



The  
American  
Turkish  
Society  
*Since 1919*

## THE ATS BOOK CLUB

**Halide's Gift**  
*Frances Kazan*



### About the Book (Random House, 2002)

Set in Constantinople in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire, *Halide's Gift* is the story of a family with a secret, and a society in turbulent transition. At the heart of Frances Kazan's beguiling novel are two sisters—one flamboyant and mischievous, the other shy and full of dreams—bound by an extraordinary friendship and torn apart by their love of radically different men. In the tradition of Tracy Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *Halide's Gift* is an intimate portrait of a young woman of restrained passions and fiercely independent mind. A vibrant fusion of history and fiction, it tells the story of the legendary Halide Edib, the daughter of Sultan Abdulhamid's first secretary, whose allegiance to the spiritual and traditional world of her mother and grandmother was destined to collide with the tantalizing promise of freedom.



### About the Author

**Frances Kazan** is the author of *Goodnight, Little Sisters*, and *Halide's Gift*. She has an M.A. in Turkish studies and is a regular contributor to *Cornucopia*. A member of the American Turkish Society, she is also a member of the Society for Women Geographers and board president of The Kitchen, a performance center in Chelsea. Frances Kazan is the wife of the late Elia Kazan, world-renowned director and she lives in New York.

### Praise for the Book

"A complex tale of intrigue, secrets, superstitions and veiled passions. Frances Kazan has turned unknown history into compelling human drama."  
—Susan Vreeland, author of *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*

"Enchanting . . . Frances Kazan has taken Halide Edib's true story—her amazing moment in Turkey's history—and with alchemy of art and scholarship has turned it into the kind of fiction that illuminates a world."  
—Jane Kramer

"Engrossing . . . Most of Halide's story takes place in the harem, where it engages themes of love, marriage and betrayal. . . . Kazan's descriptions of turn-of-the-century Constantinople are haunting."  
—The Washington Post

"I was gripped by Frances Kazan's evocation of the last days of the Ottoman empire in *Halide's Gift*. That strange, fragile world of complex intrigues and compromises is made fully present through her scrupulous attention to individual lives and psychological truth. An impressive novel."  
—Pankaj Mishra, author of *The Romantics*

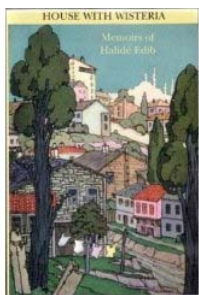
## About Halide Edib Adivar

**Halide Edib Adivar (1884–1964)** was a Turkish novelist and feminist political leader. Best known for her novels criticizing the low social status of Turkish women and what she saw as the disinterest of most women in changing their situation, she also served as a soldier in the Turkish military during Turkish War of Independence.

Halide Edib was born in Istanbul, Ottoman Empire; as a girl, she studied Arabic and mathematics, and graduated from the American College for Women in 1901; the college was an influential force for reformist social change at the time. With her first husband, Salih Zeki, she had two children before they divorced. Her first novel, *Seviye Talip*, was published in 1909. She remarried, to Dr. Adnan Adivar, in 1917, and the next year took a job as a lecturer in literature at Istanbul's Faculty of Letters. It was during this time that she became increasingly active in Turkey's nationalist movement, and after the end of World War I she and her husband traveled to Anatolia to fight in the War for Independence. After the fighting ended, she and her husband moved to Western Europe; they would live in the French Third Republic and the United Kingdom from 1926 to 1939. She traveled widely, teaching and lecturing repeatedly in the United States and in British Raj India. After returning to Turkey in 1939, she became a professor in English literature at the Faculty of Letters in Istanbul. In 1950, she was elected to Parliament, resigning in 1954; this was the only formal political position she ever held.

Common themes in Halide Edib's novels were strong, independent female characters who succeeded in reaching their goals against strong opposition. She was also a strong Turkish nationalist, and several stories highlighted the central role of women in the fight for Turkish Independence.

