

# **Briar Rose Study Guide**

## **Briar Rose by Jane Yolen**

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## Plot Summary

Rebecca Berlin, known to family and friends as Becca, is the youngest of three sisters and the one who most loves her grandmother's stories, especially her version of Sleeping Beauty. Becca's grandmother, known to the girls as Gemma, always tells the story the same way so that the girls know the story by heart and often talk along with the various parts of the story. As they age, they question particular aspects of the story, such as demanding definitions for particular words or phrases. The story has some deviations from the traditional Sleeping Beauty story. For example, in Gemma's version, the prince wakes only the princess and the story ends with only the princess and her daughter living happily ever after.

Gemma grows old and moves to a nursing home where Becca visits with her almost daily, though her sisters seldom return home for a visit with Gemma. Gemma's final words to Becca are to exact a promise that Becca will find the castle from the story as her only inheritance from Gemma. Becca begins to conduct research after Gemma's death, her direction prompted by several documents and other clues left by Gemma. Among the documents is an entry form written upon Gemma's arrival in America and a ring with the initials, JMP. Becca soon discovers that Gemma was apparently among the refugees held in a camp in Oswego, New York, upon her arrival in America and that Becca's mother, Eve, was born there.

Becca learns that Gemma likely came to America from a town in Poland called Kulmhof, and decides that she wants to go there to trace her grandmother's origins. She knows the trip is a long shot because the camp of Kulmhof in the town of Chelmno was not an internment camp but an extermination camp and that no women are known to have escaped death at that camp. Becca finds a priest who directs her to a man named Josef Potocki. Josef had been among the men who'd pulled Gemma from a mass grave. The men had administered mouth-to-mouth, saving her life, though she is the only one to survive. Josef says that Gemma had married one of their group who had also fathered her child before dying. Gemma had then been sent to safety, armed with the proper documents to describe her as a princess traveling incognito. She'd arrived in America to be interred in a refugee camp in New York before earning her citizenship and starting a new life with her daughter.

Over the years, Gemma, who'd had not memories of her life prior to her time at the extermination camp, then seems to want to forget her time following the concentration camp. Gemma tells the girls the story of Sleeping Beauty only adapted to fit her own life in the concentration camps.



# Chapters 1 - 5

## Summary

As the story opens, sisters Shana and Sylvia are begging their grandmother, whom they call "Gemma," for a story. When Gemma asks what story they'd like to hear, the youngest of the sisters, Baby Rebecca, yells "Seepin Boot," indicating she wants to hear the story of Sleeping Beauty as Gemma tells it. She begins by saying that the king and queen had wanted a child but years pass before the queen conceives. When the child is born, she has a shock of red hair. At this point, Gemma touches her own hair, by now only some of it remaining red with white changing the appearance from her youth. Gemma continues the story, saying that the queen's baby was beautiful and that the queen named her "Briar Rose," a name that's echoed by each of the girls.

In chapter two, Sylvia and Shana are riding with Becca toward the nursing home where Gemma now lives. Becca calls the worn out car she drives "Rocinante," noting that it's not right to "own something that performed for her without giving it a name." The girls go into the home, Becca slowing to greet several residents along the way. She knows them from her many hours spent in the nursing home, visiting Gemma. Sylvia and Shana have visited only a few times over the years of Gemma's residence. They arrive at Gemma's room, Room 310, and find Gemma asleep. She's wearing restraints to keep her from thrashing around. Becca continues to talk to Gemma, who eventually wakes and begins the story, "Once upon a time," which makes Sylvia groan and Becca fears Sylvia will begin her noisy crying. Gemma drifts off then begins again, saying that there was a castle. When Becca asks "What castle," both her sisters urge her to stop.

When Gemma remains asleep for about twenty minutes, Sylvia and Shana say it's time to go. Becca objects, saying that Gemma's health is fading quickly and urging the sisters to remain longer. The conversation turns into a horrible argument, with the sisters making fun of Becca's choice of career as a writer for an "underground" newspaper. Becca says that it's "alternative," rather than underground, and begins to cry at her sisters' criticism. Gemma wakes again and continues the story. When the story reaches the part in which the queen's child is born, the girls chime in her name but their hearts aren't in it.

Sylvia and Shana leave Becca by Gemma's bedside. Gemma wakes again and calls for Becca, who takes her grandmother's hand. Gemma begins to talk, saying that "I was the princess," that she was "in the castle" and that "the prince kissed me." Gemma then says that the castle is all she has to leave Becca and makes Becca promise to find the castle, the prince and the "maker of the spells." Becca promises to do so but Gemma presses, insisting that Becca swear to keep that promise. The promise seems to reassure Gemma who drifts back to sleep, muttering, "I am Briar Rose" over and over.

In chapter three, Gemma agrees to tell Becca the story of Sleeping Beauty and that she'll tell the two older sisters another story after Becca has gone to bed, though Sylvia



and Shana slip back to the doorway to listen in on the story. As they arrive, Gemma is telling Becca that the king called for a party. At Becca's question, Gemma says that it's to be a "terrifically big part, with cake and ice cream and golden plates." She says that all the "good fairies" of the kingdom are invited but that the bad fairy, "the one in black with big black boots and silver eagles on her hat" was not invited, though she showed up anyway. Gemma says that it's that fairy who cursed Briar Rose along with all her family and friends. Becca feels Gemma shudder as she tells that part and reassures Gemma, saying that "the curse doesn't work."

In chapter four, Gemma's funeral is held with a small service, though there are many who arrive for the wake at the house following the funeral. The mirrors of the house are covered and Sylvia goes upstairs to check her appearance. Her husband, Mike, reassures her that she looks good. In the hall, they find Shana with her husband, Howie, obviously having argued recently.

Becca remembers her promise to Gemma but knows that no one in the family knows where Gemma had lived as a child, only that she'd come to America sometime prior to the outbreak of World War II. Becca's father, Dr. Berlin, says that Gemma's stories about the castle had been nothing more than a story. He goes on to say that Gemma had a great tendency toward secrets and that little is really known for certain of her life prior to her arrival in America.

Later, Becca's nieces and nephew ask for a story. Becca suggests Sleeping Beauty, but the children say that story is Gemma's story. Becca reassures them that it would be an appropriate time to tell the story and begins just as Gemma always had. After the small children are in bed, Dr. and Mrs. Berlin gather with their three daughters and Howie and Mike. Mrs. Berlin says that a box filled with mementos was found in Gemma's possessions. On the top of the box, there's a carved rose and briar. Howie says that Gemma seems a "textbook case of obsessive-compulsive," prompting Sylvia to counter that he's an orthodontist. Shana says that "medical is medical" and the two older sisters get into an argument that Dr. Berlin breaks up.

