

The Chosen Study Guide

The Chosen by Chaim Potok

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Introduction

While Chaim Potok's central characters in *The Chosen* struggle between the spiritual obligations of Orthodox Judaism and secular American life, they also reflect universal conflicts between fathers and sons. The novel, Potok's first, was published in 1967 and enjoyed a wide readership, as well as critical acclaim. Potok received the Edward Lewis Wallant Award and a nomination for the National Book Award for *The Chosen*. The novel focuses on its two main characters, Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter, and covers their high school and college years, the period in their lives when they struggle for self-realization. Both are sons of religious fathers, but while Reuven's is orthodox and secularized, Danny's father is the head of an ultra-orthodox and mystical sect of Jews called Hasids. Rabbi Isaac Saunders, Danny's father, fully expects Danny to inherit his role as the spiritual leader of his congregation, but Danny is more interested in modern psychology. Reuven's father, David Malter, is a Hebrew scholar. The story begins with a baseball game between Reuven's and Danny's school teams. They both attend rival yeshivas, Jewish religious schools. Reuven and his classmates wear ordinary clothes and are coached by a gym teacher who is an avid baseball fan. Danny's team is coached by a religious Hasid who wears the black garments, skull cap, and earlocks traditional to his sect. Danny's team is not expected to win, but they have the reputation of being fierce. They do win the game and in the process, Danny breaks Reuven's glasses and sends him to the hospital with glass in his eye. After an initial meeting in the hospital when Danny tries to apologize for the injury, the two boys become friends. The novel explores the relationship each boy has with his own father and the relationship each develops with the other boy's father.

Author Biography

Two life experiences have been major influences on the work of Chaim Potok. They are the world of Orthodox Judaism in which he was raised and the larger world he experienced when he served as an army chaplain during the Korean War. His war experience made him realize that growing up in a strict Jewish community had limited his aspirations to become a writer. Artistic endeavors were not considered the proper pursuit for Jewish boys. Instead, they were expected to study the Talmud, the combined body of writings on Jewish traditions.

Potok was born on February 17, 1929, and was raised in the Bronx, New York. His parents, Benjamin Max and Mollie, had fled persecution in their native Poland. As a young boy, Potok studied in a parochial Jewish school, called a yeshiva. While his early training was in the Hasidic tradition (a sect originating in eighteenth-century Poland that emerged as a reaction to growing Jewish formalism), he later became a conservative rabbi.

The young Potok had a keen interest in artistic pursuits, an interest that was piqued after his parochial school hired an instructor one summer to teach the class painting. Potok's father and teachers discouraged the boy from pursuing such interests because Hasids see the arts as frivolous and even rebellious towards God. Nevertheless, Potok's parents indulged him enough to allow their son to write short stories. Potok also liked to read books that were outside those assigned to him in class. Two of the most influential of these were James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Evelyyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Joyce's book appealed to Potok for its portrayal of the iconoclast, the person willing to go against social norms, and how this rebellious person sees the hypocrisy of those around him. But it was Waugh's novel that convinced Potok to become a writer himself, for he admired Waugh's ability to create whole worlds on paper, and he was fascinated by her portrayal of an upper-class British society that was so outside his personal experience.

Deciding that he was interested in religious and secular societies, Potok learned about both. He studied English literature at Yeshiva University, graduating summa cum laude in 1950, and then he attended the Jewish Theological Seminary, being ordained and receiving an M.H.L. in 1954. Completing his formal education in 1965, Potok earned his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania. During all these studies, he married Adena Sara Mosevitzky in 1958, and the family now includes two daughters, Rena and Naama. As for work, Potok found several positions at seminaries and did writing and editing for various Jewish publications.

Potok's desire to become a writer was also intensified after his Korean experience (he was a chaplain in the army from 1956-57). For the first time, he was thrust into a world where the values of Judaism had little meaning. The conflict of loyalty to parental values and the desire to study outside the prescribed texts and forms of Hasidic Judaism became the central theme in his first novel, *The Chosen*, which was published in 1967.



Potok has written eight novels, all of them dealing with the conflicts his characters feel between their family values and the values of the larger society. Although his books are written in the first person, he denies that his novels are auto biographical. Potok has also written numerous short stories and articles for periodicals and served as an editor for *Conservative Judaism* and the Jewish Publication Society. His teaching experience includes visiting professorships at the University of Pennsylvania and Bryn Mawr College, the Teachers' Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. Also well known for his nonfiction work *Wanderings: Chaim Pataak's History of the Jews*, Potok has published many books that have been widely reviewed. He generally receives praise for the universal themes he develops, for his ability to bring to life the details of Jewish ghetto life in America, and for the struggles confronting his characters. Potok has, however, been criticized for contrived endings to his stories and what some reviewers consider a pretentious style.