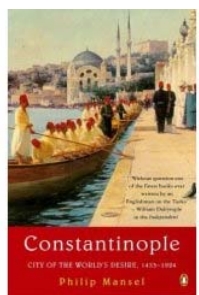
## Suggested Reading



### **House With Wisteria: Memoirs of Halide Edib**

Halide Edib Adivar, Sibel Erol (Introduction)

The first part of this memoir is a fascinating view from the inside of the life of a girl and young woman growing up in the last years of traditional Ottoman Turkey. Her story is rich with character, detail, and color and she tells it with the skill of a novelist. The second part of the memoir describes her life as a wife and mother and as a participant and observer in the difficult modernization Turkey's political and educational systems. A helpful introduction is provided by Sibel Erol, Lecturer in Turkish Studies at New York University.



### **Constantinople: City of the World's Desire, 1453 – 1924**

Philip Mansel

The story begins in 1453 with the triumphant entry into the city of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror on a white horse. It ends with the hurried departure of the last Ottoman ruler, Abdulmecid on the Orient Express. In studying the five hundred years between those two events, the author goes beneath the surface of the bustling, cosmopolitan traveler's Constantinople to record the history of what was at once an imperial capital, a holy city, a trading entrepot, a pleasure resort and, in its cultural and intellectual life, a laboratory of modernization.

## Interview with Frances Kazan (Random House)

### Q: What inspired you to write this novel?

A: At the turn of the twentieth century, Constantinople, now Istanbul seethed with intrigue and discontent. The five hundred-year-old Islamic Empire was on the brink of collapse and the Ottoman world was about to disappear forever. I wanted to write a novel that captured this moment of history. Halide Edib was the perfect protagonist. She was the most famous woman of her time. To this day, she remains a controversial yet revered figure in Turkey. I was intrigued by her paradoxical upbringing and the family tensions caused, in part, by the chaotic political climate. Raised in a traditional Ottoman household, Halide was imbued with the values of a faithful Muslim. Yet her father, an otherwise conventional man, wanted her to have a Western education. What did Halide want?, I wondered. Were her hopes and desires, her deep religious beliefs altered by her education?

### Q: How did you discover Halide?

A: While studying for a master's degree in Turkish studies, I read her memoirs. They were charming, but felt restrained before the Young Turk revolution. Subsequently, I read her novels. They were, by contrast, passionate and emotional—quite different from her memoir. In the introduction to her novel *Shirt of Flame*, Halide claimed that her fiction was born in “a creative fever” and with “a desire to express life's forces.” I read everything Halide wrote in English. She became the focus of my studies, and the subject of my thesis. Yet I still was not satisfied. This was a woman who was torn between two radically different worlds, and I was fascinated by her contradictions.

### Q: What inspired your initial interest in Turkey and the Ottoman Empire?

A: My husband, Elia, was born in Istanbul. As he got older, he identified himself with the values of the country and culture of his birth. In 1990, he took me to Kayseri, in central Anatolia, where his ancestors had lived for hundreds of years. Walking in the streets, I was struck by the fact that he blended in like a native. He belonged there. This was his home. Elia had always thought of himself as a Greek—a Byzantine Greek, an Anatolian. Then I knew nothing of nationalist policies and the population exchange, but Turkey's complex, layered history began to attract me, right there in the bustling streets of Kayseri.

### Q: In your novel, you endow the fictional Halide with a supernatural gift that has been passed down from her mother. Why did you make this choice?

A: The fictional gift represented, in part, the Ottoman-Sufi sensibility. Halide, Teyze, and Halide's grandparents were devout Muslims. I wanted to explore the ways this almost mystical predisposition was changed by Halide's education. The Sufi brotherhoods are an integral part of Turkish society. Their traditions of mysticism and nonconformity characterize the nature of religious belief.

### Q: Can you give some background on the novel's setting?

A: My novel takes place between the years of 1889 and 1902, during the long reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II. Though he initially instituted many reforms, he became increasingly oppressive. He began to crack down on the so-called Young Turks. He shut down parliament and established an informant society, which was quite corrosive. He was so desperate to retain power—and so convinced that he had enemies everywhere—that he created a

stultifying spy network, magnified all censorship, and deported any opposition.

**Q: Halide's father, Edib Bey, is a fascinating figure. In part, he is a modern man who wants an advanced education for his daughter. Yet he exercises the ancient privileges, one of which is taking a second wife.**

A: Edib Bey was the hardest character to write because he was such a contradiction. He was pro-British and forward-thinking. He risked his whole career to educate his daughter—all of his daughters; he ended up having five—and yet he took two wives. I can't say that I actually understood that, but I tried my best to convey his humanity.