The box contains photos, newspaper clippings and some documents. One of the pictures indicates "Eve and me, 1945," and is obviously Gemma and Mrs. Berlin - Eve - as a baby. One of the documents apparently documents the arrival of a refugee into America. The name on the document is Gitl Mandlestein. Howie suggests it might have been Gemma's real name and Mrs. Berlin says she hasn't ever heard that name. Eve says she'd believed Genevieve to be Gemma's real name and that she'd been named "Eve" as a variation of that. She says she'd believed Gemma took the nickname "Dawna" so that the two of them were "Dawn and Eve." Sylvia says she'd thought Dawn was from the story of Briar Rose, because of the reference to princess Aurora, or Dawn.

The discussion then turns to a man pictured in one of the photo with Gemma. There's never been talk of a brother and they consider that it might be a cousin or a boyfriend. The box also contains a ring with the initials "JMP" inside. There's a discussion of the man, "JMP" and it's suggested that his last name might have been Prinz. Eve says



she's had the impression that Gemma never knew the identity of Eve's father. The family agrees that it's a mystery, but Becca pledges to solve it.

In chapter five, Becca has her first overnight guest and Gemma begins to tell the story for the two girls. Gemma is to the part of the story in which the curse is cast. She says that Briar Rose is told that she'll be seventeen when the curse comes to pass. The curse includes "a great mist" that will cover the castle and the prediction that everyone will die. Becca's friend is frightened by the story and asks to go home.

## Analysis

Rebecca, known as Becca, is unable to say Sleeping Beauty and the name sticks, with her niece later calling the story "Seepin Boot" as well. The story is a family tradition and each of the girls has a favored part and all look for specific points of reference. The girls also look for an overall effect, and it's noted that both Sylvia and Shana, from their childhood, look for the "almost overpowering" scent of lilac powder their grandmother uses. This seems to become associated with the story in the minds of the two older girls. They also need to look at Gemma's face as she tells the story and both move back some to get the full effect.

The relationship between Sylvia, Shana and Becca is quickly emerging and it seems there is a higher-than-typical level of competition between the girls. While Sylvia and Shana have such a tight bond, Becca is left out of that relationship. Becca seems to desperately want some level of approval from her sisters and they seem unable to look upon her as anything but their somewhat inferior younger sister. Becca's decision not to attend graduate school but to work for an "alternative" newspaper seems to have given her sister ammunition for continued disapproval.

There's a brief conversation between the three girls at to the meaning of Gemma's story of Briar Rose. Becca already realizes that it's a metaphor, though her sisters seem to believe that it's simply a story. It may be that the older girls simply want to believe that it's nothing more than a story. The reader must put himself in the shoes of the sisters in order to understand the impact this could have upon the family. To know that a beloved grandmother's story, told hundreds of times over the years, was really a metaphor for something as horrible as the concentration camps of World War II would be difficult to accept.

During the wake, Sylvia's son, Shana's two daughters and a set of twins from the neighborhood are playing noisily on the stairs. Becca knows she's going to have to go deal with the five but dreads it. As she's making the resolve to go, Sylvia and Shana arrive and rush the children outside. Becca notes that her sisters are "swift" but hold a "kangaroo court," refusing to allow any of the children time to even gather a jacket before exiling them all to the outdoors. This is apparently atypical of what Sylvia and Shana would normally do and Becca takes it as a sign that Gemma's death has affected both more than she'd thought and more than they were outwardly showing.



## Vocabulary

harmony, straggling, musicale, enthusiasm, breathless, drought, mime, crotchety, compensate, musty, agitated, briskly, dutifully, mnemonic, mantra, mourner, enigma, compulsive, obsessive, heritage, furious



## Chapters 6 - 9

### Summary

In chapter six, Becca rises in the middle of the night and goes back through the items from Gemma's box. She puts some organization to the items, almost giving up but realizing that the fact that Gemma had carried the box with her until the end of her life means that it's important. Becca thinks back through the story, realizing that at one point Gemma always told that the curse would affect Briar Rose as well as all her cousins, aunts, uncles and parents, and had stretched to include anyone who bore her name. Becca realizes that, as far as she knows, Gemma has no living family except a daughter and three granddaughters. She considers that this might be the reason Gemma had been so caught up on this detail of the story.

Becca admits that there's "something odd" about Gemma's version of the story, because the traditional story indicates that the prince arrives and wakes everyone with his kiss to the princess. In Gemma's story, the prince's kiss wakes only the princess and it's only the princess and her child who live happily ever after.

Becca falls asleep at the kitchen table and is there when her mother finds her the next morning. The documents Becca has gone over include a birth certificate for Eve Stein and a citizenship photo of Gemma, identified as Dawna Stein. There are also immunization records, a mortgage on the house where Becca and her sisters were raised and a document that seems to be some sort of a visa. Eve convinces Becca to go to bed but only after promising to leave all the items spread out on the dining room table as she has them arranged.

In chapter seven, Gemma is in the car with Becca who has not yet started school. Gemma says that Becca will start school the following year and will probably no longer want to hear the silly story of Sleeping Beauty. Becca objects, saying that she'll always want to hear it because it's Gemma's story. Gemma continues the story with Becca picking up some parts and telling them herself. They talk about the great mist with Gemma answering Becca's question to say that a mist is like a fog or an exhaust. Gemma says that everyone then slept for a hundred years. Becca points out that she is only six years old and asks if a hundred years is a long time. Gemma says that "a hundred years is forever."

In chapter eight, Becca rises late after the late night. She finds the kitchen deserted, dishes piled high from breakfast and the coffee pot empty. She makes coffee and puts the dishes in the dishwasher while waiting for the coffee to brew. Howie arrives in the kitchen, pours himself coffee and asks if Becca is going to make breakfast. She notes that his voice is "wheedling" but she ignores him. Becca returns to the table where she looks over the items again. She thinks it's odd that none of the family had ever seen the box until Gemma's death but admits that a visiting nurse had helped Gemma pack for her move to the nursing home when that time had come.





Becca tells her father that she's going to her office at the alternative newspaper called "The Advocate." Dr. Berlin reminds her that her mother wants them to sit shiva and she promises she'll be back soon. She says that she's not going to work, but to have some quiet time to think. Dr. Berlin, apparently understanding this need in his youngest daughter, says that he'll "cover for her" with her mother and sisters. He admits that if he hadn't already cancelled his surgeries for the week, he might also escape the house for work.

Becca goes to the office of The Advocate, which is housed in a remodeled mill overlooking a waterfall at Mill River. Becca wrote for the Smith College newspaper during college, but her first real articles appear in the Advocate. That article had been about a battered women's shelter. On the day following her grandmother's funeral, Becca heads to the office of the Advocate with Gemma's box. She's greeted by a woman who is on the telephone and hurries to her own office, effectively cutting off communication with all the other reporters and office staff along the way who would have offered their condolences. She's greeted there by Stan, her editor, who asks why she's returned so quickly to work. She tells him briefly about the box and its contents and the story obviously piques his interest. He listens as Becca explains that they don't really know where Gemma came from but counters, saying that "everyone" knows where they came from. He says the exception is an adopted child and admits that he'd personally "chased down" the story of his birth mother.