Plot Summary

Book One

The Chosen explores the friendship between Jewish Reuven Malter and Hasidic (Jewish Orthodox) Danny Saunders. In Brooklyn during World War II, Danny hits Reuven in the face with a baseball, giving him a concussion. Reuven undergoes an operation to remove a piece of glass from his eye. In the hospital, he meets former boxer Tony Savo and Billy Merrit, a young boy blinded in a car accident. Danny visits Reuven and confides that his father expects him to become a rabbi, though he wants to be a psychologist. He also explains that his father disapproves of apikorsim (Jews who are not extremely orthodox) such as Reuven. Reuven's father, David Malter, urges Reuven to become friends with Danny because the Talmud (the book of Jewish holy law) says the two things one should acquire in life are a teacher and a close friend. When Danny calls again, the boys talk about religion and reading. Danny regularly visits the library to read books recommended to him by an old man who turns out to be Reuven's father. Danny explains that his father is a tzaddik (a Jewish spiritual leader), and that after his father dies he will be obliged to become tzaddik, too, for "if the son doesn't take the father's place, the dynasty falls apart." Danny comments on the irony of being forced to become a rabbi while Reuven freely chooses the same fate. Reuven's eye is healing, and his father arrives at the hospital that afternoon to take him home in time for Shabbat (sabbath).

Book Two

When Reuven returns home, everything seems sharper and clearer to him, as if he were seeing the world around him for the first time. Rav Malter narrates a brief history of Hasidism so Reuven can understand Danny's background. Reb Saunders, Danny's father, is a great Talmudist and a great tzaddik, with a reputation for brilliance and compassion. Danny reminds Reuven's father of a brilliant scholar who rebelled against the traditions of Hasidism. Danny's grandfather was a well-known Hasidic rabbi in Russia. Danny's father inherited the position of tzaddik, and led his Jewish community from Russia to America after World War I. Reuven meets Reb Saunders at his synagogue, and after he notes a mistake in Reb Saunders' gematriya (the Jewish theory that each letter of the Hebrew alphabet corresponds with a number), Reb Saunders gives his approval to the boys' friendship. Danny and Reuven both plan to attend the Samson Raphael Hirsch Seminary before becoming ordained rabbis.

Reuven meets Danny at the library after school. After becoming disturbed by reading negative views about Hasidism, Danny begins studying Sigmund Freud's books. Rav Malter worries about Reb Saunders' reaction to Danny's reading but realizes that Reb Saunders cannot stop it. Reuven visits Danny on Shabbat afternoon, and they review the Talmud with Reb Saunders. When Danny leaves the room, Reb Saunders demands that Reuven tell him about Danny's reading. He then asks Reuven to promise that he



and his father will be a good influence on Danny. Danny mentions that he and his father "don't talk anymore, except when we study Talmud My father believes in silence. When I was ten or eleven years old, I complained to him about something, and he told me to close my mouth and look into my soul. He told me to stop running to him every time I had a problem."

Reuven's eye heals, and he studies for his final exams. When he calls the Merrit household, he learns that Billy Merrit's operation was unsuccessful, and he is severely depressed by the news. Danny and Reuven spend the summer talking, studying Talmud, and following the war news. Danny becomes increasingly disturbed by his study of Freud. When school begins, they meet only on Shabbat afternoons. In April, President Roosevelt dies and the country mourns. When the war in Europe ends in May, everyone is horrified by news of the German concentration camps. While Reb Saunders believes they were the Will of God, Rav Malter refuses to accept this viewpoint. Rav Malter suffers a heart attack, and until he recovers Reuven lives with Danny's family. Reb Saunders speaks to Danny only during their arguments over Talmud.

Reuven's father insists that Palestine must become the Jewish homeland, an idea with which Reb Saunders violently disagrees. Danny comments that his father is suffering for the six million Jews who died. Though he doesn't understand the silence, Danny admires, respects, and trusts his father. However, he feels trapped by the expectation he must become tzaddik so as not to break the dynasty. The war ends in August, and in September Danny and Reuven enter Hirsch College. Both are older and slightly more mature. Reuven has started shaving, and Danny is wearing eyeglasses.

