North Vancouver City Library

Everyone Knows Your Mother Is A Witch by Rivka Galchen

CITY LIBRARY BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

About the book

It is 1618 in the German duchy of Württemberg. Plague is spreading, the Thirty Years' War has begun, and fear and suspicion are in the air throughout the Holy Roman Empire. In the small town of Leonberg, Katharina Kepler, an illiterate widow, is accused of being a witch.

Katharina is known for her herbal remedies and the success of her children. Her eldest, Johannes, is the Imperial Mathematician and the renowned author of the laws of planetary motion. It's enough to make anyone envious, and Katharina has done herself no favours by going out and about and being in everyone's business.

So when the deranged and insipid Ursula Reinbold (or as Katharina calls her, the Werewolf) accuses Katharina of making her ill by offering her a bitter, witchy drink, Katharina is in trouble. Her scientist son must turn his attention from the music of the spheres to the job of defending his mother. Facing the threat of financial ruin, torture and even execution, Katharina tells her side of the story to her friend and neighbour Simon, a reclusive widower imperiled by his own secrets.

About the author

Rivka Galchen is the recipient of a William Saroyan International Prize for Fiction and has been a finalist for the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Governor General's Award, among other distinctions. She writes regularly for the *New Yorker*, whose editors selected her for their list of 20 Under 40 American fiction writers in 2010. She also holds an MD from the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. Born in Toronto, Rivka Galchen now splits her time between Montreal and New York.

Interviews and articles

- **Electric Literature**: "Rivka Galchen on the Particular Horrors of Actual Witch Hunts" [article, July 1, 2021]
- **BOMB Magazine**: "The Dynamic Heart: Rivka Galchen Interviews by Molly McGhee" [article, June 14, 2022]
- **Powell's Books Interview**: "Rivka Galchen, author of 'Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch'" [article, June 23, 2021]
- **Kirkus Reviews**: "Rivka Galchen Performs Literary Witchcraft" [video, 6 mins]
- **Warburg Institute**: "Rivka Galchen and Ulinka Rublack in conversation | Everyone Knows Your Mother Is A Witch" [video, 37 mins]

- **Partial transcript by Pamela Selwyn of Johannes Kepler's defence of his mother**: https://keplers-trial.hist.cam.ac.uk/keplers-defence.pdf
- **Records of Katharina Kepler's trial:** https://archive.org/details/joanniskeplerias08kepl/page/n9/mode/2up

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Discussion questions

1. The book mainly focuses on Katharina's testimony, but also features the accounts of several other characters. How did you compare and contrast Katharina's account to what others said about her? Did your thoughts on Katharina's testimony change throughout the story?

2. Do you feel that any of the story's narrators are reliable? Is there a character whose account that you fully trusted?

3. Hans' work as the Imperial Mathematician runs throughout the background of the story. How do his scientific discoveries influence other characters' perception of Katharina? Overall, what is the role of science in the story?

4. How would you describe the bond between Katharina and her horse, Chamomile? Why is this relationship so important to her?

5. What is your understanding of Simon, and the role he plays as Katharina's guardian, neighbour, and storyteller? How does he evolve throughout the story?

6. Did you have a favourite 'minor' character? Why did you like them, and what did they add to the novel?

7. How would you describe Katharina's relationship to her family? What sort of emotions do her children show towards her, and vice versa?

8. Overall, how would you describe Katharina? Did your perception of her change throughout the novel? What moments in particular revealed her character?

9. The book is a work of fiction, but based on real events (Johannes Kepler is an important scientific figure, and he defended his mother during her witchcraft trial). What was your reaction when you discovered this? Does knowing this impact your impression of the book?

10. What did you think about the book's different writing styles: the interspliced interview transcripts, letters, and Simon's own thoughts, etc.? Did you like the variation? What did it add to the story?

11. What were your thoughts at the end of the book? Was the ending what you expected? Did you have any questions that were left unanswered?

12. A *Globe & Mail* review calls the novel "at times achingly resonant." In what ways is this novel relevant to the present day?

13. At its core, what would you say that *Everyone Knows Your Mother Is A Witch* is about? What is its "gravitational center"? (the term that Galchen uses in the Acknowledgements).