

# **Bee Season: A Novel Study Guide**

## **Bee Season: A Novel by Myla Goldberg**

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## Plot Summary

Fifth-grade student Eliza Naumann is, and probably always will be, average. This is only unfortunate when one considers that Eliza is the only average member of the Naumann family. Her parents, Saul and Miriam, are intellectually superior, as is Aaron, Eliza's older brother. Other than an affinity for movies and television, there is not much that makes Eliza stand out. At McKinley Elementary school, Eliza is a mediocre student, at best. Everything shifts for Eliza Naumann and her entire family, however, when she wins the school and district spelling bees.

*Bee Season* by Myla Goldberg is the story of a Eliza Naumann's search for her own specialness in a family of patently special people. Saul and Miriam Naumann are both only children who live peacefully with their offspring in Norristown, Pennsylvania. Saul, a student of Jewish mysticism, is a cantor at the local synagogue. His wife Miriam is a driven woman who works as a lawyer and keeps an obsessively clean house. Aaron Naumann, who is sixteen at the beginning of the novel, has inherited his parents' thirst for knowledge. Aaron is a brilliant student, if somewhat socially maladjusted, who begins the narrative searching for God. Eliza Naumann, however, embarks on her own journey into spirituality and maturity when her father offers to help her "get to know the letters" in preparation for the national spelling bee. Through the writings of thirteenth-century Jewish mystic Abraham Abulafia, Eliza comes to realize that spelling is more than simply assembling letters into words. To Eliza, spelling becomes a way to commune with God and achieve transcendent enlightenment.

*Bee Season* is also the story of a family whose members all harbor explosive individual secrets. Saul Naumann thirsts for the kind of spiritual acuity he sees in his daughter Eliza. His studies of Abraham Abulafia do not take shape for Saul Naumann until Eliza begins studying for the national bee. Aaron Naumann yearns to be accepted and loved by a God with whom he can communicate at will. He finds God in an unlikely place and refuses to let go. Miriam Naumann is a kleptomaniac whose compulsion eventually drives her to break into strangers' houses in order to reclaim parts of her fragmented self. Eliza Naumann secretly wishes to achieve enlightenment in order to finally take home the trophy for winning the national spelling bee. "Bee season," that time of preparing to take the stage and turn herself over to the magic of dancing letters, becomes a season of awakening for the entire Naumann family as Saul, Miriam, Aaron and young Eliza are forever changed.

Then there is the kaleidoscope—the ultimate evidence that things can be ordered and re-ordered until they form a colorful, stimulating the unification of one fragmented soul's emotional detritus.



# Pages 1 - 63

## Pages 1 - 63 Summary

When *Bee Season* by Myla Goldberg begins, Eliza Naumann is in the fifth grade. Eliza lives with her older brother, Aaron, and her parents Miriam and Saul. Miriam works as a lawyer and Saul is the cantor at Temple Beth Amicha Synagogue. When Eliza wins the school spelling bee, a new world opens before her very eyes. Not everything Eliza Naumann learns is pleasant or easy, however, and her participation in the national bee sets in motion a course of events which will change the Naumann family forever.

Eliza Naumann is a mediocre student who wins her class spelling bee and Eliza is just as surprised as anyone. Eliza is in Ms. Bergermeyer's combined fourth-and-fifth grade class at McKinley Elementary. The students in the class are of average intelligence. Eliza's brother, Aaron, is the family's shining star, having been selected for TAG (Talented and Gifted) classes when he was Eliza's age. Her status as patently average has always been somewhat disappointing to Eliza's parents.

After winning the school spelling bee and qualifying for the district bee, Eliza slips the official notice under her father's study door. Saul Naumann is very protective of his study; considering it a sanctuary of meditation and peace. The family knows that when Saul's study door is closed, they are not to interrupt him.

As a young man, Saul's father Henry (a mechanic by trade) renounces his Jewish faith and changes the family name to Newman. When Saul is thirteen, his mother Lisa shows Saul a box containing family mementos relating to his family's Jewish Orthodoxy. She also takes Saul to synagogue and begins re-introducing Saul to Judaism. Two years later, Lisa Naumann dies of cancer. Saul experiments with LSD during his college years.

After three days, Saul has still not mentioned Eliza's spelling bee victory.

Eliza's mother Miriam is a powerhouse, a lawyer and a compulsive housekeeper. Miriam is the only child of Ruth and Melvin Grossman, a wealthy Jewish couple. Miriam meets Saul when she is still in law school and Saul is a research assistant to a professor of Judaism. Miriam sees Saul as someone who will make a solid husband and allow Miriam the autonomy she desires. Saul views Miriam as someone who would not object to his pursuit of knowledge.

Eliza asks Aaron to drive her to the district spelling bee. Aaron is seventeen. Eliza notices that her brother has chest hair and realizes that their relationship is about to change. Eliza has always seen Aaron as a protector and a guide. Eliza and Aaron finally go to Saul's study to tell their father about Eliza winning the school bee.

When Eliza is five and Aaron is eleven, she sees her brother being beaten up by a group of boys. She watches, unable to do anything to help him (p. 30). Aaron refuses to



tell Saul or the principal who beat him up. Secretly, Saul feels a sense of pride that his son is not a tattletale.

Aaron Naumann first sees God when he is eight years old. He is on an airplane with Saul. Actually, what Aaron sees is just the blinking light on the wing of the airplane. They are returning from Henry Newman's funeral. Aaron begins to pray silently to God to reveal Himself.

Eliza Naumann wins the preliminary district spelling bee. Aaron remembers the day of his bar mitzvah. During the bar mitzvah prayers, something mystical occurs for Aaron Naumann. Suddenly, he senses the totality of the congregation. Aaron feels God once more.

Upon their return home, Saul is excited to hear that his daughter, whom he calls "Elly-belly", has won the district spelling bee. Eliza and her family plan to travel to Philadelphia in four weeks where Eliza will compete in the district finals. Eliza begins studying. Spelling practice is organic as well as intellectual. Eliza senses the words, visualizes them: "The letters are magnets, her brain a refrigerator door" (p. 44).

Eliza develops a sense of self-confidence and begins sleeping with her word list under her pillow.

On the day of his marriage to Miriam Grossman, Saul experiences a religious and spiritual reawakening. Saul views the smashing of the cup during the marriage ceremony as emblematic of the destruction of his past. Over the years, however, he and Miriam drift apart. Theirs is a companionable, if sexless, marriage.

Saul offers to help Eliza practice for the district finals but she refuses, feeling somewhat satisfied at the prospect of doing it all on her own.

At temple, Saul Naumann announces before the congregation that his daughter will soon participate in the finals of the district spelling bee. The members of the congregation all wish Eliza luck. Even Mrs. Schwartz gives her a piece of cake with a flower on it. Flowers are highly coveted and Eliza considers this a special treat.

Aaron tries not to be jealous about Saul announcing Eliza's special achievement.

The day of the district finals, Eliza is especially excited that her whole family is in the audience, even though the tights Miriam chose for Eliza to wear itch terribly. Eliza spells her first word, ELEMENT, correctly.

Aaron is not exactly thrilled to be at the spelling bee. He does, however, appreciate being there with his family. After all, "it [reinforces] the idea that the four of them are bound by more than a shared roof" (p. 56).

When Eliza is first brought home from the hospital, Aaron is in awe. Saul asks Aaron to help him "look out" for Eliza (p. 57).



As the bee continues, Eliza finds that she is unable to get the theme from Star Wars out of her head. The girl sitting next to Eliza is eliminated. Watching Eliza on-stage, Miriam Naumann realizes that she has never felt connected to her daughter. Miriam is disappointed that Eliza is not more intelligent, more like Miriam herself. Eliza looks just like Miriam when Miriam was her daughter's age.

By round 12, two more contestants have been eliminated and Eliza is left to compete against just one other speller—a young Pakistani boy who "carries himself like a middle-aged businessman" and grinds his teeth (p. 60). Eliza wins the district final spelling bee after the Pakistani boy misspells GLISSANDO.

## Pages 1 - 63 Analysis

In this section, the four main protagonists are introduced. The picture that Myla Goldman paints of the Naumann family is neither positive nor negative initially. However, with the introduction of Saul's family history, it is revealed that he is a man on a quest to find and become closer to God. Similarly, the stage is also set for Aaron Naumann's own quest to know and be known by God.

