

Reflections:

A Student Response Journal for...

The Devil's Arithmetic

by Jane Yolen

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Chapter 1

1. Passover (called “Pesach” in Hebrew) is a Jewish holiday celebrated for eight days honoring the deliverance of the ancient Hebrews from slavery. The Seder is a feast in Jewish homes on the first evening of Passover, which, like all Jewish holidays, starts at sundown. At this family celebration, the Haggadah (a book containing the order, or seder, in which the meal should progress and a narrative of the Exodus from Egypt) is read. Some Orthodox Jews also have a feast on the second night of Passover. The name Passover is from the Book of Exodus in the Torah, which describes how God promised the Israelites that, on the night of the killing of the Egyptian first-born children, the Angel of Death would pass over their homes.

Hannah does not want to attend the family Seder because she and her brother will be the only children there. Can you understand how she feels? Write a letter to Hannah letting her know that you understand. In the letter, help Hannah to recognize the special significance and importance of the Seder feast.

2. In the following passage from the book, Hannah comments on her mother’s habitual sighing.

“...Will lost everyone but your Aunt Eva. A family of eight all but wiped out.” She sighed again but Hannah suspected there was little sympathy in that sigh. It was more like punctuation. Instead of putting periods at the ends of sentences, her mother signed.

In one paragraph, similar to the example above, write about a mannerism of one of your family members that you find annoying.

3. At the end of this chapter Hannah goes into the bathroom to wash off the lipstick mark left on her forehead by her Aunt Eva’s kiss. As Hannah, write a diary entry discussing your conflicting feelings about Aunt Eva.

Chapter 2

4. Hannah describes an incident when she was a young girl. Jealous of the attention her baby brother is receiving, Hannah writes a number on her arm, imitating the concentration camp number on Grandpa Will's arm. She hopes to please Grandpa, but instead she upsets him. Hannah has never forgotten the incident.

Most of us have painful, embarrassing moments from our past that will sometimes resurface in our memories. We relive the pain and humiliation. Write about such a moment in your life. Try to analyze why you relive the incident in your memory. Then in a second paragraph, give Hannah some advice on how to stop her painful memory from recurring.

5. As Hannah is growing up, she is beginning to view the adults in her family differently. She is beginning to see them as people instead of adults who, to a child, can do no wrong. In this chapter, Hannah describes her changing and conflicting feelings about Aunt Eva. As Hannah, write Aunt Eva a letter discussing these feelings. In the letter, describe to Aunt Eva the ways in which she is special to you.
6. Why do you suppose Hannah is so annoyed by Aaron's prayers that she decides to pinch him? As Hannah, write a letter of apology to Aaron. In the letter, explain to him why you were especially annoyed by his behavior.

Chapter 3

7. Jane Yolen provides the reader with definitions for most of the Yiddish words and Jewish ceremonies mentioned in the book. Write a dictionary for the terms in this chapter. Look for context clues to find the meanings. For example, the dictionary might have a definition as follows:

Yarmulke: Small, round hat worn by Jewish men during prayers.

8. Grandpa Will insists that Hannah is old enough to have a glass of watered-down wine at the Seder feast. Her mother objects, but then she gives in. As Hannah's mother, write a diary entry describing how you feel when Grandpa Will interferes with the way you want to raise your children.
9. Hannah does not believe in superstitions such as the Easter Bunny, so she also does not believe that the profit Elijah will come through the door. To her, these are "*baby stories*" and she is too old for such things.

Faith is defined as an unquestioning belief that does not require proof or evidence. As Hannah's rabbi, write Hannah a letter telling her about the value of faith. Use incidents from your own experience to illustrate the ideas in the letter.

Response Journal

Chapter 4

10. Suspension of disbelief is a literary term that is defined as the willingness of the audience to accept the behavior and motivations of a character in a story. In this story, the reader must suspend disbelief that Hannah opens the door for Elijah and is transported into another place and time.

As a literary critic, write a one-or two-paragraph review of this chapter discussing the extent to which the author successfully helps the readers to suspend their disbelief. The review might begin as follows:

Young readers often enjoy a story that provides them with entertainment and an interesting escape into unreality. These readers will not be disappointed by Yolen's novel, *The Devil's Arithmetic*. In this novel, a young Jewish girl, Hannah, as part of a Seder celebration, symbolically opens a door to admit the prophet Elijah. She is immediately transported to a different time and place. Yolen helps the reader to accept and adjust to this change by...

11. Create a family tree for Shmuel that pictorially illustrates his relationship to the following people: Chaya (Hannah), Fayge, Gitl, Moishe, and Reb Boruch.
12. One technique an author uses to enhance characterization is to create two similar characters. The reader then gains more information about the characters by comparing them. In this novel, Gitl and Aunt Eva are similar characters. Write a conversation between Chaya and Gitl. In the dialogue, Chaya discusses with Gitl the ways she reminds Chaya of her Aunt Eva.

The dialogue might begin as follows:

Chaya: You remind me of my Aunt Eva.
Gitl: I did not know you had an Aunt Eva. Was she your mother's sister?
Chaya: [Hesitates] She is Grandpa Will's sister.
Gitl: I do not know Grandpa Will. Are you feeling well? Why do you think I remind you of this Aunt Eva?
Chaya: Well, you both...

Chapter 5

13. Shmuel confides in Chaya. “*being* married does not bother me,...But *getting* married—that frightens me!”

Shmuel is afraid of the ceremony, not of the marriage. Can you understand how he feels? Change this statement to reflect your feelings about an event in your life. For example, the statement could be changed as follows:

“The level of work in high school does not bother me,” the eighth grader said. “But finding my way around the school frightens me!”

14. Shmuel observes that Yitzchak is “henpecked and not even married to” Gitl yet. Gitl does seem to treat him harshly. In your opinion, does she really care for Yitzchak and his children? Yitzchak does not argue with any of Gitl’s criticisms.

Assume that the dialogue between Yitzchak and Gitl went differently. Suppose that Yitzchak answers back when Gitl criticizes him. What do you think he might say? How might she respond? Complete the following dialogue between Gitl and Yitzchak discussing the children, Reuven and Tzipporah.

The dialogue might begin as follows:

Gitl: So where are Reuven and Tzipporah?
Yitzchak: They are waiting outside.
Gitl: Outside?! I suppose they are in cages like the chickens.
Yitzchak: I do not know why you say such things, Gitl. You know...