Book Three

Danny becomes upset when he discovers he must study experimental psychology rather than psychoanalysis in college. After talking with his psychology professor, he learns Professor Appleman objects more to Freud's methodology than his conclusions. Rav Malter becomes increasingly involved with Zionist activities. Zionism is prevalent at the college, and tensions build between the Hasidim (followers of Hasidism) and the Revisionists (who support the Irgun, or Palestinian terrorists). Reuven joins a religious Zionist youth group. Danny joins none of the groups but sympathizes with the Zionists.

After Rav Malter's speech at a Zionist rally, Reb Saunders excommunicates the Malter family from the Saunders family. Reuven's school work deteriorates because of his anger towards Reb Saunders.

For the rest of that semester, Danny and I ate in the same lunchroom, attended the same classes, studied in the same school synagogue, and often rode in the same trolley car-and never said a single word to each other. Our eyes met frequently, but our lips exchanged nothing I lost all direct contact With him It was an agony to Sit in the same class with him, to pass him in the hallway, to see him in a trolley, to come in and out of the school building with him and not to say a word. I grew to hate Reb Saunders



with a venomous passion that frightened me at times, and I consoled myself with wild fantasies of what I would do to him if he ever fell into my hands.

The United Nations votes to create a Jewish state. As violence between Arabs and Jews escalates in Israel, the anti-Zionist tensions in school cease. Reuven's father suffers a second heart attack. Reuven studies Talmud using the scientific method and explains a particularly difficult passage in class. Later, he explains his theory to Talmud teacher Rav Gershenson, who reveres his explanation but asks Reuven never to use this heretical method during class.

Rav Malter recovers, and Reuven and Danny, forbidden to talk to one another, communicate with their eyes, nods, and hand gestures. The college students become reconciled to Israel after a graduate is killed in the fighting around Jerusalem. A year later, Reb Saunders allows the boys to resume their friendship. Danny and Reuven dominate their Talmud class. Danny tells Reuven he plans to obtain a doctorate in clinical psychology and will tell his father on the day he receives his smicha (rabbinic ordination).

The last year of college begins. Danny realizes that "you can listen to silence and learn from it sometimes it cries, and you can hear the pain of the world in it." When Danny's brother Levi becomes ill, Danny panics. Reuven believes Danny's fears relate to his worries about destroying the dynasty if he doesn't become tzaddik. But Levi recovers. Danny applies to Harvard, Berkeley, and Columbia for graduate study. Reb Saunders repeatedly asks Reuven to visit, and Rav Malter insists that he go.

Reuven visits Danny's home on the first day of Passover (the Festival of Freedom). Reb Saunders has aged. When Reuven announces his plan to become a rabbi, Reb Saunders says he knows of Danny's plans and explains his long silence. He considered Danny's brilliance a curse because it overwhelmed his soul and eliminated the compassion he would need as tzaddik. He comments, "I had to make certain his soul would be the soul of a tzaddik no matter what he did with his life. In

the silence between us, he began to hear the world crying." He accepts Danny's decision to become a psychologist because Danny now has the soul of a tzaddik. He then speaks Danny's name, and adds: "Today my Daniel is free." The tzaddikate is inherited by Levi. Reuven and Danny graduate *summa cum laude* from college. Danny and his father now speak to each other. When Rav Malter asks him whether he will raise his son in silence, Danny answers yes-if he cannot find another way.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1 introduces Reuven Malter and Danny Saunders. The novel is written in first person through the eyes of Reuven Malter. Reuven Malter is a 15-year-old Orthodox Jewish boy that attends a Yeshiva, or Jewish Parochial school, in Brooklyn. His father is a teacher at his Yeshiva. His school teaches Jewish as well as English subjects. Lessons are taught in Hebrew instead of Yiddish. The focus of Jewish study is the study of the Talmud or Jewish Law.

Danny Saunders is a 15-year-old Hasidic Jew of Russian heritage. He lives only five blocks away from Reuven. Danny wears the traditional Hasidic Jew garb of white shirts, dark pants, white sweaters and black skullcaps. He has curled ringlets of hair near his ears known as ear locks. There is a brief mention of Danny's father, Reb Saunders, who is the leader of the Hasidic sect.

The first scene involves a baseball game between Reuven and Danny's Yeshiva baseball teams. The baseball game takes place at Reuven's home field. Reuven's team is dressed in comfortable clothing while Danny's team plays in traditional Hasidic clothing. His gym teacher, Mr. Galanter, coaches Reuven's baseball team while Danny's baseball team is coached by one of his Yeshiva's Rabbis.

