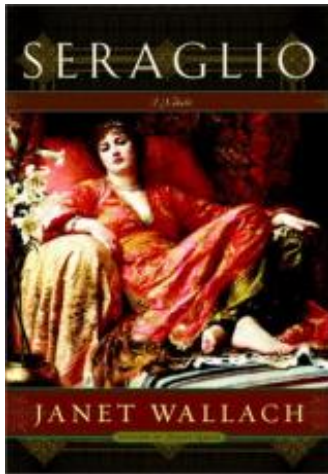


# Seraglio

by Janet Wallach

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## About the Book

A mesmerizing novel based on the true story of Empress Josephine's cousin who, kidnapped at age thirteen, was given as a gift to the Turkish sultan, placed at the lowest level of the harem, and rose to become the most powerful woman in the Ottoman Empire.

Aimée du Buc de Rivéry was still a child when she found herself in the hands of pirates while en route from France to her home in Martinique. The genteel young girl was a valuable commodity, and she was soon placed in service in a seraglio in Topkapi Palace—the Ottoman emperor's private world. Brilliantly reimagining Aimée's story, biographer and Middle East expert Janet Wallach transports readers to the menacing yet majestic world of eighteenth-century Turkey. *Seraglio* provides a passionate glimpse of East-West history through one woman's distinctly European eyes.

## Discussion Guide

1. Nakshidil tells her son that Turkey is like an ancient tree with its roots in the East and its limbs in the West. What does she mean? How does this apply to Turkey today?
2. What are the meanings of the word *harem* in the book? Why was the harem important for the sultan?
3. How does Nakshidil find life in the harem similar to life in the convent? What family values and what ways to please a man did she learn in the convent? How did they differ from the ones she was taught in the harem?
4. At one point, Nakshidil looks in the mirror and realizes she has been transformed. How has she changed physically, emotionally, and culturally?

5. Turkey was constantly struggling with the European powers. What were some of the issues? What was the Turks' attitude toward the French? What impact did Napoleon have on Turkey?
6. What was the relationship between Turkey and Russia? What effect did Catherine the Great have on Turkey? What was Catherine's goal vis-à-vis Istanbul?
7. Flowers, especially tulips, were important in Ottoman Turkey. Talk about how they were used in the palace and what significance they had.
8. What did Nakshidil have to learn in order to become a Muslim? What are the five pillars of Islam?
9. In the Ottoman Empire, clothing was used to signify status, religion, and power. How was this done? What were the most important parts of the wardrobe? How is clothing used today to signify power and wealth?
10. What was the importance of religion in Nakshidil's life as a child? As an adult?
11. The *valide* sultan was the most powerful woman in the Ottoman Empire. How did she express that power in the harem? How did she use her influence with the sultan? What were the material prizes?
12. How does Nakshidil describe the harem at the end of her life?

## Author Bio

Janet Wallach is the author of **Desert Queen: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell** and **Chanel: Her Style and Her Life**. She is also coauthor, with her husband, John Wallach, of three books on the Middle East: **The New Palestinians**, **Arafat: In the Eyes of the Beholder**, and **Still Small Voices: The Real Heroes of the Arab-Israeli Conflict**. A frequent contributor to the *Washington Post* Magazine and other periodicals, she lives in New York City and Washington.

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