Becca begins telling him about Gemma's story of Briar Rose, which had always included the fact that the princess was the only one awakened by the prince. Stan asks few questions, including whether Gemma's story had "always" included that detail, and Becca says that it had. Becca says that they'd always thought that Gemma had arrived in America prior to the opening of the war but that the document included in the box indicated that the woman named "Gitl Mandlestain" had arrived in 1944. Stan says that Becca hasn't gotten any answers yet because she hasn't worked on the story yet, but urges her to continue looking for leads.

One of the articles is from the Palladium Times, a newspaper in Oswego. She looks up the newspaper and calls the office, located in Oswego, New York. There she talks to a reporter named Arnie, and begins by asking if he has any idea why her grandmother might have had a clipping from that newspaper. Becca tells him the newspaper clipping is from the same date as her grandmother's American entry visa. Arnie tells her that there might be no relation at all, but that Oswego was a "war refugee shelter" in America, created by Roosevelt in 1944. The population of the camp was mostly Jewish and he says that the camp, called Fort Oswego, is being made into a museum. She asks for copies of the recent articles about the creation of the museum and he provides her with information about the National Archives as well as the War Relocation Authority.

In chapter nine, Gemma reaches the point of the story in which she tells that there was "a binary hedge" with "thorns as sharp as barbs." Sylvia asks for a definition of barbs and says that Gemma will never tell them what barbs are. Gemma doesn't answer now but continues the story, saying that the hedge grows so high near the castle and was so dense that no one could see in. Sylvia interrupts, saying that no one could see out



either, but asks again for a definition of the barbs. Shana urges Sylvia to stop, obviously knowing that Gemma will simply stop telling the story if pressed too hard on the point. Gemma continues, saying that "no one cared to know about the sleeping folks inside." Sylvia interrupts again, asking again for a definition of barb and prompting a heated argument with Shana which ends Gemma's telling of the story. The two girls plead with Gemma, but she doesn't continue.

In chapter ten, the articles arrive from the Oswego newspaper about the same time as information from the National Archives. They find no information about Dawna Stein, Dawna Mandlestain or Genevieve Mandlestain, but Gitl is listed in the records. She is white, Jewish, married, lived in Poland and was able to work. Becca notes that all this is "filled in with a steady hand." The date of marriage is left blank and there's no indication whether she has a home she could return to. She lists Gitl Rose Mandlestain as her full name. The question asking whether she had any other names is filled in as "Ksiezniczka." The height is about right for Gemma but the weight seems too heavy until Becca reads on to discover that Gitl was pregnant and due "any day."

Becca calls Town Hall, remembering that one of the clerks there speaks Polish and asks her about the name, "Ksiezniczka." The clerk says that Becca has mispronounced and says that it means "princess." Becca then goes outside the Advocate office to think and has some yogurt near the waterfall. Stan joins her there, teasingly takes her yogurt and eating what she hadn't yet finished. Stan asks permission to look over the items with Becca at her house later and says he'll be there at seven that evening.

## Analysis

It's evident that the three sisters have grown up to become different women. Sylvia, for example, believes herself to be sophisticated. She and Mike have a live-in nanny for their son, Benjamin. She also has taken French cooking lessons and uses candles at mealtimes. The differences in the girls can be seen early in their lives, but the differences are exaggerated by this point in their lives. A big difference is seen in the way the older girls treat Becca. Becca would never do anything to hurt her sisters' feelings, but they seem to believe that making fun of Becca will urge her into greater things.

The barbs seem to be a point of issue with Gemma. The girls seem to question different points of the story at different times and this has apparently been a point of interest before. Apparently, Gemma has never given them a definition for the word "barb." The girls are curious about it but Gemma says that it's "better" if they don't know what barbs mean, but doesn't explain. It seems likely that the "barb" refers to barbed wire rather than to the thorns of a hedge, as Gemma's story indicates. However, it seems even more likely that the barb is a metaphor for danger. In Gemma's telling of the story, the prince pushes his way through the barbs to kiss the princess. The story Gemma will come to learn later from a man in Poland is that Gemma was actually lying in a mass grave when a group pulled her out and revived her. In that version of the story, the men



risked being killed by the guards if discovered. Like many aspects of the story, it's left to the reader to decide.

Becca's relationship with Stan is purely professional at the time of her grandmother's death, but it seems to be quickly emerging into something more. Becca says that Stan has always had the power to make her feel like a tongue-tied school girl and she seems attracted to him, though he is about a decade her senior. It's not until her return from Poland that the two kiss for the first time, but it seems likely that the relationship is headed for romance from their encounters and conversations prior to her trip.

## Vocabulary

imperial, imprinted, solemn, exhaust, forbid, familiar, recall, veritable, enigma, wheedling, inviolate, secretive, herbaceous, ardor, indistinguishable, fervor, intensity, appropriate, advent, frantic, obeisance, condolence



# Chapters 10 - 16

## Summary

In chapter eleven, Gemma tells the part of the story in which it takes "a hundred years" for the prince to wake the princess. Becca asks why it took a hundred years. Gemma says that it doesn't matter whether it was a hundred years or a thousand, that "dead is dead."

In chapter twelve, Stan arrives exactly at seven that evening. He tells her that they will travel the following day to Oswego to look for more leads. He says that he has a friend there that will put them up overnight, making the return trip the following day. She agrees and he picks her up the following morning. He has a picnic basket and blanket along, and they stop to eat on the trip. They talk on the way and Becca says that Gemma's version of Sleeping Beauty doesn't end happily like the traditional story. She says that in Gemma's version, only the princess and her daughter live happily ever after and that there is never a mention of the prince's fate.

Upon their arrival, Becca meets Stan's friend, Samantha, who is married to a man named Linn. Samantha and Linn are associated with the new museum and say they have some people for Becca to meet that evening. The three are Randolph Feist, who had been an Oswego high school teacher, a woman named Marge Pierce who had lived in Oswego all her life and recalls the refugee camp, and a man named Harvey Goldman who had arrived in America among the refugees interred in the camp. Randolph says that there had been rumors about the situation at the camp, that the refugees were living in luxury there with taxpayers footing the bill. Toward making his students aware of what was really going on there, Randolph took his students for a tour of the facility. Marge recalls the shock of the sight of the barbed wire and bare barracks that housed the refugees. Harvey says that the refugees were confined while German POWs being held elsewhere were getting weekend passes.

Becca asks the three if they remember her grandmother, but none of the names she offers prompts a memory. She then shows the photographs and Harvey recognizes both Gemma and himself in the photograph. He says it's the only photo of him during his time in the camp. He refers to Gemma as "Ksiezniczka." He recalls that she had a baby but no husband and little else except that most of the other young men in the camp were more than a little in love with her, though she didn't seem to return the affection for any of them. Harvey says that she spoke nothing of her past and says "it was as if a curse had been placed on her." When Becca questions this, he says that the Nazis were that curse.

