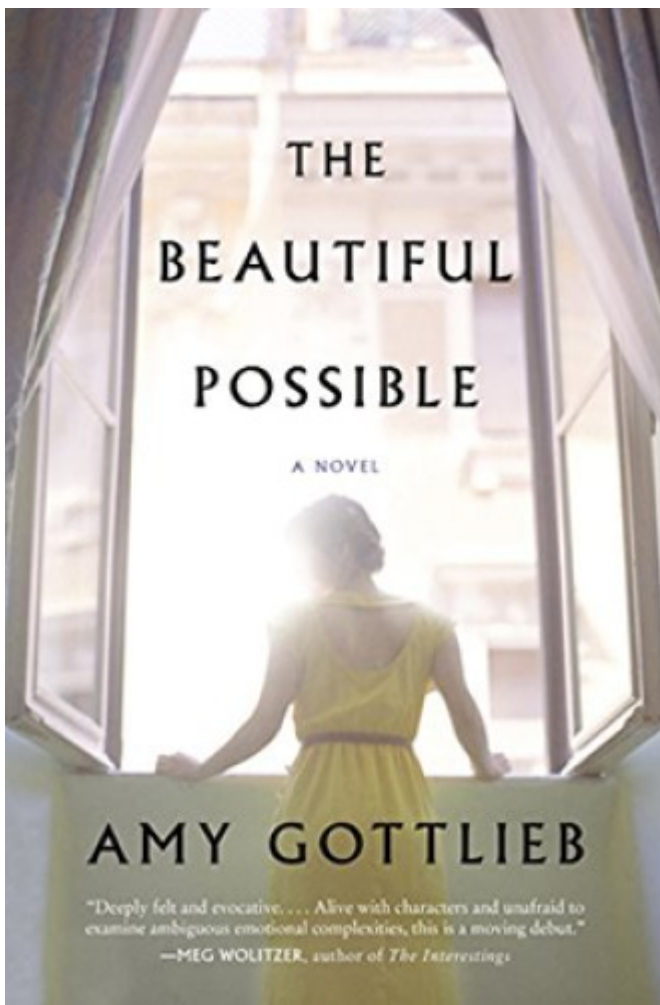


A novel at the edge of faith

It's rare to encounter a female protagonist in theological fiction.

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [May 24, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Beautiful Possible

A Novel

By Amy Gottlieb

Harper

This is a novel about faith and proximity. How far or how close do we stand to the religious traditions that shape us? Rosalie, a new rabbi's wife, decides early in the novel that she will never attend another Kol Nidre service. Instead she will greet the New Year from the porch of her house, "close enough to hear the words, yet distant enough to let the prayer resonate in her bones. If every Jew is standing to face a Torah scroll on the first hour of the Yom Kippur fast, Rosalie will face a yard, a tree, a night sky."

Rosalie's orientation to faith, marriage, and synagogue is at the center of this rare thing: a fundamentally theological novel. Even more rare is a theological novel with a female protagonist.

The novel begins in the late 1940s, before Rosalie's marriage to a young rabbinic student, Sol. In seminary Sol is assigned as a *chavrusa* (study partner) to a German-Jewish refugee named Walter. Walter had fled to India after his family was killed during Kristallnacht. He'd spent several years in the ashram of Tagore, the Indian poet, philosopher, and spiritual leader, before arriving at the seminary to study Hebrew. Both Rosalie and Sol fall in love with him, but only Rosalie becomes his lover. Caught between the skeptical Walter and the rule-following Sol, Rosalie ultimately chooses Sol's version of faith and settles down. But Walter remains a potent enigma for both of them.

Rosalie realizes immediately that she has chosen, perhaps wrongly, a life with many parameters. In post-World War II America, everyone is building new structures. Rosalie and Sol build a synagogue, and the community around them builds homes, businesses, and schools. But in Rosalie's interior life, she challenges these limits. She wrestles with her desires to live beyond them, wondering where sources of renewal are available when everything is so bounded. Her choice to stand outside of the Kol Nidre service represents her marginal position vis-à-vis all of the vows she has made. Her opportunities to annul and recommit to her vows mean that she constantly reevaluates how she stands in relation to her Jewish faith.

One answer to her interior dilemma comes at midlife in the rediscovery of Walter during a trip to Israel with Sol. Walter and Rosalie reconnect and begin an affair that lasts for many years. Their dialogue concerns what of God or meaning can be

expressed in words. Quoting Tagore, scripture, and theologian Abraham Heschel, Walter and Rosalie play a game of question and answer that always leads to more questions. Rosalie ponders her relationships with Walter and Sol in midlife in this way:

She'elah: In the world of men and women, which is stronger: Love or Torah?

Teshuvah: As it is written, *many waters cannot extinguish love*. Human love is bounded by choice; Torah is unbounded by interpretation. Love can birth generations, while Torah breeds infinite words that contradict each other for generations.

No simplistic rejection of Torah or embrace of love can satisfy Rosalie's restless questioning. She cannot discard her faith or her marriage, but she also cannot live only within their bounds. "I feel like I've been dropped inside a riddle that's impossible to solve," she tells Walter.

The novel is framed by the reflections of Rosalie's daughter Maya, who grew up watching her mother carefully without understanding her. "Our house was a palace of stories," Maya says. "The ancient ones in books, the love stories in the songs, the secrets my mother whispered into the phone late at night. At times, I would drift off to sleep and imagine how all the stories were part of one great book that hummed with sadness and longing." Honest wrestling, it seems, is itself unbounded even by time. It passes down, like Torah, through generations.

We have too few novels that unabashedly interrogate history and society through the lens of theological wrangling. At once sensual and philosophical, this is a brave and unusual work of fiction.