Book Review:  
The Coffee Trader, Author: David Liss  

by Hon. Michael Jordan

David Liss was the author of A Conspiracy of Paper for which he was awarded the Edgar Award for Best First Novel. This is a second work that was only recently given to me to read after the book spent a long time on a bookshelf. I was told I might enjoy it. Well, I certainly did, and I think others might enjoy it as well!

The author takes us back in time to 1659 where our central character, Miguel Lienzo, is a transplant from the Inquisition in Portugal where his family became secret Jews, known as “New Christians,” pretending to be Catholic while actually retaining their Judaism. Knowing the deception could not last, they immigrated to Amsterdam, a more tolerant Protestant city, in the Netherlands. They found an active merchant class of traders at the city’s Exchange with contacts throughout Europe and parts of Asia. Modern day Chicago mercantile traders would feel comfortable reading the language of “puts” and “calls” used today in the futures market.

We learn that the Jewish community in Amsterdam from Portugal has established a religious court, known as the Ma’amat, to regulate and strictly control the lives of former Portuguese Jews. The goal is to avoid any member of the “Nation” doing something that will put the entire Jewish people at risk of another exile or banishment. The court regulates daily life proscribing who their citizens may and may not see and with whom they may have any business dealings. The panel issues rulings that preclude women from learning—even the language of prayer. Women are to be fully covered from head to feet—unlike what they were used to in Portugal. Unlike the Dutch merchants who dress in black, the former Portuguese tend to dress in bright colors—unlike present-day Orthodox Jews, although some immigrants do begin to imitate the Dutch and dress in black.

Whether you are interested in learning about life in prior centuries, particularly the life of Jews in those time, the need for immigration due to hatred and ignorance evidenced by the Inquisition, or how commercial markets and communications and all of commerce took place, you will find answers in this novel. Additionally, you will find intrigue when a member of the religious court, another trader having a grudge against Miguel, brings him before the court with the threat of excommunication or lesser sanctions for disrespecting the panel’s laws and orders. A summons is to be honored or the ignoring Jewish citizen will face severe sanctions merely for ignoring the summons.

We follow the machinations as Miguel slips from a position of financial security to disgrace as a debtor beholden to his brother, to attempting to emerge as a financially secure merchant able to challenge the panel and his nemesis there. He has allies who become enemies and enemies who become allies as he pursues his goals. We find that many of them are conversant in many languages, switching from one language to another as the need arises.

Of course, there were no e-mail trails then as we have today for commerce, but there were written contracts between merchants and traders handwritten in duplicate. Sureties, guarantors, and co-signers existed as well. It was interesting to see how we might have practiced law centuries ago. Gossip usually preceded factual knowledge regarding cargo ships reaching safe harbors or being torn apart by the seas or taken over by pirates. Fortunes would rise and fall with false or true claims of events. The actual trade and futures trade are amazing and mind-boggling as reported in the book. Information is overheard in bars as well as at the Exchange. Spies are everywhere. The spies serve adversarial traders, the Ma’amat, debt collectors, and schemers.
While this book was written several years ago, it is of present interest as some Jews in America now worry if alt-right nationalism and violent anti-Semitism will drive us away to some other temporarily “welcoming” land if Israel is not available. The book raises the issue of trust within family and with business partners. The author has us consider age-old Jewish traditions in changing times. There is a desire to retain one’s faith and adhere to dietary laws and values while some use religion and the religious court as a weapon for their own power and financial enrichment enslaving the observant Jewish refugees. Some readers may conclude that things do not change much over the many years. There are many reasons to read the book, but be aware there is included some profanity, sexual encounters, and violence. The book is not for those offended by that content.

The Hon. Michael S. Jordan served as a judge in the Circuit Court of Cook County from 1974 to 1999 and then began a private mediation and arbitration practice that continues today (Mediation & Arbitration Services, Glenview, Illinois, 847-724-3502). He has been a member of the Decalogue Society of Lawyers since 1975, previously served on the Decalogue Board, and has lectured on various subjects for the CLE program.