In chapter thirteen, Becca is home sick and Gemma is telling the story. On this occasion, Becca questions why the prince is always the one to rescue the princess. Gemma says that it was "always the prince" and that when he'd ridden by he'd been



warned by a peasant not to enter, because no one who goes in survives to come back out.

In chapter fourteen, Becca and Stan visit the museum the following morning before returning home. They agree to meet at lunchtime the following day to go over the items in Gemma's box. Becca is talking with her dad and points out that Gemma hadn't had a tattoo indicating that she's been in an internment camp. Dr. Berlin says that some internment camps didn't tattoo the prisoners. Stan and Becca look again at the papers and Stan points out the question of her last address prior to her arrival in America has an entry. She does some research and eventually calls on Harvey to help her decide that the name of the town is Kulmhof. Harvey is horrified at the thought, saying that it's "the darkest region of hell." Harvey goes on to say that the purpose of that camp was only for extermination and that it's not possible that that's what Gemma had meant because there was never a women to escape that camp.

In chapter fifteen, Gemma tells the story once to Becca on a school bus during a field trip. A young boy named Barney listens in but continues to object when the details don't match the traditional story. Gemma's story includes a song about wandering around lost, being found and asking for food, and having just washed and said a prayer when the kidnappers arrived.

In chapter sixteen, Becca relates to her parents where her research has taken her and the apparent dead end of the name of the camp, Kulmhof. Becca presents the idea of traveling to Poland, though her parents object.

Becca continues to do research and finds that the camp where Gemma was interred is now Chelmno. Becca is called by her sisters, starting with Sylvia, who tries to argue her out of the trip. After that phone call, Gemma tells Shana that she's going to Europe on vacation. Shana seems to buy it until she has time to talk to Sylvia, then calls back to argue some more.

Stan and Becca talk again and Stan warns that she not allow herself to become disappointed if the story turns out to be something less than she'd hoped.

## Analysis

It's evident that Harvey and Marge have had arguments about the refugee camp prior to their meeting with Becca. Marge says that after the visit to the camp with Randolph, some of the students had returned to the camp later with treats such as candy. Harvey immediately interrupts, saying that the children who had returned with treats had handed them through the wire surrounding the camp. Harvey says that it's just like someone handing treats to animals in a zoo. The argument is brief and it's obvious that it's cut off for two reasons, that there's no resolution and that they've had these same arguments before.

The trip to Oswego seems to be a beginning of the new, deeper relationship between Stan and Becca. As they are returning home, Becca falls asleep. Upon waking, she



apologizes and Stan counters, saying it was an opportunity for him to think. He then says that he finds it difficult to think when he's around Becca. Though he doesn't elaborate, it seems that he'd just indicated his attraction to her and that she has the same effect on him as he has on her.

When her parents object to her trip to Poland, Becca says that she has to go and cites again her promise to Gemma to find the castle of the story. Her mother says that it's not an "inheritance" as Gemma had suggested, but is instead a burden or a family secret. It seems that this is true. The mystery here is at least partly why Gemma never revealed any of the details of this part of her life to her family other than through her story. Another part of the mystery is why Gemma seemed to want Becca to track down the story after her death. It may be that Gemma could never stand to reveal, let alone remember, the details of this part of her life. She may also have felt that her family should have some way of learning about this aspect of her life. Her reasons are never made clear.

## Vocabulary

scrimping, sparse, glean, footwork, navigate, throttled, default, inserted, elliptical, blurting, simultaneously, nondescript, residential, scrawl, studiously, clone, retrieving, reminisced, conservative, androgynous parchment, summation, entreatingly



# Chapters 17 - 24

## Summary

In chapter seventeen, Gemma tells the story and Sylvia finally gathers the courage to ask the question the girls always wanted to ask, "How can they have any future lives if they're dead." Gemma answers that if the prince knows the stories of those who have died and tells those stories to those in the future, they continue to live. Sylvia and Shana say they don't understand, and Becca claims that she also doesn't understand, trying to be like her sisters, though she does understand.

In chapter eighteen, Becca begins her trip to Poland. She has arranged for a translator named Magda Bronski, who meets her at the airport upon her arrival. They spend the first night with Magda's Auntie Wanda. Becca had been instructed to bring Magda blue jeans as a gift and Magda quite honestly says that the jeans aren't for her but to sell on the black market where she'll make a significant amount of money.

In chapter nineteen, Gemma is telling the story one night when Becca, who desperately has to use the restroom, urges her to hurry. Unable to wait for the end of the story, Becca wets herself. Gemma draws her a bath and finishes the story for her later.

In chapter twenty, Becca rents a car in order that she and Magda will have the ability to travel without depending on public transportation. They spend the first day doing the typical tourist things. Magda tells about a class trip she'd taken in order to learn the history of the concentration camps. She tells about a mausoleum at a camp called Majdanek, dedicated to the 360,000 who were exterminated there. Magda says that the teacher who had taken them on this trip had given graphic details but that she hadn't returned as a teacher the following year. Magda says that she'd returned to her own Jewish roots at that point. They travel on and check in at the Brda, a hotel at Bydgoszcz.

In chapter twenty-one, Becca recounts a Halloween when Gemma was telling the story. At the point of saying that the prince walked along a path with birch trees "like the souls of the dead" along each side, the girls seem a little frightened and urge that she not tell that story on Halloween. Gemma then says that the prince arrives at the palace and that there was still a mist clinging to the palace walls.

In chapter twenty-two, Magda offers to turn the trip into that of a typical tourist, but Becca says that she wants to continue with her quest. Magda says that she'd felt the duty as Becca's friend to ask. They arrive at the town called Chelmo but find the people unwilling to talk to them about the concentration camp. They find a priest who is willing to talk. The priest says that there had been a castle on the ground, though it had fallen to ruin prior to the war. The priest gives Becca some additional information, including the name of a man named Josef Potocki, who had been a partisan in the war and has information he is willing to share.



In chapter twenty-three, Gemma says that the prince arrives in the castle and finds that not a single person is stirring. Becca asks for the definition of stirring and Gemma obliges.

In chapter twenty-four, Becca and Magda wait in the lounge for Josef Potocki's arrival. When he arrives, he takes the photo of Gemma, and Eve and realizes that he knew Gemma during the war. Meanwhile, Becca has come to realize that Joseph is the owner of the ring with the initials JMP. She asks if he's her grandfather and he tells her that he's not. He tells her that he will tell her the story of her grandmother, as much as he knows, but that it will have to be the following day. He arranges that Magda and Becca will come to his house the following morning at eleven and will plan to stay for the entire day, or as late as it takes for him to complete the story.

