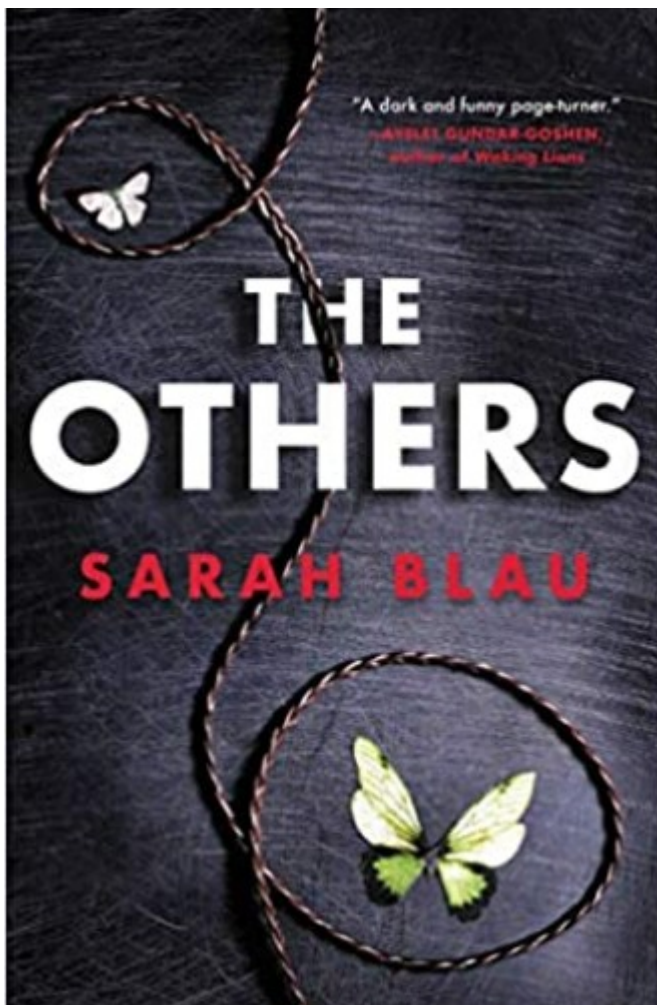


A psychological thriller about four Israeli women and their biblical role models

**Sarah Blau's protagonists are childless by choice. Herein lies the danger.**

by [Beth Kissileff](#) in the [July 14, 2021](#) issue

## In Review



## The Others

A Novel

By Sarah Blau

Mulholland Books

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In her first book to be translated into English, Israeli writer Sarah Blau has created a psychological thriller in which the main characters are committed feminists and wonderful, multifaceted human characters, concerned not just with their place in the world but also with their place as women who connect to biblical female role models.

The “others” of the title are the childless women in the Bible. For the four college friends who each pick one of these women—Miriam, Michal, the witch of Endor, and Lilith—as their Purim costumes, these figures take on a personal significance. (There’s also a hamster named Jezebel, whose affection for her offspring does not amount to allowing them to live.) The four women create a pact, promising not to have children.

The mystery opens years later, with the shocking murder of one of the four. The public intellectual and feminist Dina Kaminer is found dead with her hands glued to a doll and the word *mother* carved on her forehead. The narrator, Sheila Heller, says of her college friend, “And I couldn’t help but think, *There you have it, Dina, you’re finally a mother.*” Dina is an advocate for a movement of women who choose not to have children—a subversive stance in Israel where fertility is seen on a level almost sacred. Who would want to retaliate against her in this violent and shocking way?

The possibilities are many, and in Blau’s sure hand the reader trails behind the narrator breathlessly. Is the narrator, who identifies with the witch of Endor, herself a suspect? Sheila is a lecturer at a Bible museum, and soon she is visited and questioned by a policeman. He knows she went to see Dina the night she was murdered. But the police have no record of anyone on the force with that policeman’s name. So who is he, and why does he know so much about Sheila and her friends?

Could an old boyfriend of Sheila’s be out for revenge, since she rejected him when he professed his love for her? Or might it be Dina’s brother, who has turned fervently religious? Or perhaps the killer is Avihu (whose name literally means “he is the father” in Hebrew). He is the widower of Naama, who dressed as Michal for Purim and who died by suicide some years before the mystery begins.

Then the third woman, Ronit, is found dead in a similarly horrific position, with references to her chosen costume of Lilith and with a doll by her side. Will Sheila, now the only surviving member of the group of four, be the next victim? The plot thickens and the suspect list grows.

Blau brilliantly combines the personal stories of her contemporary Israeli characters with the narratives of the biblical women who inspire them. We learn that the group of four, who called themselves the Others, first met in a Women of the Bible course at their university and decided, based on the archetypes they saw, that they would rather be among the “others” than the matriarchs of the Bible. Why? Sheila explains, “Because we were young and we wanted something different out of this life.”

Blau, who has also written two previous novels, a novella, and two plays, has organized alternative Holocaust Memorial Day ceremonies since 1999. The goal of these ceremonies, she has said, is to turn “collective memory into a personal memory” by inviting a variety of speakers, including those with no direct personal connection to the Holocaust, to reflect on what this history means to them. In *The Others*, Blau creates a similar space, enabling the collective memory of female biblical characters to permeate the very personal mystery thriller she has created.

The last words of the book—“Apparently there are all kinds of relationships. All kinds of love.”—speak both to those in the present and to those biblical characters whom we constantly reimagine. The lessons the four women take from their college course are taught to us too in the course of this fast-paced and entertaining thriller.