This section also serves to establish the characters' as they are internally. The theme of disappointment is woven throughout, beginning with Saul's failed relationship with his own father, Hank. In addition, the reader learns that Eliza is the only average member of her family. Both her parents and Aaron are intellectually self-assured, and it is Aaron who shines. It is Eliza's spelling bee wins, though, that usher in her own feeling of belonging. In other words, Eliza manages to distinguish herself within the family as talented and gifted in her own way. Eliza's transition produces some measure of resentment in Aaron, whose position in the family hierarchy shifts when Saul decides to help Eliza with her spelling practice rather than playing guitar with his son.

The narrative shifts back and forth between past and present with ease and fluidity, making it appear as though there is little difference between what is and what was for the Naumanns. This technique also establishes the continual effect that one's past has on one's current situation.

Eliza's witnessing of Aaron being bullied and its emotional after-effects provides a foreshadowing of the ways in which the siblings' relationship is about to change. On page 24, it states: "[Eliza's] gilded image of [Aaron] will last four more months before the real world strips it from him." Seeing Aaron, her one-time protector and hero, unable to defend himself causes Eliza to question Aaron's role in her life and also leaves the character with the question of who will step into Aaron's place. Conversely, however, Aaron's subsequent refusal to identify his tormentors leaves Saul feeling proud of his son for a reason other than Aaron's intellectual abilities. Unfortunately, the feeling eventually fades when Aaron claims to espouse the views of ISKCON.

Saul's study and his proprietary attitude toward the room itself and its contents, represents the way in which Saul Naumann maintains distance from Miriam, Eliza and



Aaron. The study also represents the existence of secrets in the narrative proper. Each member of the Naumann family has a secret which remains hidden from the others. Once the sanctity of the study is breached, in the form of Saul and Eliza's study sessions, the Naumann family secrets come to the surface one by one.



# Pages 64 - 137

## Pages 64 - 137 Summary

Miriam Grossman first discovers "Perfectimundo" as a child. "Perfectimundo" is Miriam's word for something that is absolutely ideal—as if all the planets were aligned just for her. She first experiences "Perfectimundo" during a game of hopscotch in which the pebble lands in the perfect center of one of the squares. "Perfectimundo" is something Miriam searches for her entire life. She re-discovers "Perfectimundo" when she first looks into a kaleidoscope.

Saul collects all the local newspapers that mention Eliza's district spelling bee win. Eliza looks at the family photo in one of the newspapers and does not like what she sees. Her family appears disjointed; her parents' distance from one another is readily apparent: "Her family doesn't look anything like the stuff of photography studios" (p. 65). The fantasy Eliza holds in her imagination about the way her family should appear is shattered by the reality of the people in the newspaper picture.

Miriam presents Eliza with special gift. It is the kaleidoscope Miriam was given when she was a girl. Eliza is somewhat puzzled that her mother has given her a gift. Eliza is also slightly disappointed. Miriam regrets giving Eliza the kaleidoscope when she witnesses Eliza's reaction.

Miriam starts coming home late from work. She says it is because there is so much work for her to do at the law firm.

At school, Eliza experiences mixed reactions to her spelling bee win. Some of the smarter girls ask Eliza about the spelling bee. She tells them, "It was like being famous" (p. 68). Carrie Waxham, however, pokes Eliza and calls her stuck-up and a snob. Eliza tries to hold back her tears and tells herself that the incident with Carrie does not matter. These are the words Aaron uses when he is bullied at school.

Saul Naumann devises a plan to help Eliza prepare for the national spelling bee. Saul buys Webster's Third International Dictionary—all three volumes—and clears a space in his small study just for Eliza. Eliza is excited about studying with Saul but she consciously decides not to reveal her excitement to Saul, afraid that her enthusiasm will cause Saul to change his mind. The two of them study five hours on weekdays and seven hours on the weekend.

For Eliza, studying the words in the dictionary is more an adventure than a chore. It is like learning to fly. A new universe opens up for Eliza.

Miriam first steals when she is almost nine years old. Miriam steals a pink rubber ball from Berman Toys. The Dutch governess is subsequently fired for giving Miriam a rosary for her birthday.





Aaron senses something is different about Eliza. He feels resentful that Saul chooses to help Elly study for the national spelling bee rather than practicing guitar with Aaron. When Aaron knocks on the study door, his father chides him for interrupting the study session with Eliza. Aaron feels rejected and humiliated.

As an adult, Miriam steals things which call out to her rather than things she needs or wants.

Aaron realizes that he no longer enjoys practicing or playing the guitar. To him, the most enjoyable part about playing is spending uninterrupted time with Saul.

Aaron begins to question his acceptance of Judaism. He feels as though he has simply gone along with something he did not consciously choose for himself.

Miriam has sewn special pickets into a coat, skirt and blouse, enabling her to hide the stolen goods in her clothes so as not to draw unnecessary attention to herself.

Although Miriam is an only child, she is well aware of those children her mother had that did not live. Miriam's mother was reluctant to interact with Miriam as an infant, fearing that Miriam might die as the others had.

Miriam's pregnancy with Aaron prompted fears that Aaron would be born too early and deformed. Miriam resents breastfeeding Aaron after carrying him for nine months, sustaining him in her body.

Eliza finds joy in practicing for the national bee with Saul. Aaron barely speaks to Eliza anymore.

Aaron finds that attending synagogue is becoming somewhat tiresome. He feels as though he no longer fits in. Aaron has not felt God's presence in the three years since his bar mitzvah. Aaron decides to visit a church to conduct his own religious research. Aaron is at once thrilled and apprehensive about visiting a Christian church. He chooses St. Patrick Catholic church in Norristown.

Aaron's first experience in a Catholic worship service is rather heady. He cannot decide how to properly make the sign of the cross and he kneels at the wrong time. Aaron struggles with the idea of taking communion. He does not (as yet) believe that Jesus is the Messiah or the son of God. Aaron thinks of the Catholic confessionals as telephone booths directly connected to God. Aaron takes communion and is unimpressed. He leaves St. Patrick Church through a side door.

Early in their courtship, Saul explains the concept of Tikkun Olam to Miriam. Tikkun Olam means "The fixing of the world." In essence, the concept has to do with healing the world of poverty, hatred, cruelty and other forms of injustice by doing good. Thus, God's light in the world is reunited with itself. Miriam feels that Tikkun Olam refers to her finding and reuniting the lost pieces of herself. The lost pieces are the items that Miriam steals.



Aaron decides that Christianity is not for him and decides to learn something about Eastern religions. Buddhism is first.

At school, Eliza is caught practicing for the spelling bee when she should be paying attention to the teacher, Ms. Bergermeyer.

Sinna Bhagudori, one of the "smart kids," begins saving Eliza a seat in the lunchroom.

Eliza wonders why Aaron no longer plays his guitar. Aaron says it is because he has no talent for music.

Aaron remembers wetting his pants at the sight of his dead grandfather lying in a coffin at the funeral home. He is with Saul when they view the body.

Eliza knows that her mother's distance has something to do with the kaleidoscope Miriam gives her. Miriam asks Eliza what happens when Eliza thinks of a spelling word. Later, Miriam and Eliza go to the attic where Miriam gives Eliza a blouse with big buttons on it to wear at the national spelling bee. Miriam's name is written on a tag inside the blouse's collar. Eliza hugs the collar to her until she can feel the letters of Miriam's name pressing against her skin.

Aaron tries Buddhist meditation for the first time. He is uncomfortable sitting in the lotus position.

The following day, Eliza and Saul leave for the national spelling bee in Washington, DC. In her husband's absence, Miriam Naumann feels free and relaxed. Miriam is planning something significant, something she feels will liberate her.

Saul helps Eliza study for the upcoming national spelling bee. When Eliza spells GEGENSCHIN incorrectly, she becomes frustrated with Saul's suggestion to "let the letters show [her] where to go" (p. 106).

Aaron continues with his pursuit of enlightenment by meditating in the nude.

Miriam drives to an unfamiliar neighborhood, enters an unfamiliar house, and steals a blue ceramic dish.

