

The Devil's Arithmetic by Jane Yolen

Organizational Patterns

This book is divided into nineteen chapters with approximately ten pages each. There is also an epilogue that explains what happened to many of the story's characters.

The story's action begins in the Bronx in the late twentieth century, where we meet Hannah, a thirteen-year-old Jewish girl. The majority of the story, however, takes place in 1942 Poland, where Hannah is mysteriously transported at the end of the third chapter. The story ends with Hannah's fortunate return to her own time and family in the final chapter. While in Poland, Hannah seems to have taken on the life of a girl named Chaya, an orphan who has gone to live with her aunt and uncle in the country. Some students may need clarification as to why the main character is referred to as "Hannah" by the narrator, yet "Chaya" by the majority of the characters.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

Themes

The importance of appreciating and understanding one's heritage

At the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Hannah wants little to do with her family's Seder celebration. She even goes so far as to wish that she could participate in her friend's Christian customs. She is also frightened by her grandfather's behavior, which is clearly influenced by his experiences during the Holocaust. When Hannah is transported back to 1942 Eastern Europe, however, she finds herself forced to experience the some of the darkest times in her people's heritage. This gives her a deeper understanding of both her ancient customs and family's heritage, which greatly improves her attitude. Throughout her experiences in a Nazi concentration camp, Hannah keeps herself from despairing by telling herself "Don't think. Do." (first appears on page 97) This mantra prevents her from dwelling on the surrounding horrors over which she has no control. Gitl, Chaya's aunt, also demonstrates great strength as she refuses to give the Nazis any sense of satisfaction by crying: "But promise me you will cry no more before these monsters. We will *never* cry again." (page 95) Such strength is contrasted against the behavior of others in the camp. The three-fingered woman, for example, has responded to her hardship by treating others cruelly, even when she is not ordered to do so (such as when she demanded that Hannah give her the blue hair ribbons

on page 89). Still others respond by giving up: Rivka calls these people “musselmen,” telling Hannah that “They stop listening. They stop seeing. It is as if they decide that life is not worth fighting for.” (page 114)

Setting

As previously stated, the action of the story is divided between late twentieth-century New York and 1942 Poland. I imagine that many of the students will be fairly familiar with New York’s (and more specifically the Bronx’s) ethnic diversity and high population of Jews. However, most students could probably benefit from a good explanation of what Poland was like during the Holocaust. Much reference is made to the rural way of life found in much of Poland at this time, along with the way it contrasts with the city life that Chaya is said to have lived prior to Hannah’s arrival in 1942. Telling students a bit about Poland’s agriculture and urban life and the contrast between the two can help them better understand some of the dialogue in the first half of the book. More importantly, however, would be giving students good background knowledge on how Poland was affected by World War II and the Holocaust, which will be further discussed under “Background Knowledge.”

Point of View

The entire novel is told from the third-person omniscient point of view. This point of view is perfect for this particular story; shortly after her ordeal at the concentration camp begins, Hannah begins to lose her memories from her life in New Rochelle, New York. This part of the story would have been more difficult to relate through anyone other than an omniscient third-person narrator, who can look into Hannah’s mind while remaining unaffected by the confusion Hannah is experiencing. This example can show students how point of view should be a choice that the author makes strategically.

Literary Terms

Dramatic Irony

The first example of dramatic irony appears when Hannah discovers that the group of Jews she is with is going to be “relocated.” Both Hannah and the reader know that they will, in fact, be taken to a concentration camp. Unfortunately, no one takes Hannah seriously when she tries to warn them about the horrors that lie ahead if they board the Nazi’s trains, extending the dramatic irony as most of the characters continue to remain ignorant of what the protagonist and reader know.

Later in the story, Hannah forgets her previous existence in New York, and all of the knowledge that she has of the future. Like everyone around her, she is now unaware of what exactly is going on. Now, the reader knows what none of the characters do.

Foil

In the concentration camp, we see examples of the best and the worst in people coming out under the intensity of their situation. Hannah meets two perfect examples of each type of reaction. First, she meets the three- (later two-) fingered woman. This woman is mean to those she has been ordered to supervise even when she is not ordered to treat them badly. Although her situation is pitiable (especially when she loses another finger), her constant crankiness and cruelty hardly endear her to anyone.

This woman's behavior contrasts sharply with that of Rivka. Rivka has also been put in something of a leadership position – she must issue bowls and serve the little food afforded the prisoners. Even though she is supervised and under orders, she makes an extra effort to treat everyone with warmth (pages 107-108) and help them by telling them “the rules.”

Affective Issues

Rivka's example can provide a good opportunity to discuss the importance of rising above adversity and staying true to what one believes in – both of which are messages that are often presented to students during their teenage years.

Another element in the story to which teens may be able to relate is Hannah's original feelings of frustration toward her family and their customs. She is confused and embarrassed by her Holocaust-survivor grandfather's odd and angry behavior. She would much rather be eating Easter candy with her Christian friend, Rosemary, than bitter herbs with her family. Many students may be similarly irritated with and embarrassed by their families – perhaps this book can help motivate them to also increase their understanding of their families and their heritage.

