

Teacher's Resource Guide for The Devil's Arithmetic

Multicultural Thematic for The Devil's Arithmetic Author Jane Yolen Unit Developed by
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Summary...

A young Jewish girl, Hannah, sitting down to Seder with her family has a casual attitude about her family traditions. She also is annoyed by the comments of her grandfather regarding the Holocaust of WWII. As she opens the door to the hallway to "welcome" in the prophet Elijah, Hannah finds herself in the 1942 setting of the Polish countryside. Her Aunt Gitl and Uncle Shmuel welcome her, explaining that he will be married tomorrow in the shtetl of his bride to be, Fayge. Hannah is called "Chaya" by her aunt and uncle and they sweep her up in the traditions and festivities of European Jewish culture. Before the wedding can commence however, the entire shtetl is herded into waiting German army trucks and taken off on a horrible four-day journey to a German internment camp. Here, Hannah experiences the pain and suffering of the Jews who were the initiates of the Holocaust. She witnesses the brutality of death, living day by day, not knowing if it will be her turn to be "chosen" by the Commandant to be incinerated in the "factory". By the story's end, Hannah is chosen, but as she enters the portal to the furnace she reenters her life back with her real family. It is then that she understands and can communicate with a knowing look to her aunt and grandfather about what they experienced during the Holocaust.

Reading Level ...

High School

Themes...

The Holocaust Relationships Concentration Camps/Slave Labor Nazis/Nazism Stereotype Anti-Semitism/Hate groups/hate crimes

Before Reading Questions...

The story *The Devil's Arithmetic* is about Jews who were placed in concentration camps in Europe during World War II. Tell in writing what you know and understand about these camps. Jane Yolen, author of *The Devil's Arithmetic*, interviewed friends and relatives about their knowledge and experiences of the Holocaust. It was a very difficult and sad experience for her. Share experiences with your classmates about difficult times your grandparents or relatives have had in their lifetime. Be ready to explain how this might compare to what you know about people's lives in internment camps during World War II. Because a large part of the novel deals with family life and spiritual practices of being a Jew, share with the class what you might already understand about these traditions.

Purpose...

Vocabulary...

Many Yiddish words and phrases are used in the story. Many of them are repeated and have special meaning for understanding the content. Make a list of these words and phrases for the students and have them fill in their meaning as they go along. Check in with them as they progress through their reading to make sure these words and phrases are accurately defined. Find help to pronounce them in the correct way.

After Reading Questions...

Ask the students to write a review of the book *The Devil's Arithmetic*. Besides explaining the story line in a paragraph they must also relate to other characters. How do the characters relate to each other and what do they do to support or not support each other? Would this be a good book for other children to read? What should other students do to prepare themselves to read this book? Let students imagine that they are one of the prisoners in the camp that Hannah describes. Have them write a first person account in dairy form of their personal experience. Students must remember to provide a well written and realistic account of their experience. The dairy must be expressed over a period of days or weeks. Allow students to imagine that they are survivors of the Holocaust and must tell their story to one of their grandchildren. They should create a story in a way that would be meaningful for both grandparent and grandchild. This can be done in written form or orally on cassette tape. Instruct the students to write a descriptive paragraph of a camp such as the one Hannah and her relatives were taken to. This description should include the housing, work stations, food distribution lines, appearance of the prisoners, the guard's clothing, grounds, wire fences and barricades, and the tall factory chimney in the background, in the camps. Have the students write a poem of hope that might be expressed by one of the prisoners while in a camp like the one Hannah was in.

Language Arts ...

Social Studies ...

Have students research the treatment of Japanese-Americans in the United States during the time of the Holocaust. Instruct the students to write a short essay about the similarities between the treatment of the two groups during their internment. This should include the design of the camps, the possessions allowed the prisoners, the rules of the camp, and the daily activities they were allowed to engage in. Have students draw a contemporary map showing the locations of the various camps the Germans ran during the Holocaust. Each camp location should be labeled and a number written by that camp identifying the total number of Jews that were killed there during the War.

Math...

If people stood side by side the space each would take up would be approximately two feet. Knowing that 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust, determine mathematically how many miles long the line would be if these victims stood next to each other in a wide row. Put this distance into perspective by relating it to the distance from one coast of our country to the other. How many states would be traversed by this row? The National Holocaust Museum has had many visitors pass through its doors since it opened. Find out how many people on the average visit this museum each day. Calculate how many visitor days are needed to equal the number of Jews killed during the Holocaust. Relate this to time span of the Holocaust (approximately two and a half years).

Art...

Draw a sketch of a Jewish citizen prior to being captured by German soldiers. Next to it draw the likeness of this person following a term in an internment camp. Have both standing up facing forward. Show the differences as realistically as possible.

Science...

Background Information ...

National attention has been given to Europe's Holocaust of World War II. This focus has been renewed in part due to the alarming belief on the part of some Americans that no such thing occurred. History shows however, that 6,000,000 Jews lost their lives during the holocaust. Locations such as Auschwitz, Treblinka Chelmno, Sobibor, Ravensbruck, Majdanek, Dachau, Birkenau, Dergen –Belsen, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, and Belzec were the sites where families, particularly Jewish, suffered the grossest indignation and loss of life. Husbands, wives, and children were separated from each other, forced to give up their possessions, and placed in camp conditions of hard labor, inadequate food, and poor health facilities. Each man, woman, and child was shaved bald, given a set of clothes belonging to someone else, tattooed with a serial number, and given a small shelf to sleep upon. Family members were not recognized as units, and kept apart. Survival was measured in terms of getting by a day at a time, knowing that a misplaced word, a look of defiance, or an error in work could result in a severe beating or a trip to the gas chamber (the showers). As these camps filled and became too crowded, newcomers were not processed into the camps, but sent to the "factories" to be incinerated. In Auschwitz alone, 2 million Jews were gassed. Each camp carried its own indelible stamp of heinousness. Today, renewed efforts are being made to educate those born after this time about the events of the Holocaust. The National Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. is one example. Many books are in print, for adults and for children, regarding the Holocaust.

About the Author...

Born and raised in New York City, Jane Yolen currently lives in Hatfield, Massachusetts. She received her BA from Smith College and master's degree in education from the University of Massachusetts. She has authored more than 170 books. Jane Yolen also is a storyteller, a song composer, and a mother. All Jane Yolen's stories are rooted in her sense of family and self. Her writing of *The Devil's Arithmetic* is authenticated by her own family traditions as a Jew. The information gathered about the holocaust is through interviews and information gathered through friends who interviewed those who survived the Holocaust. Although the story is fiction, the information is an amalgamation of all that went on in these camps. It is portrayed to be realistic. Jane Yolen has won numerous awards for her writing. She wrote the Caldecott Honor Book in 1983 for her book entitled *The Emperor and the Kite*. She wrote the Caldecott Medal winner of 1988 for the book *Owl Moon*. *The Devil's Arithmetic* was awarded the National Jewish Book Award in 1988.

Suggested Readings ...

I Am a Star, by I. Auerbacher
I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust, by Bitton-Jackson
Jacob's Rescue: A Holocaust Story, by M. Drucker & M. Halperin
Flying Against the Wind: The Story of a Young Woman Who Defied the Nazis, By I. Friedman
Abe's Story: A Holocaust Memoir, edited by J. Korn
Number the Stars, by L. Lowery
Daniel's Story, by C.

Matas