## Analysis

There's a discussion about the birch trees and Becca says that the birch is a favorite. She says that there's a birch with a triple trunk at her house in America. It's at this point that Magda reveals the legend of the birch. She says that the story goes that souls of the dead are housed in the birch. When Becca says that there must be lots of birch trees around the concentration camp of Majdanek, Magda counters that there are lots of birch trees all over Poland. Becca soon recounts a part of the story told by Gemma in which birch trees are along both sides of the path taken by the prince.

The people of Chelmo are completely unfriendly and refuse to have anything to do with Magda, Becca or their questions. One man goes so far as to say that there'd been nothing of importance happening there and that if the girls continued asking their Jewish questions, there might be "nothing of importance" happening again. The barely veiled threat is not surprising, considering the words of the priest who says that he'd initially treated Chelmo as a stopover on his way to a bigger career in the Catholic system. He says that he'd come to realize that the people were in desperate need of his help and that he'd decided to remain in answer of that calling. The priest says that he can't forgive the people of their sins with regard to the concentration camp. Josef's story will later reveal that the people had been fully aware of the events at the camp and that they'd condoned them.

Becca asks Magda whether she believes it's wise to continue her quest for this story. Magda says that she understands the reason for it, though she may be somewhat worried about the consequences of finding the truth. When she meets Josef, she realizes that he must have "replayed this scene" with many others who had arrived over the years.

## Vocabulary

bland, cast, displaced, consulates, lulled, deceit, commodity, demented, expansively, ebullient, escarpment, discarded, stunning, grimaced, burnished, aspire, atoned, partisan, effusions, sedate





# Chapters 25 - 33

## Summary

In chapter twenty-five, Josef tells Becca and Magda that the story of the war is the story of survivors rather than a story of heroes. He enters into a relationship with a man named Alan who is a Jew. One day they travel to a place where there are signs posted prohibiting Jews. Josef reassures Alan that no one will know he's a Jew but he isn't reassured. They spend a single night in the town and Alan soon leaves Josef, who learns later that Alan had been killed in a border dispute. Josef's next lover is a man who laughs at Hitler but slashes his wrists the following morning. Josef notes that there is no suicide note but that the blood is clear.

Josef is aware of the beatings, the persecution of the Jews and the atrocities but continues to ignore them. He says that he's barely aware when the Communists and then the gypsies begin to disappear. Josef then begins to hear of homosexuals who disappear, but he reassures himself that the men arrested are also agitators and pose risks to the emerging political climate that he does not have. He stops going out and dates a few women, going so far as to have sex with one. He's then arrested for violation of the "pink triangle law," and sent to Sachsenhausen. He says there's not the same horror associated with Sachsenhausen as with some other camps because it is a labor camp as well as a death camp. Josef arrives by trains with many others at the town of Oramenberg, where the residents pelt the new arrivals with rocks and taunts.

In chapter twenty-six, Josef describes the camp. There is a place used for experimenting on bodies called "Pathologie." Josef says he initially can't believe the stories he hears but soon learns that they are all true as well as many that aren't told. Sometimes the prisoners are forced to take off all their clothing and roll in the snow until the soldiers bore of the game. In chapter twenty-seven, Josef looks out the door of his barracks to see the men of another barracks being forced to roll in the snow. As he watches, he's told to stay quiet because of an impending escape plan. He says that he wants in and is refused. Then the man who is supposed to serve as lookout backs out and Josef is taken in his place. The original lookout has informed the guards of the escape plan and they are all taken except Josef, who wasn't initially part of the plan. Already outside and with no one looking for him, he walks away. He is soon found by a man leading a pack of partisans.

In chapter twenty-seven, the group is soon killed attempting to blow up a silo, with Josef as the sole survivor. In chapter twenty-eight, Josef arrives at his home, where he finds that his stepfather has been killed and his mother is now living as the mistress of a commandant. He doesn't see his mother, but his nurse gives him money, food and clothing before he leaves again. He wakes surrounded by partisans and has to convince them that he's not a member of the German military. He falls in with the thirteen of them, including the young man of twenty-three they refer to as 'the Boy.' They have different



focuses than that of the previous group. He soon becomes favored as a source of entertainment for his knowledge of literary works.

In chapter twenty-nine, Josef describes the camp at Chelmno. He says that he and his group of partisans hear rumors about the existence of the camp and travel there to see for themselves and to see if there's anything they can do. They consider alternatives, none of them real options because they lack the equipment to make any large explosions or to take on the Nazi army. They know that the prisoners are held in a building referred to as a castle and that it's likely impenetrable. They decide that the group will split up in order to find out what they can about Chelmno. Three groups of two leave, each with a different objective in mind and the plan to return to compare notes in an effort to create a plan. Josef goes alone and travels into the town, presenting himself as a member of the Potocki family when he meets a resident of the town traveling toward the town by wagon. The man recognizes the name and says that he remembers Josef's mother. Josef says that the man tells about the concentration camp freely and that he is in favor of the murders occurring there. The town is filled with members of the Nazi army and Josef says he'd not gone on into town.

Two of the men are captured and are never seen again, though they apparently stand up to the torture of their captors and don't reveal the location of others. Using the information gathered by the others, they travel wide of Chelmno and find that there are vans regularly leaving the camp. They move to a location where they can watch the vans and discover that they carry loads of gassed bodies to a mass grave site. They watch for an entire day and find that some two thousand people a day are being slaughtered. They return to the site the following day, and Josef says it's almost as if they can't get enough of watching or can't believe what they'd seen. After the vans leave for the last time that day, the guards kill the prisoners working the grave detail as well. Josef and his group then leave the safety of the woods and go to the grave site. There the man known as the Avenger sees movement and discovers that a young girl is alive. He pulls her from the pit and Josef begins giving her mouth-to-mouth, aided by the Avenger. She is eventually revived, though she doesn't speak. They wrap her in a jacket and take her a safe distance from the site. The men return to the grave over coming nights and find several more people alive, though none survive more than a few hours. One of those, a woman, tells of the horror of losing her daughter in the crush of bodies in the van and of the gas that took her breath in the van.

After a few days, Gemma begins to talk but claims to have no knowledge of her life prior to the prison camp. She tells them she is like Sleeping Beauty and was "kissed awake." She says that she also knows there was a castle, that she's not certain it's her own castle but that she knows it's important to her. It's Josef who declares that they will call her "Ksiezniczka," or Princess.

In chapter thirty, Josef and his friends realize that they have to find food and clothing for Gemma, especially shoes. The young man called Avenger spends a great deal of time watching Gemma as they travel to join back up with the main body of partisans. They consider sending Gemma away but she pleads with them, saying that she has no family and no where to go. They agree that she is now part of their family and will remain with



them. As they are planning a new raid, the Avenger, who is really named Aron Mandlestain, says that he and Gemma want to be married. They have a makeshift wedding ceremony and the group soon heads back toward Chelmno.

