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The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon Review

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## The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon - Richard Zimler

Timothy Nunes



Richard Zimler's novel takes place in Lisbon, Portugal, at the early part of the sixteenth century.

Less than twenty years after tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered throughout neighboring Spain, and at a time when The Black Plague and The Inquisition were fermenting terror, hate, and distrust throughout much of Europe, Zimler paints a vivid, colorful and (sometimes) disturbingly violent picture of medieval Lisbon, a city as rich in its multicultural citizenry as it is plagued by poverty, disease, and intolerance.

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The story's protagonist, Berekiah Zarco, is a young student of a form of Jewish mysticism called Kabbalah. Berekiah finds himself presented with a complex mystery set amidst the bloodiest Passover in Lisbon's history, wherein thousands of his fellow 'New Christians' (Jews forced by Portugal's king to convert to Christianity at sword point) are being raped, murdered, and burned in huge pyres that darken the city's skies.

Upon discovering the murder of his uncle and master, Abraham, a great Kabbalist who may have been killed by another Kabbalist (as the murderer used the blade of a Jewish assassin), Berekiah proceeds to investigate all who may know something of his uncle's murder, all the while trying to protect his surviving family members from the ongoing massacre that surrounds them.

Using a mix of traditional detective work combined with Kabbalah, Zimler's protagonist somehow manages to remain a step ahead of his own demise while slowly winding his way towards the truth.

While I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Last Kabbalist of Lisbon*, the story does take place in a historical setting filled with graphic images of violence, which might offend some readers (as might the sexual encounters of Berekiah Zarco). That said however, novelist Richard Zimler has succeeded in weaving together a fascinating story that, with its unique characters, colorful setting, and complex mystery, most readers may have a hard time putting down.



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