The night before the spelling bee, Eliza sneaks out of her hotel room and stands in the empty ballroom, looking at the stage where she will be sitting with the other contestants.

Aaron decides to practice his meditation sitting under a tree in a public park not far from where the Naumanns live. In the park, Aaron meets a man named Chali (whose real name is John) and Aaron tells Chali about his quest to find meaning in organized religion.

Eliza makes it through the first three rounds of the national spelling bee.



Miriam was never close to her parents, but she understands having inherited their eccentricities. During her junior year of college, Miriam's parents are both killed by an automobile while walking by the side of the road. Miriam's parents were also only children and Miriam finds herself completely alone in the world.

Eliza advances to the finals of the national spelling bee.

Aaron's new acquaintance invites Aaron to a religious service the following Sunday—the same day that Eliza and Saul will return from Washington, DC. Aaron decides that he will lie and tell his parents that he has plans to have pizza and see a movie with school friends. Aaron realizes that his school friendships are only superficial and he cannot imagine talking to his schoolmates about God-consciousness.

Over dinner, Eliza tells Saul that she wants to win the national spelling bee. Saul tells Eliza that he thinks she could win—next year. Eliza is crushed and convinces herself that Saul does not really believe in her after all.

Aaron and Miriam do not celebrate Shabbat. Instead, they eat frozen turkey pot pies and sit in silence. Miriam is preoccupied with stealing the blue dish from a stranger's home earlier in the day.

Eliza is eliminated from the national spelling bee in round 7. She misspells DUVETYN.

Miriam contemplates another theft. She feels compelled to drive to another unfamiliar house to steal back another missing piece of herself. Miriam steals an ashtray from another stranger's house. This time, however, there is no key under the mat and Miriam climbs in through a window. The house itself is dirty and ordinarily Miriam would be disgusted by its condition. There are cockroaches, to which Miriam pays no attention. Her compulsion to find another missing piece of herself consumes all of her attention. Once she has the ashtray in her hand, however, Miriam vomits.

## Pages 64 - 137 Analysis

The introduction of "Perfectimundo" into the narrative provides salient information on Miriam Naumann's inner landscape. In one way, "Perfectimundo" explains Miriam's compulsive nature and perfectionistic tendencies. More importantly, however, "Perfectimundo" is foreshadowing Miriam's subsequent kleptomania and the revelation of the true depth of Miriam's mental illness. Similarly, the episode chronicling Miriam's fascination with the kaleidoscope is also a foreshadowing of the character's eventual mental collapse. "Perfectimundo" becomes more than just a word/concept to Miriam Naumann. It becomes her holy grail. The ultimate significance of "Perfectimundo" is not revealed until the end of the narrative.

The depth of Eliza's delusion as to her family's actual state is revealed when Eliza looks at the newspaper photograph. This is the first step in Eliza's awakening to the reality of the Naumann family.



Disappointment re-enters the story when Miriam presents Eliza with the kaleidoscope. Eliza's reaction unintentionally reinforces Miriam's total lack of connection with her daughter. The giving of the kaleidoscope is also representative of Miriam's inability to connect emotionally outside the frame of her own mind and what holds significance to her. Also, the kaleidoscope reinforces Miriam's own disconnection from her parents.

As a result of his father's perceived rejection, Aaron Naumann finds a new friend in Chali. Aaron's questioning of Judaism mirrors his father's experiences as a young man who had also been rejected by his father. Aaron's acceptance of Chali's friendship is not limited to his religious/spiritual quest, however, as Aaron is himself nearly friendless. Without a connection to his father, mother, or Eliza, Aaron finds that he is free to explore the world on his own. The closing of Saul's study door grants Aaron the permission necessary to look elsewhere for acceptance and guidance. Also in this section, Aaron Naumann begins lying to his father. While some might posit that lying to one's parents during adolescence is not out of the ordinary, for Aaron, it is tantamount to betrayal.

Additionally, it is in this section that Miriam Naumann's character takes on more depth. The fact of her kleptomania is surprising, but not completely inconceivable, given her family history. The omniscient narrator in this instance serves to reveal to the reader Miriam's deep-seated illness. It becomes apparent that Miriam's life is not what it seems on the surface at all. Miriam is a shadow character — one whose actual motives are hidden from those around her. Miriam graduates from department store theft to stealing from strangers' houses. This clearly signifies that Miriam's compulsion to gather together the missing pieces of herself is beyond her immediate control. It becomes apparent that Miriam Naumann steals primarily because she has to. With the entrance into her second house, however, Miriam ups the ante by climbing in through the window.

Aaron and Miriam's non-celebration of Shabbat is a reverse image of the times during which Saul and his mother celebrated Shabbat in Hank's absence.



## Pages 138 - 200 (MIDDLE)

### Pages 138 - 200 (MIDDLE) Summary

Back from Washington, DC., Eliza and her family eat dinner together once again. Saul calls it a "victory dinner" even though Eliza did not win the spelling bee. After Eliza's loss, Aaron senses his closeness with Eliza returning.

Aaron and Miriam do not mention their non-observance of the sabbath to Saul.

Aaron asks Saul's permission to go out for pizza and a movie with Aaron's new friend, "Charlie." Saul teases Aaron, asking Aaron if he is going on a date with a girl.

Aaron has only lied to Saul once before. During the last days of eighth grade, Aaron sets fire to his gym uniform; a pair of shorts and a shirt. After the clothes ignite, Aaron hastily tries to clean the scorched spot on the patio with a garden hose. Saul, standing at the screen door, asks Aaron what he is doing. Aaron tells Saul that he is just playing.

Eliza hears her parents making love. She decides against alerting her brother.

Aaron's excitement over visiting Chali's temple builds. He considers resuming guitar practice with his father but decides to leave well enough alone. Aaron knows that Saul would welcome this, but Aaron is too excited about his new friendship with Chali (and the prospect of finding God) to begin again with Saul.

Saul observes that Aaron is especially restless and particularly sensitive lately. He leaves his study door open, hoping that Eliza will approach him and want to do more spelling practice. Saul feels like a wallflower, waiting to be asked to dance. Saul then decides to ask Aaron to practice playing guitar. Saul takes his instrument to Aaron's room, hoping that his son will want to spend time with him again. When Saul reaches Aaron's room, however, the door is closed. Saul decides to give Aaron his space and returns to his study, leaving the door open in case one of his children wishes to approach him.

Aaron arrives at Chali's temple and is warmly greeted by his new friend. When Aaron learns that Chali is a Hare Krishna, Aaron is immediately disappointed and wary. Aaron considers leaving the temple.

Chali presents Aaron with a set of japa beads and explains to Aaron that chanting japa (saying the name of God one hundred-eight times) is essential to the Hare Krishna practice. Aaron is pleased with this new endeavor.

Eliza's return to school and her post-national spelling bee life is less than auspicious. Her routine feels boring and flat. However, Eliza is still somewhat disturbed by Saul's assertion that she must get to know the letters. Eliza begins to feel disconnected from Saul and Aaron once again.



Aaron begins his chanting discipline. Although he feels somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of chanting, he proceeds, making his chant sound as much like Chali's as possible. Aaron chants fifty cycles before he hears someone coming up the stairs and decides to try again early the next morning.

While watching a rerun episode of Barney Miller, Eliza comes to believe that her father is right. She will keep practicing her spelling and look forward to next year.

Miriam resists the urge to drive to another unfamiliar neighborhood to steal. She comes to the decision that having sex with Saul is the only way to counteract her compulsion to take things that do not belong to her.

Eliza and Saul resume their spelling practice. Saul introduces new, interesting techniques that make spelling practice a more organic, natural activity. Eliza is finally learning exactly how to get to know the letters of the alphabet.

Aaron continues chanting japa, finding the darkness of his bedroom closet to be the most preferable spot. Aaron carries his japa beads with him wherever he goes.

Miriam's sexual voracity becomes an embarrassment to Saul. His wife has begun having sex with him when Saul is asleep. Saul feels violated and he notices that Miriam behaves as though he is nothing more than a penis. Saul has a dream in which his penis becomes detached from his body. Saul is conflicted about discussing the matter with Miriam.

Aaron becomes a vegetarian. Over barbecued chicken, Aaron tells his father that Chali ("Charlie") is a vegetarian as well. Saul expresses interest in meeting his son's new friend.