As they near the camp, Gemma goes down a slope first, and she is just slipping out of sight when shots ring out. Josef is shot in the leg and Aron killed. Josef and Gemma fall into the water and the current pulls them away from the fighting. Josef has to restrain Gemma to keep her from returning to Aron's body. His injury is severe and he's soon dependent on her for his survival. A short time later he finds her vomiting and she says she's pregnant with Aron's child and that she will survive in order that the child survive. She's provided with papers to exit the country and Josef gives her his family ring to corroborate the story that she's a member of the aristocracy, traveling "incognito." Josef says he never heard of her fate and hoped that she'd survived, though in moments of despair, he knew that it was more likely that she and the child had both died.

In chapter thirty-one, Becca recalls Gemma's story, which included that the prince arrives at a room with a tin ceiling and floor where he finds the princess.

In chapter thirty-two, Becca and Magda listen to the entire story with only a few short breaks. Magda asks if the story is true. Becca seems upset that Magda would ask but Josef admits that it would be easy to fabricate such a story. He points out the role of love in the life of anyone and Becca is momentarily confused until Magda says that Josef had been in love with Aron. Josef says he's told more of the truth to Magda and Becca than he's ever revealed to anyone. Becca offers to give him his ring back but he says that he wants her to keep it. Becca then begins to struggle with the story and how much of it she should tell her family. She tells Magda that Americans want the truth but only if it's "tidy." She arrives at the airport to find Stan waiting for her. At his questions, she says she's not certain she has any royal blood but suggests that he kiss her so that she might wake up. He does and promises that they'll eventually get to a "happily ever after" for themselves.

In chapter thirty-three, Gemma goes on with the story, this time telling it to Sylvia and Shana's children, saying that the princess wakes and that she marries and has a daughter, and that the princess and the baby live "happily ever after." Becca arrives at this point and asks Gemma if that includes the prince but Gemma says only that Becca is a trouble maker. She never answers but says only that "happily ever after means exactly what it says."

## Analysis

Josef tells about his life prior to the war. He says that he is sent to a boarding school early and that his good looks makes him attractive to many, including men. Josef notes that he drifts into various aspects of his life, including into his relationship with Alan. Josef in fact has little motivation at this point in his life and he seems surprised that Alan won't agree to hid the fact that he's Jewish and that he won't stay in a place that has a sign posted against Jews.



The camp where Josef is held is a study in contradictions, but most of them are. While there is a lab for experimenting on bodies, torture chambers where medical experiments are carried out and all the horrors of the death camps, there is an outward appearance of that includes flowers. Josef says that for years later he can never smell specific flowers without associating it with the smell of death.

Josef says that there's a reason the concentration camp at Chelmno is not so well known as others and that reason is that there were only five survivors in the entire history of the camp. It wasn't a labor camp and the sole purpose of the camp's existence was extermination. Two men escape from a grave-digging detail during the operation of the camp and two men were miraculously found still alive in the camp at the end of the war. The only other survivor was to be Gemma. As Josef begins telling the story as it relates to Gemma, it's easy to see aspects of Gemma's version of Sleeping Beauty in Josef's details. For example, all the members of the partisan groups are given nicknames. Josef is soon called "Prince" because his mannerisms and level of education makes him seem more refined than many in the groups.

There's a huge difference in the attitudes and the plans of the second group of partisans Josef travels with as compared to the first. Josef talks about the first groups in terms of stories and of their apparent desire to become martyrs for the cause. He says that the men and women of that group tell the stories of those who resisted the German authority, though they all died anyway. An example of that story is the woman who refused to hand over her baby to the officials. The baby was ripped from her arms and killed but Josef is told that the point of the story is not that the child was killed, but that the woman resisted. Josef can't find it in himself to make that distinction and it seems that he wants to make a difference with his life rather than becoming someone who will be the subject of stories told by other partisan groups in an effort to increase their own courage. The second group throws around equally impossible plans and ideas, but once those are mentioned aloud, they are discarded as impossible to carry out. The group's leaders say that their purpose should be to survive the war rather than to die as martyrs.

Josef's lineage is of aristocracy, and he uses this for his own purposes when traveling to Chelmno in search of information about the concentration camp, but he also uses it to help Gemma escape the country. Though he's probably not officially a prince, he is a member of the aristocracy, much as Gemma had claimed.

Josef says that there were changes at Chelmno in the year between the time of Gemma's rescue and the time the group returns with a new plan in mind. During that time, a crematorium is built to more effectively dispose of bodies. There have also been an increase in the number of guards. Josef says that even if they had known this, they would have returned. In fact, the rescue of Gemma seems to have been a tremendous source of encouragement to the partisans. Josef says that they realize more than a thousand people died on the day they saved Gemma but they look at it as having saved one of those slated to die that day. It seems that they focus on the fact that they cheated the Germans out of a victim rather than focusing on the number lost to the Germans that day. This is an interesting focus because it is displayed also by Magda. She says that the Polish people would do nothing but cry if they didn't focus on that fact.

## Vocabulary

introspection, sensual, cabaret, enchant, devoured, apolitical, chalets, slogans, gallows, litany, perverted, hurled, lioness, flotsam, jetsam, catastrophes, forays, conscription, detachment, fierce, sustained, shunned



# Characters

## Becca Berlin

Known as Becca, she is just a baby as the story opens and is in her twenties by the time her grandmother, Gemma, dies. Becca is a strong young woman, though she feels the need to be accepted by her sisters, a need that is seldom fulfilled. It's probably because her sisters are close in age to each other while Becca is several years younger that she comes to find herself in such a close relationship with her grandmother. Becca's sisters note that it's Becca who goes to visit their grandmother so often after she's placed in a nursing home while they've visited only a few times over the years. When her sisters fuss at her about various aspects of her life, she tries to find ways to placate them. When her sisters try to argue Becca out of her planned trip to Poland, she argues back at first, then tries to convince them that she's really going as a vacation, a ploy that is obviously designed to avoid further argument, though it works only briefly. Becca is a strong character and eventually ignores the protestations of her family in order to make her trip, though this strength is offset by the need for peace among her family. Becca is a writer for an alternative newspaper and feels the need for support from her sisters for this career choice, though she doesn't get it.

## Gemma

Grandmother of Becca, Shana and Sylvia, Gemma is known by several names, including Genevieve or Dawna Prinz to her family and friends. It's only after her death that it's discovered that her name might have been Gitl Mandlestain. She's dubbed "Gemma" by her granddaughters, the oldest of which is unable to properly say grandma. Gemma never talks about her life prior to coming to America except through the fairy tale, and it takes a trip to Poland in order to discover the details.

In Poland, Gemma is interred in a concentration camp where she is put in a small van and gassed, then thrown into a mass grave and left for dead. When she stirs, a small group of men see her and come to her rescue, giving her mouth-to-mouth and eventually reviving her. She is one of only four to survive the camp and the only woman. Gemma has no memories of how she came to be in the camp, or at least claims to have none. When her rescuers decide to send her to a more secure location, Gemma refuses, staying with the group instead. She's married to a member of the group and discovers that she's pregnant shortly after he's killed. She then becomes determined to live and to keep the child alive. With the help of a man who helps her establish a false identification, she travels to America where she is held in a refugee camp before making a life for herself and her daughter. Gemma uses her own version of the story of Briar Rose to explain her life prior to coming to America.



