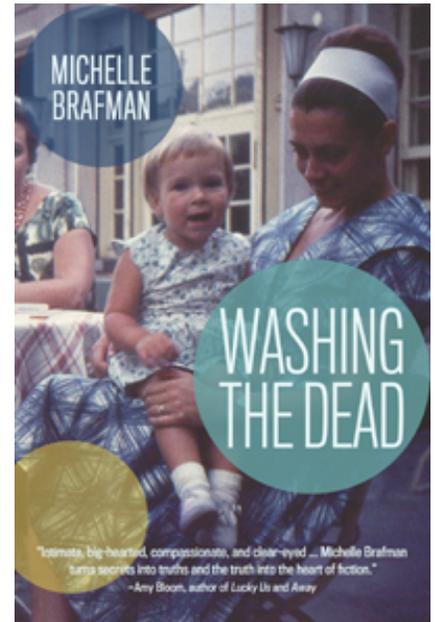


Readers' Group Guide
Washing the Dead
By Michelle Brafman

Conversation Starters

1. The novel is structured around three ritual burial washings. What is the significance of the washings? How do they trace the arc of the story? And what other rituals are important to the narrative?
2. How did Barbara's ruptured relationship with her mother, June, as well as her best friend, Tzippy, and the Schines, impair her? What is the price of cutting someone out of our life?
3. One of the themes of this book is loss and how we try to "replace" the people we love and have lost. June attempted this by joining the Schines's community and Barbara does this with her mentor, Mrs. Kessler, and in San Diego by becoming part of the Cox's household. How did Barbara's relationship with Mrs. Kessler mirror her drive to fill in what was lost? And how did Barbara's experience with the Cox family shape her future? Which do you think would be harder, growing up without a mother—like June—or with an absent one—like Barbara?
4. What is the toll of keeping family secrets? Revealing them? How did Lili suffer from her mother Barbara's secrets? Do you think she will repeat this pattern with her own daughter?
5. Do you think the rebbetzin did the right thing in Barbara's youth? What did those decisions cost the rebbetzin emotionally? Spiritually? And what did Barbara lose or gain after leaving her "spiritual" home?
6. Barbara's letters to Tzippy offer great insight into her character. Why did she write them, why couldn't she bring herself to send them, and why did she keep them? Were her feeling of shame misplaced?
7. Did you find it difficult to empathize with Barbara in the beginning? Why? And did coming to understand Barbara's history and motivations change your feelings about her character?
8. Barbara's relationship with her husband (and most every other character) shifts dramatically throughout the novel. How might these relationships have changed if Lili didn't do what she did at the end? And what do you imagine will happen to these relationships now?



9. From the holy waters of the mikveh to the water used in the tahara, and from Barbara's home on Lake Michigan to her youthful sojourn on the Pacific Ocean, water figures heavily into this story. Why is it such an important symbol throughout the novel?

10. The author has said she hopes "washing the dead" will become a euphemism for "forgiveness and renewal, for cleansing the parts of ourselves that hold onto grudges and anger, that deaden us to joy and connection." Is "washing the dead" a term you would use to express such actions?

Michelle Brafman on *Washing the Dead*

Novelist David Grossman describes a certain kind of writing that "deals with explosives," that can "change a reader's life." *Washing the Dead* detonated a bomb inside of me. And I hope it will do the same in readers.

I did not experience one single event that took place in *Washing the Dead*. Yet, I did grow up in a Milwaukee Orthodox community, and my parents were recruited by a Chasidic rabbi with a blaze of fire in his eyes. After we left the community the Catholic brother of my best friend worked as a Shabbos Goy for an Orthodox community in the city.

I have also performed a tahara. About eight years ago, a friend casually told me about the Jewish burial rites, how the body leaves the world cleansed by the holiest act of Judaism, as a baby is washed and enters the world clean and pure. This act is called the "good deed of truth" because tending to the dead is a favor that the recipient can neither acknowledge nor repay. I became obsessed with this ritual, both its beauty and its metaphorical possibilities, and so I began reading and talking to our synagogue's head of the burial society, who invited me to perform a tahara.

These facts all came together to create the religious world and the themes around redemption I wished to explore. The mother daughter tensions, however, emerged from the help of some super smart readers. And they contain the truths of the novel.