Eliza knows that Aaron is lying about "Charlie." Aaron begins to seriously consider joining the Hare Krishna temple. Subsequently, he becomes infatuated with the guru's daughter and fantasizes about marrying her and having children.

On another visit to the temple, Aaron loses his inhibitions and begins chanting and dancing with Chali and the other temple devotees. Aaron's spirit feels free and he loses awareness of his earthly body as he and the others shout God's name.

Miriam finds the next house she will enter. The house, with its as yet unrevealed missing piece of Miriam's self, calls out to her. Miriam parks three blocks away and begins a causal stroll toward the house. Madge Turner, the mother of one of Aaron's Boy Scout troop members, recognizes Miriam. Miriam is so shocked by the chance encounter that she immediately sinks to the curb. After her conversation with Madge, Miriam is so shaken that she does not go through with her plan.

It has become the norm that Eliza and Saul eat dinner together. Miriam works late regularly and Aaron spends the majority of his free time with "Charlie."



At the end of the school year, Eliza receives straight As on her report card and finally makes the Honor Roll for the first time ever. That night, Saul bakes a cake and he and Eliza conspiratorially eat the whole thing. Later, Saul decides that it is time for Eliza to meet Abraham Abulafia.

Miriam makes the decision to return to stealing from stores rather than from strangers' houses. When she arrives at a mall, however, things do not seem right. Miriam feels ill at ease in the department store. She feels paranoid and disoriented. Finally, she steals a single shoe and makes her way back to the car. Pulling out of the parking lot, Miriam Naumann tosses the stolen shoe out the window.

Saul introduces Eliza to the concept of permutations—taking the letters in one word and recombining them to make new words. By the time Eliza finishes with her permutation practice, she is able to take a six-letter word and recombine it until she has all 720 possible permutations. Saul believes that Eliza has the potential to commune with God through her spelling practice. Saul begins incorporating Abulafia's mysticism into Eliza's spelling study sessions.

Aaron becomes increasingly more involved with life at the Hare Krishna temple. They have nicknamed him "Chaitanya" which means "energy" in Sanskrit. Aaron does all he can at the ISKCON temple. He works in the office and helps with childcare. Aaron fantasizes about becoming the "pujari" (prayer leader) of the temple and leading worship. However, Aaron is not yet ready to accompany Chali to public places in order to find prospective new converts.

Aaron remembers the day he and Saul arrived at Temple Beth Amicah after someone painted a swastika on the wall.

When he, Eliza, and Saul attend Shabbat services at Beth Amicah, Aaron finds that the synagogue no longer interests or inspires him.

After Miriam refuses to discuss her sexual compulsiveness with Saul, Saul begins sleeping in his study. He returns to his bedroom early each morning before Eliza and Aaron wake up.

Chali invites Aaron to spend the weekend at the ISKCON temple. Aaron knows that this means lying to Saul once again. Aaron tells Saul that he is going camping with the school's chapter of the Sierra Club. Aaron even goes so far as to provide Saul with a fake permission slip to sign.

Saul and Eliza continue practicing with letters and reading Abulafia. Saul encourages Eliza to intone each letter and then move her body according to how that intonation makes her feel. Eliza begins with A. The movement she associates with the letter is the exact movement described by Abulafia in the early thirteenth century. Saul is amazed and awed as he watches his daughter.

In Eliza's fantasy, achieving "shefa" (total communion with God) will solve all of her problems. She will be popular, make straight As all the time and, of course, reaching



"shefa" will help her win the national spelling bee next year. Eliza plans to borrow the next Abulafia book, *Light of the Intellect*, when Saul is away giving a bar mitzvah lesson. Eliza knows that borrowing books from her father's study is something that Saul forbids, but she is in a hurry to reach "shefa."

Aaron is packed and ready to leave for his weekend at the Hare Krishna temple. Saul offers Aaron the family camera to capture his adventure on film but Aaron declines the offer and Saul is once again disappointed. When Aaron arrives at the ISKCON temple, he feels as though he has come home.

While Saul is out of the house, Eliza begins reading the next book by Abulafia. She follows the instructions and begins pronouncing the vowels accordingly. Eliza prepares herself to finally hear the voice of God.

Miriam struggles with her compulsion to steal another object from a stranger's house. Finally she gives in to the urge to drive to another unfamiliar neighborhood to take back another missing piece. She drives into a middle-class housing development. Miriam parks in front of the chosen house this time rather than a block or two away. There is no key under the mat, but Miriam finds that the garage door is unlocked. Lifting the door, Miriam is surprised by a barking dog. She falls onto the garage floor, hitting the back of her head. As the dog (a beagle) continues to bark frantically, Miriam Naumann manages to escape.

At the ISKCON temple, Aaron is so excited at the prospect of his new experience with Chali and the others that he has trouble falling asleep the first night. However, at one point, he dreams that he sees Krishna beckoning to him and hears Saul's voice coming out of Krishna's mouth. Somewhat deflated at the prospect of not having cereal and a banana for breakfast the next morning, Aaron nonetheless throws himself wholeheartedly into temple life.

## **Pages 138 - 200 (MIDDLE) Analysis**

After Eliza and Saul return home from Washington, DC., Aaron and Miriam are both entrenched in their secret lives. Aaron begins lying to his father with more ease and Miriam continues to steal. Aaron's decision not to return to playing guitar with his father proves to be a major turning point in his and Saul's relationship. Conversely, it is Saul who is left wishing that his children will choose him for inclusion in their lives.

Aaron's initial reaction to Chali's revelation of his true religious bent is mitigated by Chali's gift of japa beads to Aaron. After all, Aaron Naumann is someone who prides himself at being good at things and meditating is, for Aaron, no different than solving math problems or playing the guitar. The new meditation practice also gives Aaron something else to enjoy and perfect on his own, without the aid of his father. The japa beads take the place of Aaron's guitar. The character's attention shifts away from his family and onto himself.





Eliza is deflated by her father's assertion that she could be a contender for the national spelling championship the following year; this somewhat erodes her self-confidence and enthusiasm. Momentarily, Eliza returns to the mediocrity that was her pre-bee life.

Miriam experiences substitution. That is, since Miriam is resisting the urge to steal, her compulsion presents itself in the form of sexual compulsion. While his wife's sexual interest is at first stimulating, Saul knows that something is terribly wrong.

When Saul introduces Abulafia's principles of permutation to Eliza, the young girl inadvertently opens the door to her singular fate. Simultaneously, something in Aaron Naumann begins to awaken when he concentrates on perfecting his ISKCON meditation practice. The thrill of his discovery is difficult for Aaron to contain and he makes the decision to devote more of his time and energy to the Hare Krishna way.

Miriam's close call with Madge Turner provides the character with a wake-up call. Running into Madge just prior to another burglary affects Miriam significantly. However, the shock is only temporary, as evidenced by Miriam's subsequent trip to the shopping mall. The effect of stealing the shoe from a department store does not equal the charge Miriam attains when she enters a stranger's house. The shopping mall scene is pivotal, as Miriam fully turns herself over to breaking and entering. It is at this point in the narrative that Miriam's kleptomania takes full control of her entire life. Similarly, this is the point in the narrative at which Aaron Naumann turns his back on Judaism forever.

As Saul and Eliza grow closer, Miriam and Aaron become even more distant from the family unit. Aaron and Miriam trade their family home for other, "figurative" homes. In Miriam's case, home becomes the places from which she is compelled to steal. In Aaron's case, the ISKCON temple becomes his home. Aaron lies to his father for the last time when he tells Saul that he is going camping with the Sierra Club from Abington High School.

After her initial introduction to the mystical ideas of Abraham Abulafia, Eliza Naumann develops a secret of her own. In doing so, Eliza Naumann becomes another character in search of something greater than herself which can only be found outside of the world she now knows.



## Pages 200 (BOTTOM) - 274

### Pages 200 (BOTTOM) - 274 Summary

After her late-night escapade, Miriam comes downstairs for breakfast. At first, she cannot remember where the egg-sized lump on the back of her head came from. Saul is surprised to see his wife in anything other than work clothes and greets Miriam affectionately, mostly for Eliza's benefit. Moments later, Miriam bolts from the kitchen. Eliza finally realizes that Saul and Miriam are no longer sleeping in the same bed.