Danny's baseball team is known as "murderers." Danny's team arrives and demands to have a warm up period on the field. They warm up and appear to not be too talented with a baseball. However, looks can be deceiving. The baseball game gets underway and Danny's team takes a big lead. Danny's team plays "hard" baseball by hitting balls that make Reuven's teammates cringe in pain. Reuven hurts his wrist on a catch, but continues to play because his team finally regains the lead.

During the game, Danny's team is out for blood. Danny ruffles Reuven's tail feathers when he brings his Hasidic beliefs into the game. Towards the end of the game, Reuven is asked to be the pitcher. He accepts the challenge even though his wrist aches. He is angry at Danny's comments and wants to win the game.

Reuven pitches to Danny and he hits the baseball straight at Reuven as hard as he possibly can. Reuven does not duck in time and the ball smashes into his glasses and knocks him out. Reuven sits on the bench until the end of the game. His team loses 7-8. His eye is piercing with pain and his coach, Mr. Galanter, finally realizes the urgency of the situation. He calls a cab and takes Reuven to the hospital.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter provides religious background beliefs for both Reuven and Danny. While they are both Orthodox Jews, they have very different beliefs. For example,



during the game, Danny tells Reuven that he told his team to kill the "apikorsim." *Apikorsim* refers to a Jew that was educated in Judaism, but denies basic tenets of the faith. For example, he would deny the existence of God, the revelation and the resurrection of the dead. Therefore, Reuven Malter was an apikorsim in Danny Saunders' eyes.

This conflict in religious beliefs sweeps into motion a friendship between Reuven and Danny from which they will both learn a great deal about one another's beliefs. They do not have experience in nor understand the issues each of them faces. Danny employs the use of rage and wants to "kill" Reuven. Reuven does not understand why Danny has such rage and believes Danny's fanatic sense of righteousness is ridiculous.

Reuven reacts to Danny's rage with a fervent desire to beat him not only on the baseball field, but show him that he will not back down against Danny's aggressive nature. Reuven's determination to understand, overcome and admire Danny is sparked at the thought of pitching him out of the game.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Reuven is rushed to the Brooklyn Memorial hospital and he has intense pain in his left eye. Mr. Galanter will not tell him what is going on and everyone at the hospital tells him he is going to be fine. He sees a doctor and becomes nervous when more than one doctor is called in to determine his condition. Reuven wears glasses and a hint is given as to the intensity of his accident. Reuven looks at the light in the hospital and comments that he has never seen a light with so many different colors in it. This implies that Reuven's glasses have been broken and some of the glass has lodged in his left eye.

Reuven falls asleep for nearly two days and awakes in the hospital ward, hesitant about his surroundings. He meets an ex-boxer named Mr. Savo who lies in a hospital bed next to him. Mr. Savo is stuck on the word "clop" and he keeps the hospital humming with activity. In the other hospital bed next to him is a blind boy named Billy. Billy is waiting to have a new form of surgery done on his eye so that he can see again.

Reuven's father comes to visit him in the hospital because he has been told that Reuven is now awake. Reuven's father is hesitant to tell him what happened to his eye. Reuven demands to know what happened. Reuven's father explains that he had eye surgery to remove glass from his eye. They discuss the fact that scar tissue may form over the eye causing Reuven to lose sight in that eye. Reuven is scared, but his father reassures him that they had the best doctor available and everything will heal successfully.

Reb Saunders, Danny's father, calls Reuven's father twice that day to see if Reuven was fine. Reuven is surprised at the news, especially when he tells him that Danny says he is sorry about hitting the ball at him. Reuven is convinced that Danny is lying and is not sorry at all. Reuven is sure that Danny deliberately hit him.

Reuven is not allowed to read so he won't strain his eye. Therefore, Reuven's father brings him a radio so that he can stay up to date with the "outside" world.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Reuven thinks about how much he hates Danny Saunders even as he sits on the examination table in the hospital. He is outraged at Danny's righteousness. At the same time, he hopes that his father isn't too worried about him. In this chapter, we begin to see the warm, caring relationship between Reuven and his father. The fact that Reuven's father brought him a radio to help him keep connected to the outside world shows that Reuven's father is not a Hasidic Jew in any way and wants Reuven to explore the world outside of Jewish teachings.



While lying in his hospital bed, Reuven thinks about how Danny Saunders gloated about winning the game and he considers him a "miserable Hasid." The actions of Danny at the baseball game have left anger in Reuven. In addition, Reuven was confused about Danny's expressionless nature that turned into eyes of fire right before he hit the ball at Reuven's head.

