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Iconic Jewish Children's Books

Educator Guide



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241 1st Avenue North, Minneapolis, MN 55401

Lesson Plan by Betsy R. Rosenthal
HC: 978-1-7284-2052-3
PB: 978-1-7284-2053-0

Ages 9-13 | Grades 4-7
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Summary

In 1928 Odessa, Texas, eleven-year-old James is struggling to find “his purpose” in life, and along the way, he discovers a family secret. With his father having been struck dead by lightning and his mother in jail, James is treated as an outcast at school. But James has a loyal friend in Paul, a Russian Jewish immigrant boy. Together they battle the school bully and Paul helps James uncover his beloved Abuela’s hidden history.

About the Author

A former civil rights attorney, Betsy R. Rosenthal is an award-winning author of seven books for children, poems that appear in anthologies, magazine and newspaper essays, and has also ghost-written memoirs. She did extensive research, including a trip to Spain, for *When Lightnin’ Struck*, her second middle grade novel. Her middle grade book, *Looking for Me in this great big family*, was a Sydney Taylor Notable Book for Older Readers, a Junior Library Guild selection, and a PJ OurWay selection. Betsy lives in Pacific Palisades, California with her husband and two dogs and is enjoying watching her three adult children follow their own unique paths.

Before reading:

Ask students what they think the book might be about based on the title.

Ask them to describe what they see on the jacket cover.

Ask: What clues suggest what the book might be about?

Can you figure out who the main character is from the cover?

After they read the book, ask students to look at the cover again. Now can they explain where those clues appear in the story and what they mean?

During reading:

Language

Ask students to identify words in other languages that appear in the book and ask which languages they are. Can they give definitions for the words they’ve found?

(Spanish, Yiddish, Russian, Hebrew)

Introduce students to the Yiddish language.

Historical period

Ask students to identify details that suggest the time and place of the story. Examples include idioms and expressions used, accents and dialogue with broken English, type of transportation (e.g. model of Pappy's truck), playground games, foods (e.g. Jewish Russian foods, Spanish foods, and diner food), and names of characters (e.g. Pappy, Jeb, Malvern, Virgil, Fanny).

Ask for details of the natural surroundings that give a sense of the place. Examples include prickly pear cactus, mesquite, buffalo bones, meteor crater, buffalo wallows, twig girdlers, and horned toads.

After reading:

Religion and Anti-Semitism

Questions for students:

How is Paul's Jewish religion shown? Examples include holiday and shabbat observances in his home, his stepfather and uncle's clothing, special foods, family members names, the Yiddish language, and what happened to his father in Russia.

How is James' religion shown? Church attendance, for instance.

What is anti-Semitism? Explain negative stereotypes about Jews and old myths that people still believe.

What hints of anti-Semitism do you find among the townspeople in the story?

Where do you think these anti-Jewish feelings or thoughts, particularly on the part of the schoolchildren, come from?

Do you think anti-Semitism still exists today?

What do you think the terms conversos and crypto Jews mean? Here the teacher can give a short history of what happened to the Jews of Spain in 1492. This history is covered in the Author's Note in the back of the book.

What were the clues that James' abuela was a descendant of converso Jews? Examples include the Bible, the amulet, and her unusual non-Catholic practices. Why do you think she hid her Jewish ancestry? Why didn't she ever reveal it to James?

If you had been a Jew in Spain in 1492 and the King and Queen ordered you to either convert to Christianity or leave the country, what do you think you'd have done? Would you have stayed and secretly practiced Judaism, even though it was extremely dangerous to do so? Would you have left your home, your possessions, your friends and family behind and moved to a different country where it was safer for Jews to live?

Why did Paul's family come to Odessa, Texas? Was it to escape religious persecution? How is Paul's family's journey similar to that of James' ancestors?

Are there still people in the world today escaping religious and other types of persecution and dangerous conditions in their home countries? Should the United States be a place of refuge for them?

If you have students in your class who have come from other countries, ask them why they came to this country, what they miss, if anything, about the country of their birth, and what it was like for them to start a new life in a strange place.

Research project:

Assign a research project about anti-Semitism—Students can compare how anti-Semitism manifested itself in Russia in the early 1900s when Paul’s family fled, versus how it was exhibited in the U.S. in the late 1920s when James and Paul were kids, versus the forms it took in Spain during the period of the Inquisition. And if it still exists today, how does it appear?