**Q: There's a marvelous range of female characters—Granny, the guardian of tradition; Teyze, the beauty; Mahmoure, the revolutionary. Do you have a basic philosophy or technique for creating such rich characters?**

A: I do not have a conscious philosophy about my writing. Essentially, I try to adhere to the truth as I see it. Fiction is, in part, an exploration of the self, and sometimes things that occur surprise me. With *Halide's Gift*, I knew how the story would begin and end, but I wasn't sure what was going to happen in between, although I had the outline of Halide's life to follow. What happened to Granny, Teyze, and Mahmoure was made up. The real-life Mahmoure married a pharmacist and had five children. Teyze lived into old age. A friend of mine encountered her in the late 1930s; she was living with her son, Halide's half-brother. Teyze was apparently tiny, silent, and heavily veiled—not at all how I describe her.

**Q: One of your characters contemplates suicide, yet you ultimately didn't eliminate her. To what extent do your characters guide you?**

A: I intended for her to kill herself, but I finished the scene and found that she hadn't. It was a very mysterious thing. It was as if she took on a life of her own. To me, if you plot a novel chapter by chapter, or strand by strand, it would be like painting by numbers. There are so many things you just have to let go freely, once you begin writing.

**Q: What became of the historical Halide?**

A: She fell out of favor with Atatürk in 1923 and was exiled. She went to live in England, and visited America several times. In fact, the book I did for my master's degree was about a speech she gave at Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 1928, which (for the first time anywhere) framed the notion of the new republican history of Turkey.

**Q: Has your relationship with your husband, the famed director Elia Kazan, or your understanding of his work influenced your creative process in any way?**

A: Elia taught me the importance of generosity and unequivocal support. He has been steadfast in his encouragement of my writing. He showed me how to be generous with myself, less critical, and to allow for human error. He has always been a very generous person—not just with me, but with all the artists he's worked with.

## Reader's Guide (Random House)

1. Historically, outsiders have viewed the harem through the lens of sexual intrigue. Discuss how your impression of harem life has changed after reading *Halide's Gift*. Are there advantages to the sexes living apart?
2. Mahmoure hates wearing her veil (see p. 70), whereas Halide feels protected by it (pp. 200—201). Consider why, in modern Turkey, wearing a headscarf has become a political statement against secularism. What do you think of the veil?
3. Belief in the power of spirits and “peris” played an important role in women’s lives during final days of the Ottoman Empire. Examine some modern equivalents in our everyday life.
4. Even though his actions affect her, Edib Pasha discusses with Halide neither his decision to bring Mahmoure to the harem nor his decision to marry Teyze. Discuss Edib Pasha’s motivations. Was his apparently thoughtless behavior dictated by the patriarchal structure of Ottoman society, or was he, as Granny feels, “a solitary man” (p. 167) who would not think of consulting other people?
5. Teyze is devastated when she discovers that Edib has taken a second wife (p. 162). Although Islamic law permits polygamy, do women in the novel suffer when their husbands take multiple wives? Did Edib hurt Teyze intentionally, or was he surprised by her reaction? Was his decision justified by her inability to bear children.
6. Examine Mahmoure’s unconventional behavior in dressing like a man (p. 102). Does this free her or bring her closer to her adored father?
7. Halide tells her father “We cannot fight fate” (p. 158). How does her deterministic belief differ from the Western notion of taking control of one’s own destiny? Consider how Halide’s perception of fate and free will is altered by her education.
8. Although Halide’s father arranges her marriage to Salih Zeki, the union is clearly a love match. Discuss why the marriage fails and how Halide changes. Where does she find the courage to demand a divorce and how does her father influence her decision? Examine why Halide is able to survive the breakdown of her marriage, whereas Teyze is shattered by her separation. What personal qualities differentiate the two women?
9. Politics and religion are closely bound within the Islamic faith. Discuss instances where politics and religion are intertwined within the novel.
10. Discuss the impact of Western ideas on the political situation in Constantinople. Does Westernization threaten to destabilize the empire, or is it a source of progress? How do Edib, Salih Zeki and Halide respond?

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