Reuven quickly dismisses the apology given to Reuven by Reb Saunders. He can't believe that Danny's strong comments against him earlier would lead to an apology that meant something. This demonstrates that Danny Saunders did not leave a good first impression with Reuven, as not only a Hasidic Jew, but a person as well.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The story takes place during World War II. The opening scene of chapter 3 has the hospital patients listening to the radio about "D-Day." Mr. Savo, Billy and Reuven listen to his radio. Meanwhile, Reuven adheres to his Jewish faith and works with his tefillin and prayer book. This leads to a conversation between Mr. Savo and Reuven. Mr. Savo asks Reuven if he is going to be a Rabbi. Reuven reveals that his father wants him to be a mathematician while Reuven wishes to be a Rabbi.

The invasion of D-Day is woven throughout the chapter and Mr. Galanter visits. He remarks that it is one of the greatest days in history. To Reuven's dismay, Danny Saunders appears at his bedside after he awakes from a nap. Danny tries to apologize and Reuven decides to let him start his apology. Reuven becomes angry and asks Danny how it feels to make someone blind in one eye. Danny says that he feels miserable about it, but Reuven does not believe him. Reuven tells Danny that his Hasidic group can go to hell. Reuven wants to fight this out, but Danny doesn't want to argue about it so he leaves.

After Danny leaves, Reuven feels a tinge of regret at having been so angry with Danny. Reuven's father visits and they discuss the situation. Reuven's father tells him he has done a foolish thing by not accepting an apology. He refers to the Talmud by saying "If a person comes to apologize for having hurt you, you must listen and forgive him."

Reuven and his father discuss Hitler and war. They discuss how it will affect the lives of Jews. Reuven had started a friendship with his blind hospital mate Billy. Reuven wonders what it would be like to be blind. He is frustrated that he is forbidden to read due to his eye. He experiences the war through the radio, but he would love to read about it in the newspaper. The radio worked well at first, but he is soon bored with the small variety of shows it provided.

Danny Saunders appears at his bedside the next day. Danny wants to apologize again and Reuven is surprised that he is actually glad to see him. They discuss the baseball game and Danny doesn't understand why he felt like he had really wanted to kill Reuven. Danny explains that they had played tough baseball teams before, but something about Reuven made Danny want to break his head open with a bat.

Reuven and Danny discuss what their fathers do for a living. Danny's amazing intellect is shown through his memorizations of the Talmud. We learn that Danny wants to be a psychologist; however, he has to be a Rabbi because it is a position he must inherit from his father. Reuven explains that his father wants him to be a mathematician, but he wants to be a Rabbi so that he can help people.



Chapter 3 Analysis

This chapter intensifies the initial disdain Reuven has for Danny. Reuven doesn't accept Danny's apology at first. Reuven discusses this with his father. This discussion and advice from his father demonstrate the relationship between Reuven and his father. They openly discuss things and learn from each other.

Reuven allows his anger to subside and his curiosity is sparked at the return of Danny. Reuven accepts his apology and they begin to discuss their lives with each other. Danny reveals that he felt like he wanted to split Reuven's head open. There was something about Reuven that has ignited anger in Danny and he wasn't sure what it was. He felt like he couldn't tell anyone else this and had to get it off his chest. Reuven is surprised at the admission of his feelings and is intrigued to know more about Danny.

Danny's remark that he didn't want to talk about the way his father would have acted if they had lost begins to disclose the strained relationship between Danny and his father. Danny's amazement in Reuven's choice to become a Rabbi poses one of the main topics in the book - one boy must become a Rabbi through inheritance even though he doesn't want to and another boy wants to become a Rabbi by choice even though he doesn't have to.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Reuven is still in the hospital, but he will be out by the end of the week. Reuven is frightened when the curtain is around Mr. Savo's bed. Mr. Savo groans and Reuven hopes that Mr. Savo is not suffering. Danny visits, and Reuven and Danny talk in the hallway. Reuven is happy to see Danny. Danny jokes that he is the Messiah for Reuven.

Reuven learns that Danny's father only talks to him when they study the Talmud. Danny talks about the great writers he enjoys reading. Reuven is confused about Danny because Danny doesn't sound like most Hasid. Danny sounds as if he almost doesn't even believe in God. Danny says he believes in God.

Reuven and Danny discuss what they like to read when Reuven's father appears at their side. Danny is astonished and Reuven doesn't understand why until his father tells him that he meets Danny in the library.

Mr. Savo's eye had to be removed. The doctor exams Reuven's eye and allows him to leave the hospital.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Reuven's father remarks "No one knows he is fortunate until he becomes unfortunate. That is the way the world is." This demonstrates the manner in which Reuven's father teaches him and raises him. He verbally discusses these teachings with Reuven.

