A queen in ancient Persia was marked by animal tattoos.") (264)

In what other ways does The Book of V. challenge our perceptions of ancestral history?

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