

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Devil's Arithmetic by Jane Yolen

Book Information

Jane Yolen, The Devil's Arithmetic

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Viking Penguin, 1988

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170 Pages

Book Level: 4.6

Interest Level: MG

Hannah resents the traditions of her Jewish heritage, until time travel places her in the middle of a small Jewish village in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Award: American Bookseller Pick of the List; Misc./Other; Parent's Choice Award/Honor Book; Phoenix Award/Honor; State Award; Sydney Taylor Award/Honor

Topics: Countries/Regions, Poland; History, Holocaust; People, Jewish; People, Nazis; Power Lessons AR, Grade 6; READNOW - Perma-Bound, Perma-Bound - Read Now Grades 6-8; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; Recommended Reading, Jewish Stars; Recommended Reading, NCSS/CBC Notable Social Studies; Science Fiction, Time Travel

Main Characters

Aunt Eva Hannah's favorite aunt

Chaya Abramowicz a Jewish girl from Lublin, Poland in the 1940s, whom Hannah becomes when she opens the door at the Seder meal

Gitl and Shmuel Chaya's aunt and uncle

Grandpa Will Hannah's grandfather, who survives the concentration camps in the 1940s

Hannah Stern a Jewish teenage girl from New Rochelle, New York, who does not like to listen to her grandfather's stories of the Holocaust

Rivka a girl Chaya meets at the concentration camp, whom she later learns is Aunt Eva

Shifre, Esther and Rachel girls Chaya meets in Poland, who are also sent to the concentration camp

Vocabulary

badchan a Jewish version of a "Court Jester"

blokova the female supervisor in a concentration camp barrack

bris Jewish religious ceremony involving the circumcision of an infant male

goy a non-Jewish person

Kaddish a long prayer said for someone who has died

Malach ha-mavis Yiddish term for an "Angel of Death"

midden the garbage dump in the concentration camp

shtetl village

shul school

zugangi the newcomers to the concentration camp

Synopsis

This novel begins with a teenage Jewish girl, Hannah Stern, who goes to her grandparents' house to celebrate the Passover Seder. Hannah does not like the celebrations with her grandfather, who survived a concentration camp, because he gets angry and retells the stories of the Holocaust. When Hannah is chosen to open the door for the Passover meal, she finds herself transported to another time and place.

Hannah has become Chaya, an orphaned Jewish teenage girl who has just moved in with her aunt and uncle. In her first days with her aunt and uncle, Gitl and Shmuel, Chaya is to attend the wedding of her uncle. As the villagers travel from their village to that of Shmuel's bride-to-be, Chaya makes friends with some other teenage girls. Chaya is surprised to see that the other girls wish to be her friend and that they are so enthralled by her stories.

After the group meets the bride and arrives at her village, they are met by soldiers and army trucks. The colonel tells the group they are to get into the trucks because they are being "relocated." Chaya/Hannah tries to convince the others that they

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will be sent to concentration camps, but the others believe she is still suffering from an illness and is confusing her stories with reality.

The people from both villages are loaded onto trains and transported to the camp. In the camp, they come face to face with the reality of what is happening. Chaya and her friends quickly learn the rules of survival from Rivka, a girl who has been in the camp longer. Though other groups are brought to the camp and sent straight into the gas chambers, Chaya's group is kept alive to work at the camp. Chaya, Rivka, Gitl, and others arrange to escape one night. The attempt fails for all except one, and the commandant is extremely angry with the attempt. He has the men who were involved shot, and he decides he has been too lenient with the others. He changes his "rule" of not sending healthy prisoners to the gas chamber. Soon afterward, Chaya and her friends are caught talking instead of working. Chaya's friends are all chosen, instantly, for death. Chaya trades places with Rivka and tells her to stay alive and remember the stories to pass on to others when she gets out.

At the point that Chaya walks into Lilith's Cave (the gas chamber) she returns to being Hannah and is back in New Rochelle with her family. Once back she realizes that Aunt Eva was actually Rivka, and Grandpa Will was actually Rivka's brother, Wolfe, from the concentration camp. Hannah has finally learned the importance of remembering the Holocaust.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Literary Analysis

One could say that the theme of this story is "Those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it." What is there to be learned from the Holocaust? Could an event like this ever be repeated?