Aaron tells Chali that he wants to live at the ISKCON temple. Chali seems pleased, telling Aaron that not everyone feels so strongly after their first weekend. Aaron wants to undergo devotee training and vows to have a new spiritual name by his eighteenth birthday.

While Miriam is in the shower, Saul knocks and asks his wife if she needs ice for the bump on the back of her head. Miriam feels another house pulling at her subconscious. Saul suggests that they all dine together that evening, in honor of Aaron's homecoming.

Eliza and Saul continue with their studies. Eliza is convinced that her parents' separation has something to do with her. She becomes more determined than ever to reach "shefa."

Miriam finds the house she has been waiting for. The house is dilapidated and in total disrepair. The door comes loose from its hinges when she opens it. Miriam sees a dead dog's carcass in one of the room. Miriam takes a photograph of a young girl and leaves the house.

Upon his return home, Aaron knows that things have changed. He tells Eliza that instead of going camping, he went to a place "[for] people who want to get closer to God" (p. 210). Eliza informs Aaron that Saul and Miriam do not sleep in the same bed anymore. She promises not to tell Saul that Aaron did not go camping.

At dinner, Miriam's shocking appearance worries Saul, Aaron, and Eliza. She arrives home late, the food is cold. Miriam's clothes are disheveled and stained, her hair is tangled and she smells "like she's been sorting through week-old garbage" (p. 211). When Saul makes Miriam look at herself in the mirror, Miriam is horrified.

When their parents do not return to the dinner table, Eliza and Aaron clean the kitchen. Eliza sleeps in Aaron's bed that night. Aaron's bed has always been a sort of refuge for Eliza.

Saul waits until Miriam cleans herself up and then holds her in his arms for the remainder of the evening. Miriam dreams of seeing her dead parents in the house where she found the photograph.



Early the next morning, Elly returns to her own room. She hears Aaron chanting japa and feels close to him again.

Eliza is placed in Ms. Paul's sixth grade class. With the change of seasons, things seem to have returned to normal in the Naumann home. However, Aaron continues lying to Saul to cover for the times he spends at the ISKCON temple. Aaron claims to be involved in a number of extra-curricular activities, including debate team.

Miriam begins coming home at 6pm again. No mention of the day of Aaron's homecoming dinner is ever made.

While Saul and Eliza eat dinner alone one evening, Saul receives a phone call informing him that Miriam has been arrested. Saul leaves the house, instructing Eliza to wait for Aaron to return home. While she waits for her brother to arrive, Eliza sneaks into Saul's study and begins chanting the Hebrew word Adonai, in accordance with Abulafia's instructions. She chants until she is nearly exhausted. Eliza realizes that she has been waiting to hear the voice of God loudly rather than paying attention to the still, small voice within her, within the letters. Eliza falls asleep, alone in the house for the first time.

A police officer takes Saul to a storage space. In the space are all the things Miriam Naumann has stolen over the past eighteen years. The objects range from buttons to shoes, hats, scarves, feathers to artificial flowers. The officer tells Saul that Miriam refers to the storage space as her kaleidoscope. Saul becomes overwhelmed and leaves the kaleidoscope feeling sick and bewildered. Saul returns home, tucks Eliza into bed, and discovers that Aaron has not returned.

Saul finds the first thing Miriam ever stole, a pink rubber ball, in a shoe box under their bed. The next morning, Aaron has still not come home. Saul tells Eliza that Miriam is sick and has been hospitalized.

At Miriam's arraignment, she pays no attention to Saul. Saul then goes to Abington High School to look for Aaron. The school secretary tells Saul that Aaron is absent that day. Saul thinks that Aaron is simply going through an adolescent phase.

Eliza decides that her parents are getting a divorce and that Saul has made up the story of Miriam's hospitalization as a way to soften the blow.

Saul visits Miriam at Holliswood psychiatric hospital. During their conversation, Miriam tells Saul that she has never stolen anything. Miriam then explains to her husband that she has merely been reclaiming parts of herself in order to fix the world and make everything whole. Miriam expresses no remorse. When Saul hands Miriam the pink rubber ball, Miriam sees that the ball has somehow been scuffed. She becomes agitated and tells Saul to leave.

Aaron decides that he will live at the Hare Krishna temple from now on.



Saul tells Eliza the truth about Miriam and her stealing. Aaron telephones Saul that evening and tells his father that he will not be coming home. Eventually, Saul threatens to call the police and Aaron agrees to let Saul pick him up at the ISKCON temple.

After returning home, Aaron tells Saul about his Hare Krishna experience. Saul thinks that Aaron has been brainwashed by a cult. Later, Aaron attempts to explain reincarnation to Eliza, but the change in Aaron confuses her and she lashes out at him.

Saul telephones Miriam's work and is told that Miriam has not been employed there for the last ten years. Saul then learns that Miriam added Saul's name to the substantial trust left to her by her parents. The trust has been paying bills for ten years. Saul then contacts the doctors at Holliswood. The doctors assure Saul that he will receive weekly progress reports on Miriam. Miriam does not want to see Saul or anyone else.

Aaron has given Saul books to read so that Saul might understand Aaron's newfound interest in ISKCON. Since Aaron is almost eighteen, at which point he will be free to do as he chooses, Saul figures he has one year in which to change Aaron's mind. Saul promises himself that he will read the books Aaron has given him.

In school, Eliza imagines the letters which would be best to cure Miriam.

One evening, Aaron prepares dinner for Eliza and Saul. The blessing Aaron says over their dinner angers Saul. The dinner consists of undercooked chick peas in congealed butter, limp zucchini and burned rice. Aaron and Saul exchange harsh words with one another and Aaron takes his dinner to his room.

Alone in the kitchen, Eliza and Saul talk about Miriam. Eliza decides that it is time to borrow another book from her father's study. She begins reading Abulafia's "Life of the Future World" while Saul and Aaron argue upstairs.

At school, Eliza ignores the questions about Aaron's strange new clothes and her mother's status as a mental patient. All the while, Eliza is gearing up for the upcoming school spelling bee. She continues unlocking Abulafia's secrets to attaining "shefa."

During one of their nightly arguments, Saul takes away Aaron's japa beads.

Eliza fantasizes more and more about winning the national spelling bee this season. She imagines herself on the world stage—a superhero who uses her powers only for doing good.

The evening before Eliza's spelling bee, over dinner Aaron tells Saul that he thinks Saul is lying about Miriam's hospitalization. Aaron asserts that Miriam has left her family because of something Saul did. At this point, Saul tells Aaron the whole truth about Miriam's kleptomania and the kaleidoscope. Saul tells Aaron that his mother has not worked in ten years, that she was arrested for stealing from a stranger's house. He sees the shock on his children's faces and tries to apologize. Aaron slaps Saul's face.



Upstairs in her room, Eliza begins chanting as Abulafia's "Life of the Future World" suggests. Something happens and the young Eliza finally experiences "shefa." She is animal and human, divine and simultaneously corporeal. She undergoes a transformation that she does not completely understand.

The next morning, as Saul sits at the back of Eliza's classroom, it is time for the class spelling bee.

Eliza Naumann misspells the word ORIGAMI.

## Pages 200 (BOTTOM) - 274 Analysis

The final section of *Bee Season* chronicles the complete disintegration of Miriam Naumann. Miriam's disheveled appearance at the dinner table is external evidence that she is no longer in command of her kleptomania and provides evidence that she is unraveling. Interestingly enough, the last item Miriam Naumann steals—the final missing piece of herself—is a photograph of a young girl. In a way, this act signifies the end of Miriam's career as a kleptomaniac in that she finally reclaims the girl she once was.

Eliza is now in the sixth grade. Her realization that Saul and Miriam are no longer sharing a bed is Eliza's initiation into the realm of reality. However, because she is unaware of the secrets of her parents' marriage, Eliza mistakenly attributes her mother's decline to something having to do directly with her. Childishly, Eliza convinces herself that reaching enlightenment ("shefa") will heal her family's ills. However, for a time she experiences a closeness to Aaron by not revealing the details of Aaron's weekend away from home. Her return to Aaron's bed after Miriam's breakdown represents Eliza's return to the safety of her relationship with Aaron.