Reuven's father also tells him that "[t]he Talmud says that a person should do two things for himself. One is to acquire a teacher." Reuven chimes in that the other is to acquire a friend. This demonstrates that Reuven's father is also following the Talmud.

Reuven's father also says "two people who are true friends are like two bodies with one soul." This comment foreshadows how Reuven's soul will affect Danny. It details the purpose of the friendship between Reuven and Danny.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Reuven is well enough to go home from the hospital. Reuven and his father arrive home to their brownstone and they are greeted by their Russian housekeeper, Manya. Reuven's father types articles and spends much of his time typing in his study.

Reuven has New York Times war maps plastered all over his bedroom walls. He and his father like to stay up to date on current world events. He also has pictures of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Albert Einstein, two of his heroes that he admires. He also likes to listen to a Tchaikovsky symphony on the radio.

Reuven describes his father as a thin, frail man typing on his typewriter with his skullcap on. He doesn't like to be disturbed while he worked. Reuven admires the sunlight shining through the windows into his apartment. He thinks about his stay at the hospital.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Reuven has a slightly different view of his life when he leaves the hospital. He is in awe that the baseball game accident had happened only 5 days ago. In addition, he had a new unexpected acquaintance with Danny Saunders.

Reuven says "I felt I had crossed into another world, that little pieces of my old self had been left behind on the black asphalt floor of the school yard alongside the shattered lens of my glasses." This statement foreshadows Reuven's new venture into the world of Danny Saunders and Hasidic Jews.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Reuven asks his father about Danny Saunders after they eat their Shabbat meal. Reuven's father said that in order to understand Danny he would have to explain Jewish History. He goes on to explain Jewish History in detail. He says that Poland encouraged Jews to come live there because Poland was poor and wanted people who could build their economy. The Jews accomplished this and established great Academic Schools as well. However, the role of the Jews between the Nobles and the peasants caused a great conflict. The peasants viewed the Jews as the ones who worked the dirty work of the Nobles.

In addition, the Cossacks fought against the Jews in 1648. The Cossacks were members of the Greek Orthodox Church in Russia. The Cossacks rose up against the Nobles and they were led by Bogdan Chmielnicki. The Cossacks fought against the Jews as well because they felt the Jews were working for and with the Nobles. This revolution lasted ten years and many Jewish people were slain.

Following the revolution, the Jewish people had thought they had seen the Messiah in the form of a Jewish man named Shabbtai Zvi. Unfortunately, he was found out to be a fraud and the Jewish people experienced a spiritual disaster. Empty discussion about the Talmud that has no relationship to the world, called Pilpul, became the activities of the few learned Jews. In the process, the Jewish masses were neglected regarding Jewish Talmud.

Therefore, they believed that Jewish people could fall prey to demons and spirits. It was believed by the Jewish masses, that Ba'ale Shem - Masters of the Name, could drive away evil spirits by using magical amulets, prescribed medicines and wild dances wearing their tallit and tefflin.

Meanwhile, in 1700 a Jewish child named Israel was born in Poland. He didn't like school and preferred to spend his time quietly in the woods and by the river. Instead of studying the Talmud, he studied the Kabbalah. The Kabbalah are books of Jewish mysticism. Study of the Kabbalah was forbidden by the Rabbis, so he did his studying in secret. Israel gave birth to Hasidism.

Legends were created about Israel and the way he studied quietly in the mountains to establish his Hasidic views. He became a Ba'ale Shem and talked about God and his Torah in plain language that everyone could understand. Hasidism called its great leaders, "tzaddik." This position is inherited from father to son and study of secular subjects was forbidden. This approach engulfed nearly half the Eastern European Jewry by the end of the 18th century.



In contrast, during the 18th century a great Talmudist by the name of Rabbi Elijah was born. He was a strong opponent of Hasidism. Opponents of Hasidism were known as Mitnagdim. The disagreement between the two Jewish beliefs was so great that if a Hasidic Jew and Mitnagdim Jew were married, their parents would consider them dead.