Merely posing the novel's questions—how do you mother a mother who didn't mother you? and what is the cost of not doing so?—to those who have expressed an interest in the book has unleashed tales about difficult and/or loving parents who will need care or who have already passed away, bequeathing devastating emotional legacies. I've heard other stories of deathbed epiphanies, forgiveness, redemption, and gratitude for the chance to care for these dying parents. My hope for this book is that my test group of readers expands, not to launch a wave of gripe sessions about mothers or daughters, but to introduce a roadmap or a ritual to flush the toxins from our bloodlines and wash the dead inside of us.

Praise for Washing the Dead

A Jewish Book Council Featured Title

“Intimate, big-hearted, compassionate, and clear-eyed, Michelle Brafman’s novel turns secrets into truths and the truth into the heart of fiction.” —**AMY BLOOM**, author of *Lucky Us* and *Away*

“Heartfelt and genuine, *Washing the Dead* never betrays the complicated truths of family and tradition.” —**DAVID BEZMOZGIS**, author of *Natasha and Other Stories* and *The Betrayers*

“Brafman’s first novel is a heartfelt story of loss, hope, and reconciliation. Through her authentic portrayal of a Jewish community, she captures the complex essence of the mother-daughter relationship with honesty and sincerity.” — **BOOKLIST**

“From roots in one religious tradition comes a tale of emotional redemption for all of us. Michelle Brafman’s astonishing compassion for all human frailty infuses this story about the need for truth and the promise of forgiveness.” —**HELEN SIMONSON**, author of *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand*

“An illuminating and intricately layered novel about the complicated legacies that pass from mother to daughter, and about the ways that understanding our own history helps make us who we are. Brafman is an insightful writer who never falters or flinches in her quest to uncover the hearts of her characters.” —**CAROLYN PARKHURST**, author of *The Dogs of Babel*

“A rich tale of love, friendship, yearning, and forgiveness. Brafman’s beautifully wrought prose quickly cuts to the heart of things: how to live, how to love, and how to care for the dead.” —**JESSICA ANYA BLAU**, author of *The Summer of Naked Swim Parties* and *The Wonder Bread Summer*

“Like a Jewish Anne Lamott, Brafman reels you in with warmth, depth, and heart. Infused with lush detail about Orthodox Jewish life in the Midwest, *Washing the Dead* is the story of three generations of women and family secrets that threaten to unravel. A charming and original spiritual page-turner about love, forgiveness, and family life.” —**SUSAN COLL**, author of *The Stager* and *Acceptance* and events and programs director at Politics & Prose

“Sensual and spiritual, shot with betrayals, *Washing the Dead* plumbs the destructive power of secrets across three generations of mothers and daughters. In haunting prose, Brafman offers a riveting glimpse into Orthodox Jewish life and breathtaking insight into what it means to forgive.” —**DYLAN LANDIS**, author of *Rainey Royal* and *Normal People Don’t Live Like This*

“With the knife blade of her prose honed razor sharp, Brafman skillfully dissects the bonds of mother-daughter relationships. . . . She weaves together the sacred and the profane, reverberating silences, exile and return, atonement and forgiveness with the tenderness of a mother braiding the hair of a beloved daughter.” —**FAYE MOSKOWITZ**, author of *A Leak in the Heart* and *Her Face in the Mirror: Jewish Women on Mothers & Daughters*

“*Washing the Dead* made me ache. Barbara Blumfield’s longing is palpable on every single page: for her mother’s love, for her past, and for re-admittance into a world from which she has been exiled. What a spectacular debut.” —**T. GREENWOOD**, author of *Bodies of Water* and *The Forever Bridge*

“Brafman offers a fresh, vital narrative about guilt, love, loss, and the necessity of wrestling with the dark angel of a painful family legacy until it blesses you. June Pupnick, one of the most bewitching and problematic fictional mothers I’ve come across in years, makes a regular habit of escaping her life by ‘gobbling up’ novels ‘without chewing.’ *Please* resist gobbling up this novel. Slow down, savor the richness and generosity of Brafman’s storytelling, and then buy a copy for your most deserving friend.” —**MARGARET MEYERS**, author of *Swimming in the Congo* and *Dislocation*

“Throughout these pages, moving in shadow, runs the terrific responsibility of forgiveness and redemption. Brafman has done us all a true mitzvah by writing this beautiful book.” —**ROBERT BAUSCH**, author of *A Hole in the Earth* and *Far as the Eye Can See*

“A riveting and humane account of family pain passed from one generation to the next. . . . How do we begin to forgive those who injured us? Start by reading Brafman’s unflinching and inspiring novel.” —**MARY KAY ZURAVLEFF**, author of *Man Alive!* and *The Frequency of Souls*

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