## **Stan**

Editor of the alternative newspaper where Becca works. Stan tells the story of his quest to find his birth mother. He encourages Becca to travel in search of her grandmother's story.

## **Josef Potocki**

The man who tells Becca the story of her grandmother and of Josef's role in helping her escape certain death. Josef is also the man who helps Gemma find a way to escape the country to go to America.

## **Magda Bronski**

The young woman who serves as translator for Becca during her trip to Poland. Magda and Becca feel an instant connection and are friends by the time Becca leaves for America. During the trip, Magda worries about what Becca might find and suggests at one point that she might abandon her quest, though she understands when Becca doesn't want to.

## **Shana**

Becca's sister, Shana is in real estate. Shana has two daughters and is married to a man named Howie. The couple are obviously having trouble.

## **Sylvia**

Becca's sister, Sylvia is a social worker. Sylvia has a son and is married to a man named Mike.

## **Dr. Jerold Berlin**

Becca's father. He is a surgeon and fully understands the need to get away from the family gathered following Gemma's wake. He is concerned when Becca decides to go to Poland but doesn't stand in her way.

## **Aron Mandelstein**

The man who is with Josef when they rescue Gemma and who later falls in love with her and marries her. Aron is Becca's grandfather.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Rocinante**

The name Becca gives her car.

### **Room 310**

Gemma's room at the nursing home.

### **The Advocate**

The name of the newspaper where Becca works.

### **Palladium Times**

The newspaper that produced a newspaper clipping in Gemma's box.

### **Oswego, New York**

Where the Palladium Times is located and where Gemma was interred in a refugee camp upon her arrival to America.

### **Kulmhof**

The name of the concentration camp where Gemma was interred.

### **Chelmno**

The name of the town where Kulmhof is located.

### **Brda**

The hotel at Bydgoszcz where Magda and Becca stay.

### **Oramenberg**

The town that is home to the concentration camp where Josef is interred.



## **The Pink Triangle Law**

The law that calls for all homosexuals to be interred in concentration camps operated by the Nazis.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

Becca is a baby as the story opens and ages mentally throughout the course of the story. However, she also matures, as seen in the final scene as she comes to realize that she has most of the answers she'd sought but now has to decide what to do with that information. It seems that the more immature Becca from early in the story would never have stopped to consider whether her family would want to know the details of Gemma's life. Another example of this theme is seen in the life of Stan, who tells Becca about his own quest to find his birth mother. While Stan doesn't go into a great deal of detail, it seems that he'd fully expected that he would have some sort of connection with his birth mother once he found her. He comes to term with the lack of connection, a sign of emerging maturity.

Finally, Josef and Gemma are examples of the theme, though their own maturity comes at the cost of lost innocence and living through unimaginable horrors. Josef admits that he'd coasted through life until his life after being a prisoner of the German army. He says that he'd had little in the way of initiative and that he'd simply drifted into relationships and situations. During his time as a prisoner, he'd drifted into an escape plan that had miraculously resulted in his own escape, though he was alone in this success. He'd then drifted into being a part of a resistance group and then traveled with little in the way of objectives. He comes to realize this can't be his life, and it's shortly before Gemma's rescue that he begins to take initiative. In the case of Gemma, there are no memories of how she became a prisoner, but she holds to the group that rescues her as her new family and remains with them until the death of her husband, Aron. It's only after discovering that she's pregnant that Gemma takes control of her life, and it's this initiative that exemplifies her own coming of age.

## The Subjectivity of Memories

Over the course of her life with her children, Gemma often tells the story of Briar Rose, though it is not the same story as the traditional fairy tale. It seems likely that Gemma's own memories are caught up in the fabric of the fairy tale so that she has, over the course of years and the trauma of her lifetime, lost the ability to distinguish between what was real and what was part of the story. She does, however, remain true to the story as she knows it, indicating that the story as she tells it is focused on the memories of her life after being gassed in a concentration camp. It's important that the reader realize the "spin" Gemma puts on the story so that it lacks in the horror of what really happened to her. This tendency toward subjective memories is human nature, especially in situations in which the memories are too horrible to contemplate.

This theme is seen in other characters of the story, including the name named Randolph Feist. Mr. Feist tells Rebecca about his time in an American refugee camp where



Gemma was apparently interred upon her arrival in America. However, he points out that memories are "unwieldy" and at least somewhat unreliable. He says that people tend to remember "odd" details of life while perhaps overlooking other things. Later, Becca encounters a man named Josef Potocki, who immediately remembers Gemma. He relates his memories of the time of concentration camps and his role in rescuing Gemma. When he finishes his story, the young interpreter named Magda asks if he's told the truth. While it seems that Josef has presented the story as he remembers it, it also seems possible that he doesn't fully remember every aspect of the story and that some of these memories may be skewed because of his role in the story.

## The Importance of Family

The importance of family history, connections, relationships and roots is seen in the lives of two of the main characters, Becca and Stan, though it can also be seen in the lives of those who survived through the horror of the concentration camps while their families died. In the case of Becca, she feels a strong sense of family, especially with her grandmother. As Gemma is near death, Becca spends as many hours as possible with her, continuing to keep her company, though her sisters say they can't imagine how Becca spends so much time in the nursing home where Gemma lives. It's Becca who is with Gemma as she reaches the end of life. Gemma tells Becca that the castle is the only inheritance she has to offer Becca and asks that she find it. Becca promises and it seems that this promise solidifies her resolve to find out about Gemma's past life and to find out the truth about the story told so often by Gemma.

As Becca makes this decision to travel to Poland, Stan reveals that he had also gone on a search of this kind, only his quest was to find his birth mother. Stan initially says that it's the blood ties that prompt him to find her but later admits that he had simply been driven to it. Becca seems to feel that same drive but realizes that the rest of her family may not be consumed with this need as she is. She ponders whether she'll tell them all she's learned but arrives at home without resolving this question.