Yes, this type of thing could happen again and is happening now. There are numerous places in the world (Albania, Africa, Kosovo, etc.) where people are killing others merely because of the religious or ethnic group to which they belong. People are driven from their homes to places and killed. Even in the United States, there are groups who exist for the sole purpose of ridding the world of "unclean" or unworthy people.

Literary Analysis

Briefly describe the kind of person Chaya's Aunt Gitl was.

Gitl was a tough woman with a mind of her own and a sense of humor. Before the camp scenes, she teases Chaya about her stories, and she is not shy about criticizing Yitzchak for leaving his children outside when he visits. In the camp, she has both a strong will to survive and compassion for others, often giving her food to children, while advising Chaya to look out for herself.

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Constructing Meaning

Throughout the story, the Nazis use code words, or euphemisms, to refer to their actions and people. One example of this practice came when they told Chaya and the others that they were being "relocated." Very often these code words were used to refer to death. Find or recall some examples of such words from the story. What did they actually mean? Why didn't they just use the correct words?

Among the euphemisms used in the camp are "the chosen" for those selected to be killed; "shmattes," which is Yiddish for rags or old clothing, to indicate corpses; "organize" as a verb for the stealing and conspiring done by prisoners; and "Lilith's Cave" to refer to the gas chambers. Using such words allowed the Nazis to disguise, from the world and themselves, the atrocities their brutal, mechanized system of death was committing. It is significant that a prisoner who said "death" was liable to be "chosen" simply for speaking the truth directly.

Constructing Meaning

Why did Rivka tell Hannah, "You must learn to read the numbers as you would a name"?

The two most important pieces of information Rivka taught Hannah to read in the prisoners' numbers were the individual's race/country of origin and longevity at the camp. It was dangerous to be around foreign prisoners, for example, who sometimes drew attention to themselves from guards because of their slowness to understand German commands. Prisoners who had lower numbers, and had therefore been in the camp a long time, were more likely to know how to behave or secretly obtain forbidden items. In short, the numbers could give Hannah clues about which prisoners might help her survive and which might present dangers to her.

Teachable Skills

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning When Chaya and the others entered the camp, they saw a sign that read ARBEIT MACHT FREI. The meaning of this phrase was "Work makes you free." The

irony of the sign was that at this camp, the phrase was in one gruesome way true: those who could work were usually the ones who stayed alive and were one day closer to freedom. Ask students to discuss this sign's meaning and purpose.

Responding to Literature The author took a risk in this novel by using the device of "time travel" familiar from children's fantasy books, like Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, as a bridge to a very realistic depiction of daily life in the concentration camp. You may want to explore how successful your students believe the author was. Would the novel have been weaker or stronger without Hannah's present-day perspective opening and closing it? Do the camp scenes feel "real" and believable, or does the fantasy element make them seem less threatening? Would most children have found it harder to read the book if it had been written simply from Chaya's own historical time and point of view?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors One of the novel's strengths is that it delivers a strong flavor of Jewish rituals and Yiddish expressions. As a class presentation, or as independent research projects, you might want to further expose students to both. Most of the Yiddish terms used are briefly explained in the book, but all could be covered further, particularly to distinguish slang terms like "schnorrer" from religious ones like "Seder" and "Kaddish." These religious rituals could be more rigorously and objectively presented than the novel needed to do. What is a Seder really meant to "celebrate"? What are the different elements that make up an observation of the Seder? How far back in history does the Jewish duty of "remembering" extend?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors The author made clever use of time travel to teach Hannah a lesson from history. Imagine that you could travel back in time to an important era or event. Consider what the place would look like, what people would wear, what their habits, attitudes and language would be. Gather information to help you get a complete picture of the time and place in which you would be. Create a scene from an event or time and act out a short

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play that would reflect your understanding of the setting.