Also, Aaron's re-entry into the family home after his weekend at the ISKCON temple brings with it turmoil and transition. Unlike an earlier phase during which he wanted to become a rabbi, however, it is clear just how serious Aaron is about becoming a devotee to ISKCON. Eliza's own spiritual search takes a significant turn when Eliza realizes that she has been listening for the wrong signal from God. Unlike the movies and television shows which populate her imagination, Eliza comes to understand that the voice of God (in Abulafia's teachings) is something much more subtle than Charleston Heston's God in *The Ten Commandments*.

By the end of *Bee Season*, the Naumann family is in tatters and all of their secrets have come to the fore—except for one. Aaron has decided to devote himself entirely to the Hare Krishna way of life and Miriam is hospitalized as a result of her kleptomania. For the first time in his married life, Saul Naumann realizes just who he has lived with for the last eighteen years. To his credit, however, he is able to experience compassion for his mentally ill wife. Aaron and Miriam exit the narrative as unresolved characters.

Eliza Naumann finally learns what it is to commune with God, through the use of Abulafia's principles of permutation. No justification is provided, however, for why she

chooses to misspell ORIGAMI. Eliza Naumann realizes her power for the first time. She and God control the letters and attaining "shefa" is proof that spelling bees are not as important as some people might believe.



# Characters

## Eliza Naumann

When the narrative opens, Eliza Naumann is a fifth-grader at McKinley Elementary School. Eliza is a mediocre student who is unconvinced of her seeming mediocrity. Eliza does not have any close friends, but does not suffer as a result of this fact. Eliza spends a good deal of time watching re-runs on television and fantasizes that her life is, in fact, some sort of movie. Eliza's fantasies take the place of known realities and it is not until she wins the district spelling bee and sees a photograph of her family in a local newspaper that she realizes her family does not fit her internal picture.

Eliza is the daughter of Saul Naumann (a cantor) and Miriam Naumann (an attorney). She has an older brother, Aaron, whom she idolizes for a time. Eliza does not enjoy an especially close relationship with either of her parents, who are basically strangers to her. She is surprised and delighted at her father's offer to help her study, although she does her best to hide her enthusiasm from Saul, believing that it might cause Saul to change his mind.

Eliza's entire personal paradigm changes, however, with her discovery of the writings of Jewish mystic Abraham Abulafia. Spelling, for Eliza, is the entry point into communion with God and the realization of a higher purpose.

## Saul Naumann

Saul Naumann spends the first seventeen or so years of his life as Sal Newman, the son of an auto mechanic. When he first discovers his Jewish heritage at the age of thirteen, Sal changes his name back to Saul and goes in search of God—or at least in search of expanded thinking and alternate ways to view the world. Saul turns his back on his father and embarks on a lifelong journey toward transcendence. After extensive experiences with LSD in college, Saul becomes interested in Kaballah, a form of Jewish mysticism. Study for its own sake and the pursuit of knowledge are most important to Saul Naumann.

Saul is married to Miriam, an attorney. Theirs is a marriage of comfort and order. Saul is completely unaware that Miriam is a kleptomaniac. The Naumanns have two children, Aaron and Eliza (whom Saul refers to as "Elly-belly"). Saul, however, sacrifices deeper closeness with his family for his studies of the Torah and Kaballah. It is Saul who is closer to the children when they are younger, especially Aaron, with whom Saul plays and practices guitar. When she wins the district spelling bee, though, Saul notices something special about his daughter and decides that her path and his are intertwined. It is for this reason that Saul begins tutoring his daughter in the concepts and principles developed by Abraham Abulafia.



## Miriam Naumann

Miriam (Grossman) Naumann is Saul Naumann's wife and the mother of Eliza and Aaron. Miriam is an only child whose wealthy parents are both killed by an automobile while they are out for a walk. She is an obsessive-compulsive kleptomaniac and a rabid perfectionist who is unable to form deep attachments to other people. Miriam's most profound relationships are with objects. Miriam's external locus of control is solidified the first time she experiences "Perfectimundo." She views her kleptomania not as stealing, but as a way to bring together the missing parts of herself. Taking things that do not belong to her is Miriam's way of establishing order in the world. Her fragmentation prompts Miriam to steal and then arrange the stolen goods in a storage space, which she calls her kaleidoscope.

Miriam is not close to either of her children or to Saul, for that matter. She sees Aaron as Saul's son primarily and she is at a loss as to how to relate to Eliza. Much like the kaleidoscope that is revealed later in the narrative, Eliza "generally equates the inside of her mother's head with the grand finale of a July Fourth fireworks display" (p. 17). Miriam is extremely intelligent and extremely eccentric.

## Aaron Naumann

Aaron Naumann is the only son and oldest child of Miriam and Saul Naumann. For a time, Aaron fantasizes about becoming a rabbi. Aaron is highly intelligent, having been selected for the TAG (Talented and Gifted) program when he was Eliza's age. Aaron does not have close school friends and is bullied as a young child. Aaron and Eliza spend a good deal of time together before Aaron enters adolescence. Aaron does not know it, but he is Eliza's hero until she sees him being beaten up by a group of boys. Like his sister, Aaron Naumann entertains extensive fantasies. Aaron, however, daydreams about being popular, athletic, and talented.

Aaron Naumann, like his father, is a seeker. He prays diligently for God to reveal Himself. When his prayers are not answered, Aaron becomes disillusioned with his Jewish faith and he becomes interested in Krishna consciousness. When he begins spending time at the ISKCON temple, Aaron Naumann comes into his own as someone who is spiritually alive. While his attempts to explain Hare Krishna concepts to his father and sister fall flat, Aaron is convinced that Chali and the others at the ISKCON temple have found "the answer."

The only time Aaron Naumann ever sees his paternal grandfather, Heimel Naumann, his grandfather is lying in an open coffin.

## Heimel Naumann (Henry Newman)

Heimel Naumann is born into a Jewish Orthodox family.





When Yehuda Naumann, Heimel's father, declares Heimel's fiancée Lisa as "not Jewish enough," Heimel and Lisa elope anyway (p. 10). Yehuda Naumann ignores the birth of his grandson, Saul (who becomes Sal), after which Heimel Naumann changes his name to Henry (Hank) Newman and turns his back on Judaism altogether. Hank works as an automobile mechanic and has hopes that Saul will follow in his footsteps. Saul is Hank and Lisa Newman's only child. "When Saul uses his student status to stay out of Vietnam, Henry officially washes his hands of his ungrateful, hippie Jew of a son" (p. 11).

Henry and Saul never resolve their differences.

## Lisa Naumann

Lisa Naumann (later, Newman) is the mother of Saul Naumann and the wife of the former Heimel Naumann. Lisa introduces Saul to Judaism when Saul is thirteen years old. It is Lisa who instills a sense of religious and ethnic pride in her son. Lisa sneaks Saul to synagogue to worship when her husband Hank is out of the house. Lisa Naumann dies of cancer when Saul is fifteen years old.

## Chali

Chali, whose real name is John, is a devotee of ISKCON (Hare Krishna) and a close friend of Aaron Naumann. Chali meets Aaron while Aaron is sitting in a park one day and he invites Aaron to the ISKCON temple. In terms of the narrative, Chali is to Aaron what Saul Naumann is to Eliza. Chali is Aaron's guide and tutor. Chali represents mysticism, and the search for communion with a Supreme Being.

## Sinna Bhagudori

Sinna Bhagudori is one of the "smart girls" who attends McKinley Elementary School. Sinna is one of Eliza's competitors in the school spelling bee. Eventually, Sinna becomes a friend of sorts to Eliza Naumann. At the beginning of the narrative, Sinna is described as having "blue contact lenses and big boobs" (p. 7). Even though the other pupils at McKinley know that Sinna's eyes are not really blue, Sinna, who is obviously of East Asian descent, "insists that a lot of people's eyes change when they go through puberty" (p. 7).

## Brad Fry

Brad Fry is another of Eliza's competitors in the school spelling bee. Brad is also classified as one of the "smart kids." Brad is described as having "a lot of moles" (p. 7). Brad is somewhat geeky, as evidenced by his presence at a summer camp for "kids who take math and science classes because they want to" (p. 7). Even though Brad



tells the other kids at McKinley that he actually goes to soccer camp, no one believes this.

