

Isabela's Way

A Novel

by Barbara Stark-Nemon



Fiction - Historical - Event/Era

296 Pages

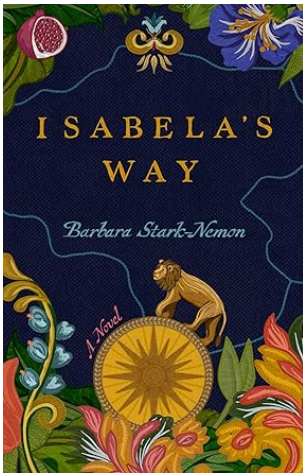
Reviewed on 04/23/2025

Book Review

Reviewed by Saifunnissa Hassam for Readers' Favorite

Barbara Stark-Nemon's *Isabela's Way* is a captivating coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of renewed persecution of Jews by the Spanish Inquisition in the early 17th century. The story begins in 1605 in Abrantes, Portugal. Isabela de Castro Nunez is 14 years old, her mother has died of the plague, and her father, Gabriel, is away on a business trip in Germany. Isabela's family is famous for their beautiful embroidery, and she is already known as a talented embroideress. Isabela's family belongs to the New Christian Community in Portugal. She is a devout Catholic. Her life is upended when Dama Ana Martel Gerondi gives her an urgent message from her father to leave Abrante immediately. David de Sousa, 18, is her closest friend from childhood days. When his father dies of the plague, David takes over his responsibilities as magistrate of the New Christian community in Abrante. David is asked to help Isabela and other New Christians leave Abrante immediately. The Spanish Inquisition suspects New Christians of being Jews in secret. Isabela is puzzled, but with David's support, she leaves Abrante on the long, dangerous journey to Germany, working on embroidery projects along the way.

I thoroughly enjoyed *Isabela's Way*. I particularly liked how Isabela's inner personal transformative journey is woven into her dangerous physical journey. The story gained great depth as Isabela's embroidery talents increasingly became integral to the plot. I liked the well-crafted dialogues, thoughts, and emotions of Isabela and other key characters because these revealed Isabela's growing understanding of her real role and the specific nature of the embroidery symbols and colors in her projects. Through the vivid and atmospheric settings, I could imagine the mysteries puzzling her, the people she met, the life-threatening dangers she faced, and the key people who were her guides on that journey. I liked how the details of the clandestine network of people and safe havens emerged, guides and protectors helping New Christians and Jews to escape persecution by the Spanish Inquisition. I liked the depth of detail in the character development of three particular characters who played key roles in Isabela's journey: her closest friend, David de Sousa, and the secret network guides Dama Ana Martel Gerondi and Eduardo Carel. Finally, I liked the quotes at the start of each chapter and also the cover, a beautiful illustration of an embroidery design that plays a significant role. Barbara Stark-Nemon's book is a character-driven



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—story of a young girl's growing confidence and determination for her life's journey; it's also a story of courageous people, their sacrifice, loyalty, and love.