There are other characters who display this same theme. The survivors, those who escape the prison camps as well as those who manage to escape arrest altogether, tend to gather together, and it's noted that they are driven by revenge but also come to care for each other, substituting this new group of companions for the families that are forever lost.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is presented in third person from Becca's perspective, though that perspective is greatly expanded through the stories told to her by others. This is especially true of the man she meets in Poland who reveals his life during World War II and his role in helping Becca's grandmother escape from Poland to America. Becca's memories of her childhood with her two sisters revolves almost exclusively around the story told by their grandmother. The reader should keep in mind that the story begins before Becca is old enough to have memories of her own, making it necessary to use a third-person presentation. There are few details about anything else Becca or her sisters do except as it relates to the story or is prompted by the story. It's evident that Becca shares a stronger bond with her grandmother than either of her sisters. It seems this could be because her sisters, older and much closer in age than Becca is to them, share a strong bond already. Becca may be so close to her grandmother because she lacks that bond with a sibling. Becca does remember saying that she doesn't understand a particular aspect of the story simply as a way of trying to be more like her sisters, though she secretly admits that she does understand her grandmother's words. The limitations of the story are off-set by the fact that people who knew her grandmother share information with Becca. For example, she finds a man who'd played a role in saving Becca's grandmother from death and helping her escape to America. That man's memories are told to Becca so that his story is presented from her perspective as listener, though she wasn't there during the time of her grandmother's internment into a concentration camp. The perspective and its limitations is acceptable for the story.

## Setting

The story is set in three distinct settings. The first is the home and home town of Becca Berlin, which is located in New England. This is described in some detail, including the offices of the Advocate, the newspaper where Becca works. There are also some descriptions of the childhood home of Becca and her sisters, which was purchased by her grandmother years earlier. The second setting is Oswego, New York, where Stan and Becca go to learn more about the refugee camp where Gemma had been housed upon her arrival in America. The third is Poland, where Becca travels in search of the concentration camp where Gemma had apparently been interred. The settings are adequately described and present an accurate picture of the settings. The overall settings are real. For example, the Polish cities that were home to the concentration camps are real and the horrors there are historically accurate overall. The specific setting of Becca's childhood home is likely the only setting that isn't historically accurate but even this setting is believable and acceptable for the story.



## Language and Meaning

The story is written in two distinct ways and the two sections alternate with some chapters devoted to specific sections and telling of Gemma's version of the story Sleeping Beauty and alternating chapters devoted to the story of Becca's quest for her grandmother's story and her origins. This constant alternating may be somewhat distracting to some but a reader will quickly learn to distinguish between the two.

The story uses some foreign words and phrases, mainly Polish. For example, Gemma is called "Ksiezniczka" by the men who find and save her, and it's much later that Becca learns this means "Princess." These words and phrases are not used overly much and are typically explained through context or by interpretation.

Becca's grandmother was known by a series of names, including "Princess" and Genevieve. Becca and her sisters call her Gemma and it's revealed that it was because the oldest of the girls hadn't been able to say Grandma and had dubbed their grandmother "Gemma."

## Structure

The story is divided into three sections. The first is titled "Home," the second is "Castle" and the third is "Home Again." The sections are divided into thirty-two chapters. There are twenty-four chapters in the first section with chapters twenty-five through thirty in the second section and the final two chapters in the third section.

The first section is generally arranged so that chapters alternate between Becca's memories of the story of Briar Rose told by her grandmother and the events leading up to her decision to travel to Poland in search of the truth about her grandmother's story. The chapters devoted to the telling of the story are generally only one to three pages in length and lend clues about the events that Becca's grandmother suffered during her time in Europe during World War II. The alternating chapters range generally from eight to fourteen pages.

The second section of the book is devoted to Becca's trip to Poland in search of the truth about her grandmother's life there. The second section focuses on the story told to Becca by the man she discovers on her trip to Poland as he recounts his life during the war and the role he played in helping Becca's grandmother survive the death camp and escape to America.

The final section begins with Becca remembering the ending of the story told so often by her grandmother and her arrival back in the United States along with her struggle to decide how much of the story she should reveal to her family.



## Quotes

Old houses and old people smell and I don't plan to live in the one or be the other." Chap.. 2, p. 9

And everyone in it - the good people and the not-so-good, the young people and the not-so-young, and even Briar Rose's mother and father fell asleep." Chap. 7, p. 43

I don't think you're going to be happy until you find out who your grandmother was, Becca." Chap. 10, p. 64

The prince isn't mentioned in the last line. It's as if he disappears after the ceremony. Only the princess and her baby daughter remain." Chap. 12, p. 74

Not all the camps burned numbers into their prisoners' arms, Becca,' he said. 'Not all of them kept their prisoners long enough.'" Chap. 14, p. 91

A concentration camp is not an inheritance." Chap. 16, p. 102

And she said, 'See how green and lovely are the lawns around the memorial. Think of what horrors were buried here forty years ago right under our feet; think about what it is that has so fertilized this rich soil.'" Chap. 20, p. 128

And I say to them that if they are truly repentant, God will forgive them. And if God forgives them, they will also be forgiven by the souls of the Jews and Gypsies and Communists and priests." Chap. 21, p. 145

Later he found out this was the usual greeting given the prisoners by the cultured citizens of Oramenberg. Wars do not make heroes of everyone." Chap. 25, p. 172

They grabbed the child from her and hurled it from the window. But ...' he turned a ravaged face towards Josef and there was a shining in it, a reflection of borrowed courage, 'but she did not turn the baby over to them on her own.'" Chap. 27, p. 182

The next night, flushed with the victory of her life, and the night after as well, they went back to the pit, sorting through the stiffening bodies, trying to find someone else alive." Chap. 29, p. 208

She had stayed in there longer than necessary, trying to take in all the details of the narration, trying to be thrilled with the idea of a grandfather who was a war hero, trying to understand that Gemma - her Gemma - had died and been resurrected by a kiss of life given by a man who had probably never kissed a woman before - or since." Chap. 32, p. 227



## Topics for Discussion

### Topic for Discussion 417317

Describe the story of Briar Rose as told by Gemma. How does this story differ from the traditional story. How is it similar?

### Topic for Discussion 417318

Describe the three sisters, Becca, Sylvia and Shana. How are they different? Similar? What is it about the girls that makes the two older girls tend to be so close and that makes Becca tend to be so close to Gemma?

### Topic for Discussion 417319

What is Becca's job? What are the comments Sylvia and Shana make about her job? What role does Becca's job play in her ability to find Gemma's origins?

### Topic for Discussion 417320

What is Stan's role in Becca's quest? What do Dr. and Mrs. Berlin think of her plans to travel to Poland? What is the reaction of Sylvia and Shana?

### Topic for Discussion 417321

Why does Gemma urge Becca to look for her "inheritance?" What does Gemma say is this inheritance? Why doesn't Gemma simply tell Becca and her sisters the truth of her life?

### Topic for Discussion 417322

Describe Gemma's rescue from the mass grave. What emotions does her rescue prompt among those who save her? What actions does it prompt? What is the distinction Gemma has for her escape from the grave of this particular concentration camp?

### Topic for Discussion 417323

What is the conclusion that Becca comes to about Josef upon their first meeting? What does she eventually learn about him? What is the story he tells about his own interment and his role in Gemma's rescue?



## Topic for Discussion 417324

Who is Samantha? Linn? Stan? Harvey Goldman? Marge Pierce? Randolph Feist? Magda? What is the role each plays in Becca's quest to find the truth about Gemma's life?