



To & Fro

A Novel by Leah Hager Cohen

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“*To & Fro* is a luminous, charming, and utterly original novel filled with pleasures and provocations at every turn. Through some strange alchemy, Leah Hager Cohen has combined character-driven storytelling with brilliant philosophical forays into what it feels like to decipher the world, honor its mysteries, and stay open to its aches and gifts.”

—**Elizabeth Graver**, author of *The End of the Point* and *Kantika*

“Cohen’s writing is a wonder. Here are worlds nested inside worlds, each unfolding like a delicate paper staircase leading to destinations unknown. *To & Fro* is a gorgeous, captivating riddle of a book.” —**Rachel Kadish**, author of *Tolstoy Lied: A Love Story* and *The Weight of Ink*

“A tour de force peek into the wilds and wounds of childhood. . . . With ‘nary an end’ and triumphs aplenty, *To & Fro* is a luminescent novel . . . whose heroines’ curiosity reflects the wisdom of sages.” —**Foreword Reviews** (starred review)

“Wondrous, funny, and fantastical. . . . Most impressively, Cohen knows that there is nothing more fantastic than the vastness of a young girl’s mind, and she lets her heroines shine.” —**Booklist**

INTRODUCTION

A tale of two girls—one living in a parable, the other in Manhattan

Ani, journeying across a great distance accompanied by a stolen kitten, meets many people along her way, but her encounters only convince her that she is meant to keep searching. Annamae, journeying from childhood to young adulthood alongside her mother, older brother, and the denizens of her Manhattan neighborhood, never outgrows her yearning for a friend she cannot describe. From their different worlds, Ani and Annamae reach across the divide, perhaps to discover—or perhaps to create—each other.

Told in two mirrored narratives that culminate in a new beginning, *To & Fro* unleashes the wonders and mysteries of childhood in a profound exploration of identity, spirituality, and community.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I know of no time I wasn’t besotted by language, by the mouthfeel of words and the way you could string them together into meaning. Or into nonsense, if you liked. When I was very little, I named my fingers and made up poems and stories about them. My mother wrote them down for me before I learned to do it myself. Letters, words, punctuation marks. They were my treasured playthings, my most intimate companions. My infinite mystery and delight.

No part of *To & Fro* is based on my own experience, yet it is the most autobiographical thing I have ever written. I did not set out to write something overtly political, yet how can it not be a political act to trace the journeys of two young girls and produce a book in which no harm comes to either? It was not my intention to explore religion or theology, yet I wound up with a book in which two children from impossibly separate worlds—one of them Jewish and one whose story echoes that of the cast-out Ishmael—are driven to reach out toward each other, longing to connect with a presence they sense but cannot name.





CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. On the first page of *To & Fro*, the reader is faced with a choice in the form of a poem: Which story will you read first? In most books featuring two or more narratives, chapters move back and forth between characters' perspectives. In *To & Fro*, the girls' stories only intertwine at the very end (or the middle, depending on how you look at it!). What similarities did you discover mirrored in each girl's story? Do you think your experience of the novel would have been different if you'd begun on the other side?
2. Both Ani and Annamae are on a quest. What are they each searching for? Do you think their goals are fundamentally the same or different? How does chance come into play?
3. Only one character traverses the girls' two worlds: the ferryman. How is he significant as a connecting character? What role does he play in the girls' journeys?
4. Language is vital to Annamae, whose mother is a linguist. How is language portrayed as sacred in the novel? How is Annamae's obsession with words contrasted with Ani's inability to read?
5. Ani has an epiphany about the difference between "lonely" and "lonesome": "Lonely is sad about being alone. Lonesome is a kind of hunger." Did this resonate with you? How does the yearning behind Ani's lonesomeness drive her choices?
6. As they search for connection in their communities, both young girls name their companions "Company," Ani her kitten and Annamae her notebook. Why does Ani steal the kitten? Why is Annamae so attached to her notebook? What role does Company play in each girl's life?
7. Annamae is described as "Serious to a fault. . . . She was not glum. She didn't lack a sense of humor. She was just serious. About most things. Joy included." In what ways did you find the novel itself humorous, joyful, serious? How does the book's playfulness contribute to our understanding of its philosophical lessons?
8. The author has written that "an obligation to question authority" was an essential value she learned during her secular Jewish upbringing. How is this rebellion reflected in the book? How does debate or questioning shape both girls' spiritual journeys?
9. On her quest, Ani encounters a "study house" full of books, rumbling with endless conversations. When she struggles to explain her past to a woman there, the woman reassures Ani, "I wouldn't worry so much about sorting this from that. It's all one story in the end." In what ways do the two narratives in the novel similarly become one story in the end?
10. A bookseller wrote of *To & Fro*, "It's as if Eloise and Alice walked hand-in-hand through the looking glass and I was able to follow them," while a critic suggested the book for "fans of Neil Gaiman and Lewis Carroll." The author has also mentioned a kinship between the protagonists and Judy Blume or Lois Lowry characters. Did Ani and Annamae remind you of any beloved literary characters? Of yourself? Did either girl's story feel more "real" to you? How is the story reminiscent of books from your childhood, and how does it stand apart as a book for adults?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leah Hager Cohen is the author of seven novels, including *To & Fro*, and five works of nonfiction, including *Train Go Sorry*. Among other honors, her books have been longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, named a finalist for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, and selected as best books of the year by the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Globe and Mail*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Kirkus Reviews*. Cohen is the Barrett Professor of Creative Writing at the College of the Holy Cross. She lives in Belmont, Massachusetts. Visit her website at www.leahhagercohen.com.

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