At the end of the 18th century a genius named Solomon, later called Maimon, was born. He had a thirst for knowledge and the outside world. He read forbidden secular books. This interest sparked others to think that he might have even turned Christian when they lost track of his travels. Reuven's father says that Danny Saunders is like Maimon. Danny Saunders has an exceptional mind and thirst for outside knowledge and meaning. Danny is lonely and has no one to talk to about this because he is a Hasidic Jew. Reuven's father tells him to be friends with Danny Saunders and that they can help each other through this friendship.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Jewish History of Hasidic and Mitnagdim Jews is given to establish the history behind the differences in Reuven and Danny's Jewish faiths. Reuven is allowed and encouraged to explore the outside world, while in contrast, Danny must follow his Hasidic beliefs and not engage in any secular study. Reuven's father understands that Danny has an exceptional mind and craves the study of secular subjects. He also understands that Danny can't voice this opinion to his father. Therefore, Reuven must be the listening ear and friend of Danny.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Reuven and his father go to their synagogue for morning service. Reuven takes part in the Torah service by reciting the blessing over the Torah. Reuven prays for Mrs. Savo and Billy. Reuven's eye is still healing and he is not yet allowed to read. After the service, Reuven goes home to take a nap. He is awakened by a visit from Danny Saunders.

They had planned to spend the afternoon together. Danny wants to take Reuven to his father's Shul so he can meet him. Reuven dresses in a shirt and tie and comments that he doesn't have the Hasidic caftan. Danny remarks that only members of the fold have to wear the caftan. This first question is the first of many Reuven will experience while meeting Danny's father.

They walk to Danny's neighborhood and discuss some more personal information in order to get to know each other better. They realize they were born just two days apart. They marvel at the fact that they only live five blocks from each other and have never met each other. Reuven states that he thinks Danny's father is a tyrant. Danny tries to explain his father's behavior by saying that he is a strong-willed person. Reuven asks Danny why his father wanted to meet him, especially since Reuven is an apikoros. Danny explains that is precisely the reason why Reb Saunders wants to meet him. Reb Saunders wants to know the kind of friends that Danny has so he can approve or disapprove of them.

Danny reveals that his father doesn't talk to him at all, except when they discuss the Talmud. Reuven is amazed that Reb Saunders gives Danny the silent treatment because he and his father have an open, expression-filled relationship. Danny explains that his father is a great man and Reuven will understand the relationship better between Danny and Reb Saunders when he meets him.

Danny gives the history of his family. Danny's grandfather was a well-known Hasidic Jew in Russia. Danny's father, Reb Saunders, became a Rabbi by inheritance and had a reputation as an awesome Talmudist. His father brought his Russian Jewish community over the United States after the First World War. It was a terrible ordeal and they faced much tragedy over the war, but they made it to the United States. They settled in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Reb Saunders' entire Jewish community had followed him over to America because he was a tzaddik.

Reuven can't believe that an entire community would follow one person just like that. He also lets Danny know that Reuven's father didn't have very complimentary things to say; that tzaddiks take advantage of their followers. Danny counterpoints by saying that a tzaddik is like a god and that is the way it is.



They go to Danny's synagogue and Reuven is met by stares. Reuven feels uncomfortable, but he knows that he has some respect because he is friends with Danny. The men in the synagogue treat Danny as if he were a god as well. The synagogue fills for services and only Yiddish is spoken. Discussion of the Talmud is the main interest of the men. Danny introduces his father, Reb Saunders, to Reuven. Reuven feels uneasy in the situation. Reb Saunders asks about Reuven's eye and also says that he knows Reuven's father. Reb Saunders asks Reuven if he knows Hebrew.

They have a long service in which Danny and Reuven are tested by Reb Saunders. Danny must find the mistake in Reb Saunders' service and explain the correct answer. The mistake involves the Talmud. Reb Saunders and Danny go through a verbal quiz right in front of the entire synagogue. Reuven finds this to be cruel to Danny, but realizes that it is a common Jewish tradition.

Reb Saunders also added in gematriya. Gematriya consists of assigning number values to Hebrew letters and then adding the numbers together for given words. There was a mistake in Reb Saunders' gematriya that Danny didn't catch because Danny is not skilled in mathematics. However, Reuven is very skilled in mathematics and caught the mistake. Reb Saunders verbally quizzes Reuven about this and Reuven has the correct answer. This leads Reb Saunders to respect Reuven and allow him to be friends with Danny.

Reb Saunders complains about the anti-Hasidic articles that Reuven's father writes, but he knows that Reuven's father is a follower of the Commandments. Therefore, he will allow Danny and Reuven to be friends. Danny walks Reuven home late that night after all the services. Reuven remarks at how Reb Saunders can be very mean one minute and then very nice the next. Reuven doesn't understand it. Reuven wants to know what happens if Danny misses a question during the verbal quiz. Danny explains that hasn't happened in years, but if it did things would be uncomfortable for a while.