Students will also likely be able to relate to the book's message on sincerity. When Hannah opens the door in her grandfather's apartment that transports her to Poland, it is because her grandfather chose her to ceremonially open the door for the prophet Elijah. Her grandfather selected her because she gave all of her watered wine to Elijah's cup. However, this was not an act of true sacrifice like her grandfather thinks it is; she only offered her wine because she didn't like it. When Hannah walks through the door to be killed

in the place of her friend, Rivka, however, Hannah is making a genuine sacrifice for the greater good. It is after she has learned this lesson about true sacrifice that she finally returns to her family. Students are surrounded by insincerity in middle and high school – they should be able to contribute much to a discussion on this topic.

Vocabulary Issues

This book is written in beautiful yet simple prose which uses vocabulary that should already be quite familiar to most students. However, there are a great many Hebrew words used throughout the novel, such as *Seder*, *klezmer*, *badchan*, *shmatte*, and *render*. Learning the meanings of these words can help students increase both their understanding of the text and their cultural awareness.

Background Knowledge

Obviously, it would be important to give students a basic understanding of the historical events surrounding the Holocaust and World War II. Helping them realize that this book, while fictional, is based off actual events will allow them to more fully appreciate the book and its message. Because so much of the novel also deals with Jewish culture, it would be wise to familiarize students with customs such as *Seder*, leaving a seat for the Elijah, and wedding customs, all of which are referenced in the novel.

Implications for Students of Diversity

I suppose the most significant issues surrounding diversity would arise if there were students with significant German or Jewish heritage in the class. Having a German student or a student of recent-German decent in the class would further increase the already-existent importance of separating Hitler and Nazi ideology from Germans in general. While presenting background knowledge on the Holocaust, it may help to share accounts of Germans who resisted the Nazi movement, and discuss the ways in which Germany has tried to rise above its past.

If there are Jewish students or other students whose cultural heritage has been affected by genocide, it may be important to be watchful, paying close attention to their reactions to some of the more graphic and frightening elements in the book and background-knowledge material. These students very well may deal with the material like their peers do, but some may be more sensitive because it hits too close to home for them. Even students without such ties to genocide may be more sensitive than others due to other traumatic experiences or simply their general temperament. It is important

to respect the gravity of the subject by emphasizing how horrible the Holocaust really was, but equally important to avoid harming any student emotionally or psychologically. It would be wise to make sure that all students are given the opportunity to give feedback and to offer an alternative assignment should any of the material seem to be too much for them.

Gender Issues

Although the book depicts very traditional, domestic roles for women (women are often party to arranged marriages, do not attend school, and are expected to keep house while the men work in the field) in the part that takes place in Poland, there is also evidence of more modern attitudes in Hannah's life in New Rochelle, as she attends school and admires her Aunt Eva's independence. As long as it is emphasized that book's depiction of stereotyped roles for women is in keeping with the novel's historical and cultural context, there should be little to worry about.

The Central Question or Enduring Issue

Although there are many questions that are addressed in this book, I would say the most central would be "How can an understanding of our past affect our attitudes toward the present." As already discussed, Hannah is frustrated and confused by her family's customs, and seems to prefer her friend's Christian customs. However, after gaining a better understanding of and appreciation for the horrors of her family's and people's past, Hannah finds she is able to appreciate what her grandfather and aunt have experienced and also appreciate the cultural values that have allowed her people to endure so much hardship. Yolen does not explicitly state how Hannah's attitudes have changed; rather, we watch them change throughout her experience. At the end of her experience, when she learns that Rivka is in fact her aunt Eva, and Rivka's tormented brother her grandfather, Hannah, along with the reader, is able to apply what she has seen and learned in the concentration camp directly to her family. We know that her attitudes toward them are now the same as her attitudes toward those she grew to love and respect in the camp.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

1. Research project on background information
 - a. Have students research and present five-minute group projects on a topic related to the novel (*Seder*, Jewish history in Poland, concentration camps, etc.).

- b. Have students identify something from the text that interests them (the trains to concentration camps, ceremonial Jewish dress, etc.), and have them submit it for your approval. Have them write a short (two to three page) research paper on this subject.
2. Creative project ideas
 - a. Have students write a short story or part of a longer story in which someone from the present day is transported back in time to another historically significant time and place. Have their writing answer questions such as “How would someone from today react to that period’s culture?” or “What would someone from the present day be able to tell someone from this time period in order to help them?” Ideas for locations/time period: Salem Witch Trials, ancient Egypt, the Roman Empire. Require that students have at least one good research source, and that they write a one-page summary of the historical information that is important to their story (Yolen’s appendix “What is True About This Book” is a good model for this).

Information/Functional Texts

To provide students with good background knowledge on the history and culture involved in this book, they could read

1. age-appropriate first hand accounts of Holocaust survivors (such as *The Little Boy Star: An Allegory of the Holocaust* by Rachel Hausfater, *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* by Hoestlandt, or *Erika’s Story* by Ruth Vander Zee).
2. newspaper articles from the period (on the Nazi occupation of Poland or on the discovery of the concentration camps) – one of the best resources for this would be the BBC’s online archive. (Here are some good web links:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/27/newsid_352000/3520986.stm;
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/15/newsid_355700/3557341.stm;
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/december/17/newsid_3547000/3547151.stm
3. age-appropriate articles