## **Rabbi Mayer**

Rabbi Mayer is the spiritual leader of Temple Beth Amicha Synagogue. Mayer is a rather large man with a "broad forehead" and gray eyebrows. His eyes are quite small as if "to take in as little of the world as necessary" (p. 13). While Beth Amicha would not have been Mayer's first choice as a rabbinical assignment, Mayer made his choice based on the steady income offered by presiding over a suburban synagogue.



## Objects/Places

### Torah

The first five books of the Old Testament. Also known as the Books of Moses, the Torah is the foundation of the Jewish religion.

### Synagogue

A place of worship for Jewish people.

### LSD

A hallucinogenic drug, used by many during the 1960s, thought to aid in the expansion of the mind.

### Japa Beads

Meditation beads used by those who belong to the Hare Krishna religious movement.

### Bhagavada-Gita

Sacred Hindu scripture.

### Vedas

Ancient Hindu texts, written in Sanskrit.

### Zamboni

A large machine used to resurface an ice rink.

### Kaddish

A prayer that is part of the Jewish worship service.

### Menorrah

A candelabrum with nine branches, most commonly used at Hannukah.

## Challah

A special braided bread which is eaten on Shabbat (the Jewish sabbath).



# Themes

## Transcendence

In terms of *Bee Season*, transcendence relates to a character's experience of a type of spiritual ecstasy. As it relates to Eliza Naumann, transcendence takes two forms. The first kind of transcendence Eliza experiences is related to her spelling ability. During her spelling bee experiences, the letters occur to Eliza in a way that is beyond the norm. That is to say, the letters envelop Eliza's consciousness, dancing in her mind and moving through her body; spelling for Eliza is organic rather than purely intellectual. Eliza's second experience with transcendence has to do with her study of Saul's translations of the work of Abraham Abulafia and his principles of "shefa." By closely following Abulafia's principles, Eliza is transported to a place outside herself, a place of complete and total spiritual alignment with herself and the universe around her.

Saul Naumann's first experience with transcendence occur when he is a young man studying at Baruch Yeshiva. There, Saul experiments with the drug LSD, a hallucinogen thought to expand the human mind and transport the user to existential states of pure clarity and unimpeded creativity. When Saul embraces and begins to study Jewish mysticism, however, his LSD trips become less and less significant. As Saul discovers transcendent states through his accession of the principles of Kaballah, his transcendence takes the form of communing with God.

Aaron Naumann, though born and raised in a Jewish home, reaches transcendence for the first time while spending the weekend with his friend Chali at the Hare Krishna temple. Aaron releases himself to the experience of shouting the name of God with Chali and the other worshipers and becomes aware of himself as a spiritual being, interconnected with the other souls surrounding him. This experience of transcendence closely mirrors the day of Aaron's bar mitzvah at Beth Amicha when, standing on the dais before the congregation, he feels a oneness with everyone else in the synagogue.

Miriam Naumann's experience of transcendence differs from that of her family in that Miriam's transcendence is dependent on her perceived perfection of things external to herself. Her concept of "Perfectimundo" only happens at those times when Miriam sees or feels something related to an object or a particular circumstance. The pebble in the perfect center of a hopscotch square, a perfectly round, unspoiled pink rubber ball, the inside of a kaleidoscope—all signify "Perfectimundo" to Miriam.

## Disappointment

As a theme, disappointment is generational in *Bee Season*. The first disappointment to befall the Naumann family is Saul's father's disappointment with his own family. Yehuda Naumann becomes Henry (Hank) Newman as a result of Hank's strained relationship with his own father, which leads to Hank's subsequent rejection of the Jewish faith.



Sal Newman becomes Saul Naumann after Saul realizes the importance and profundity of being Jewish. However, Saul experiences the same type of disappointment in his own father when he becomes aware of his father's past. Just as Yehuda (Hank) turned his back on his father, Saul turns his back on Hank. Saul's disappointment stems from the realization that for most of his early life, Saul's father kept Judaism a secret from Saul. Later in life, Saul experiences disappointment once again when he learns of Miriam's kleptomania and the depth of her mental illness. Miriam, like Hank, keeps things to herself rather than share them with Saul. Later, Saul becomes disappointed with Aaron's decision to join the Hare Krishna temple.

Miriam (Grossman) Naumann's sense of disappointment begins with the death of both of her parents when she is a junior in college. As an orphan, Miriam is faced with the challenge of being her own family. She becomes self-contained, driven and externally focused. When she meets Saul, it is clear that Miriam does not experience love, but a kind of rational attachment to someone Miriam feels will provide her with a solid home and security while she continues to search for "Perfectimundo." Later, Miriam's disappointment carries over into her marriage and raising her children. Miriam resents having to breastfeed Aaron, considering him to be more Saul's child than her own. Miriam's family-related disappointment resurfaces when she witnesses Eliza's blasé reaction to the kaleidoscope Miriam was given as a young girl. Finally, Miriam's disappointment turns to a sense of betrayal when she notices that her pink rubber ball has been scuffed and she tells Saul to leave Holliswood.

Aaron Naumann feels disappointed in God after his prayers go unanswered. When Aaron first "sees" God in the blinking red light of an airplane, he, too, begins a quest for closeness with the Creator. He becomes disillusioned with Judaism when the feeling of oneness eludes him after his bar mitzvah experience. Aaron becomes disappointed when Saul seemingly throws him over to help Eliza practice for the spelling bees.

Eliza's disappointment is somewhat more subtle than that of the other members of her immediate family. Eliza is not so much disappointed as disconnected—from her father and mother, certainly, but most especially from Aaron once he begins his friendship with Chali. Eliza sees herself as the mediocre one in the Naumann family until her spelling bee success.

## Revelation

In the narrative, revelation refers to the principle of things being revealed or uncovered in the characters' lives and individual psyches. For instance, when Eliza sees Aaron being beaten up by a group of other boys, she realizes that Aaron is not as powerful and strong as she had once believed. This revelation affects Eliza's opinion of her brother although she does not share this with Aaron. However, Eliza's feeling of disillusionment with her brother is finally revealed toward the end of the narrative when Eliza lashes out at Aaron after he returns from his weekend at ISKCON.



For Saul, revelation takes more than one form. The first, of course, is Saul's introduction to Judaism. When he and Lisa (his mother) first light Shabbat candles in his father's absence, Saul feels as though he has come home. Next, the revelation that his daughter Eliza is a gifted speller buoys Saul's confidence in his daughter and raises his level of esteem for a child he thought would only ever be average at best. Saul's most damaging revelation occurs toward the close of the narrative when he visits Miriam's kaleidoscope storage space. The discovery of his wife's lifelong pathological "collecting" is too much for his senses to bear when Saul finally understands who Miriam really is.

Finally, revelation registers significantly with Eliza Naumann during her private study of Abulafia's teachings. While the physical experience itself is outlined in the narrative, the reader never learns the true importance of the internal shift Eliza undergoes. However, Eliza's final (perhaps intentional) misspelling of ORIGAMI does offer a clue as to the depth of her experience.

# Style

## Point of View

Bee Season is written entirely from the perspective of an omniscient narrator. This technique serves two specific purposes. First of all, the narrative transitions between past and present at several points in the story. This serves to maintain smooth flow and continuity. Also, the events which take place in a particular character's past are interwoven into their present circumstance. The omniscient narrator's point of view (as it applies to past happenings) is one example of an "aside," a break in present action, which allows the reader to follow the narrative without the experience of being completely removed from the linear trajectory of the novel. For example, the inclusion of biographical information pertinent to certain characters (such as Saul and Miriam Naumann), told from the omniscient narrator's point of view, functions to keep the narrative moving in a forward direction.

The narrator's voice in this novel is completely objective. That is to say, the narrator does not offer any opinion as to what happens to the characters in the narrative. There is no editorializing on the part of the narrator in Bee Season. The reader is left to determine the meaning of the information being offered. This fact proves to be especially salient in terms of Eliza and Aaron's experiences of transcendence. In addition, use of an omniscient narrator adds to the texture of the novel, in that the novel unfolds, revealing itself without commentary, which could influence the reader's view of the characters and the happenings in the narrative proper.

## Setting

The majority of Bee Season takes place in and around the Naumann family's home in Norristown, Pennsylvania. During the course of the novel, Eliza and her father Saul also travel to Philadelphia and Washington, DC. where Eliza competes in both the regional and national spelling bees, respectively.

Another location featured in the novel is the ISKCON temple not far from the Naumann home. The ISKCON temple may or may not actually exist. However, this location features prominently in the novel as a kind of "spiritual home" for Aaron, which is positioned in direct opposition to the "biological" home he shares with Eliza, Saul and Miriam. At the ISKCON temple, Aaron Naumann feels as though he is genuinely himself, without the inhibitions of family dynamics which adversely influence his journey to become closer to God.

Alternately, Temple Beth Amicha Synagogue also provides contrast to the Nauman family home. Beth Amicha is the site of Saul's work as a cantor. It is also the site where Aaron Naumann distinguishes himself as something of a star around the time of his bar mitzvah. As the novel progresses, however, Aaron comes to view Beth Amicha as part





of the past, a representation of his former self from which he becomes progressively more detached.

## Language and Meaning

Bee Season is written entirely in English with Hebrew words (spelled phonetically in English) and Hebrew characters interspersed throughout. The inclusion of Hebrew words and characters lends to the the mysticism of Judaica which underpins the novel's main plot points. It is clear that there are words and phrases that cannot be translated from Hebrew into English. This gives the reader an idea of the nature of the mystical. In regards to Bee Season, Saul and Eliza Naumann both wish to unlock mysteries for which there is no specific language. This fact calls into question the precarious nature of letters and language.

For example, Saul Naumann is a scholar of Judaism and Jewish mysticism, who closely follows the writings of Jewish mystics such as Abraham Abulafia. Eliza Naumann also studies Abulafia, but Eliza's study is based on Saul's translation of Abulafia from Hebrew into English. Therefore, Eliza's understanding of Abulafia's principles is contingent upon her father's interpretation. In terms of representation, Eliza Naumann studies a copy of a copy of Abulafia and not the authentic document itself. It goes without saying that this could pose a problem for the main protagonist once she is able to access what she believes to be "shefa."

Finally, in his study of the Krishna consciousness, Aaron Naumann also faces challenges related to language. Being raised in the Jewish tradition, Aaron is able to set himself apart from others at Beth Amicha by virtue of his acuity with the Hebrew language. However, when he is presented with the Bhagavad Gita and other sacred Sanskrit texts, he faces the same dilemma as his sister Eliza. Aaron reads the Bhagavad Gita in English, translated from Sanskrit. Similar to Eliza's experience with Abulafia, Aaron also reads a copy of a copy. Both characters experience transcendence by studying and interpreting material which is diluted by translation.

Finally, Miriam Naumann's concept of "Perfectimundo" relates to an existential condition rather than anything literal (having to do with language). "Perfectimundo" is Miriam's word for transcendence and when she experiences "Perfectimundo," Miriam is as close to God as either of her children or Saul.

## Structure

Myla Goldberg's novel Bee Season is 274 pages in length. The novel is not divided into chapters. This technique functions to present the narrative's events in one uninterrupted stream. The lack of chapter designation also mirrors the main characters' journeys to transcendence ("shefa," "Perfectimundo," total enlightenment). Each character's experience is continuous in nature, one thing folding into the next without headings to mark his/her progression. Also, the absence of chapters produces the effect of the never-ending, constantly-evolving story of Eliza and her family. The end of the novel is

somewhat mysterious, as Eliza misspells a word—either intentionally or unintentionally; the nature of Eliza's possible misspelling of the word ORIGAMI is never revealed. Like the study of things mystical, the novel ends without concrete resolution.



## Quotes

"With suburban rabbis outnumbering suburban synagogue two to one, Orel Mayer chose a steady salary over spiritual affinity" (p. 13).

"Like many things left unsaid, Eliza's thoughts have metastasized, kernels of doubt exploding into deadly certainties" (p. 17).

"Miriam Naumann is a hummingbird in human form, her wings too fast to be seen without a stop-motion camera" (p. 17).

"[Saul] looks upon his acid insights as shadowy impostors, clay pigeons that will explode at the touch of true transcendence" (p. 20).

"Sex, like ironing or changing a flat tire, is an essential life skill to be mastered. [Miriam] is intrigued by a firsthand account of an orgasm as a giant body wave" (p. 21).

"Aaron, whose sister's gilded image of him will last four more months before the real world strips it from him" (p. 24).

"Aaron wonders if God lives in all clouds, or if his plane just happened to pick the right one" (p. 36).

"Though certainly cognizant of their biological connection, Miriam has grown to view Eliza as not quite her child" (p. 59).

"Eliza wonders if death is not a sleep you can't wake up from but life reduced to one inescapable moment" (p. 63).

"Miriam sometimes spends hours combing through floor after floor, intent as a pig sniffing truffle" (p. 76).

"[Aaron] considers disguising himself, briefly toys with the idea of dying his hair, but decides that a bleached-blond Jew will look even more conspicuous than a regular Jew and then there's the problem of explaining his new look to [Saul]" (p. 83).

"[Aaron] is Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, and Lewis and Clark all rolled into one intrepid Jew ready to see if, when he reaches the front of the church, he will fall off the edge of the world" (p. 85).

"The fresh paper sash across the toilet seat, announcing sanitization, reminds Eliza of her mother" (p. 100).

"When he attempts to picture himself old, Aaron realizes that the old man currently awaiting him has a face perpetually braced for disaster. He wonders if, at age sixteen, it is not too late to change his wrinkles" (p. 128).



"She knows that part of her will welcome this but, like a schoolgirl presented with the temporary anarchy of deep snowfall, Miriam wants to enjoy the brief obscuration of routine afforded by Saul's absence" (p. 133).

"With the spelling bee over, [Eliza] had entertained soft-focus visions of father/daughter kite-building and cookie-baking, images she doesn't realize she has lifted from an old Hallmark commercial until she sees it again on TV" (p. 151).

"Compared to the colors and the smells of the ISKCON temple, Beth Amicha is plain and uninviting, a spinster who long ago gave up on luring a groom" (p. 176).

"Saul smiles and adds 'father/son camping trip' to the mental list of things he really does intend, someday, to do" (p. 186).

"Miriam had thought the night of her final capitulation to the houses would be presaged by something to push her over the edge, but it is a night the same as any before" (p. 195).

"Eliza enjoys studying to the smell of her father's cooking. It makes the words seem nutritive, reminding her that she is feeding her brain" (p. 218).

"Of all the senses, the tongue is the most voracious and uncontrollable" (p. 249).

"[Eliza's] skin has become so fragile she knows it will crumble away at the slightest movement, reducing her to bones and reddish dust that was once her blood" (p. 264).

"'At least,' Saul had told himself, 'if I cannot prevent myself from inheriting my father's faults, I can protect my daughter from their effects'" (p. 61).

"Since she was very small, Eliza has thought of the inside of her head as a movie theater, providing herself with an explanation for the origin of bad dreams" (p. 58).

"Not having observed the others' faces, [Eliza] is unaware that most spell with their eyes open after a brief period of face-clenched concentration indigenous to constipation and jazz solos" (p. 58)



## Topics for Discussion

What does the acronym ISKCON stand for?

Explain "Perfectimundo" as it relates to Miriam Naumann.

What prompts Eliza to misspell the word "origami"?

Discuss Eliza's experience with transcendence during her study of Abraham Abulafia's "Life of the Future World."

When does Aaron Naumann "see" God for the first time?

What, exactly, is at the root of Miriam Naumann's quest to fix the world?

What does Saul Naumann do for a living?

Why does Aaron Naumann turn his back on Judaism?

Discuss the significance of Miriam Naumann's kaleidoscope.

Why does Miriam become upset when Saul presents her with the pink rubber ball?

Why does Miriam Naumann steal things she could just as easily buy?

Explain how Saul Naumann reclaims his Jewish heritage.

At which point in the narrative does Eliza Naumann feel most alone, and why?

Explain the concept of shefa, introduced on page 172.

What causes Saul to choose to sleep in the study rather than with Miriam?