Danny comments that he is preparing to study with Rav Gershenson who is a great scholar at The Samson Raphael Hirsch Seminary and College. This was the only Yeshiva in the United States that offered a secular college education. The rabbinic faculty had well respected Talmudists. Reuven is going to go to that college too. The boys rejoice at discovering that they are going to go to the same college.

When Reuven arrives home, he details his experience at Danny's synagogue to his father. Reuven asks his father why Reb Saunders asks the way he does and he says it is because great men are complicated.

Chapter 7 Analysis

To start the day Reuven attends his synagogue's service. By the end of the day, he has experienced a Hasidic service. The introduction to Hasidic services derives from Reuven meeting Danny's father. Reuven doesn't know how to properly dress and wonders what people will think of him when they see him walking with Danny. He



realizes that he doesn't care because Danny is his friend. He has followed his father's advice about getting to know Danny so that they can both learn from each other.

Reuven doesn't understand the Hasidic ways and tells Danny that he thinks Danny's father is a tyrant. Danny replies with, "When he makes up his mind about something, that's it, finished." This statement is a prevalent theme throughout the book with regards to Reb Saunders actions. He is a tzaddik and has to lead his people. This responsibility means making a decision and sticking to it no matter what.

Reb Saunders is considered a great man and he feels he has to test his son and anyone who wants to be his friend. Reb Saunders lightly shook Reuven's hand when he first met him. However, Reb Saunders gave Reuven a firm handshake after Reuven correctly identified the gematriya mistake. This demonstrates facets of Reb Saunders' personality and position. One is not worthy until he deems them worthy. Reb Saunders uncharacteristically lets Danny be friends with a non-Hasidic Jew like Reuven only because Reuven's father follows the Commandments. Reb Saunders can't let a non-Hasidic Jew into Danny's life unless he has justification by Jewish Law.

Reuven learns the rationale behind some of Reb Saunders' actions. Reuven's father explains that many Jewish families quiz their children in public because all learning must be in public. Reuven's father doesn't necessarily agree with the way Reb Saunders treats his son, but understands that there is more than one way to raise a child. Reuven's father is glad that Reuven has begun to understand and ask questions about Danny and Hasidism.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Reuven returns back to school and his classmates are curious about his baseball accident. Danny and Reuven have decided to meet each other at the library that afternoon. Reuven heads to the library after school and finds Danny practically hiding behind a bookcase reading a book. Reuven describes one of his recent trips to the library when he found an article in the *Journal of Symbolic Logic*. Reuven is amazed at how fast Danny read through the book and didn't want to disturb him. Reuven isn't supposed to read yet, so he goes over propositional calculus in his head.

Danny finds him and reads passages from the *History of Jews*. Danny reads about Dov Baer who has invented the idea of tzaddik. The book is against Hasidism and viewed Hasidism has a belief for drunkards and was vulgar and perverse. Danny is hurt by this opinion of Hasidism. He can't believe someone would view Hasidism this way. Reuven says he doesn't describe Hasidism like that and maybe that's how Hasidism was during Dov Baer's day. Reuven tells Danny about books that his father recommends he read.

Danny talks about his interest in psychology. He details the idea of the unconscious. They discuss dreams and psychoanalysis. Danny says that he wants to read about Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, but first he has to learn German so he can read Freud's original writings. Reuven is appalled and surprised that Danny wants to learn German. They leave the library and Danny remarks that his little brother is still sick. The doctor thought that there was something wrong with his brother's blood chemistry and gave them pills for it.

Reuven tells his father about their adventure in the library. Reuven's father is surprised that Danny wants to read Freud in German at such a young age, but understands that Danny is a genius.

Danny and Reuven meet at the library again and Danny has started memorizing German. At the same time, Reuven's father wonders if suggesting topics for Danny to read is ethical because they are doing it behind Reb Saunders' back. Reuven's father explains that he has just given Danny some direction. Reuven says that Danny would have read the books on his own anyway at some point in time.

Danny and Reuven spend the following Shabbat afternoon studying Pirkei Avot. They have gone to Reb Saunders study and discussed the Pirkei Avot text. Danny would catch any mistakes by Reb Saunders and use the Talmud as justification. It was battle between equals and Reuven was enthralled in watching it.

Reb Saunders sends Danny down to get some tea. He explains to Reuven that he knows that Danny was going to the library. He wants to know what Danny is reading. Reuven feels uncomfortable, but has to tell Reb Saunders about what books Danny was



reading. Reb Saunders explains that he has to ask Reuven because he can't ask his son. Reuven tells him what Danny is reading.

When Danny returns with the tea, Reb Saunders doesn't ask him about the library. Later, Reuven tells Danny that he had to tell Reb Saunders about his trips to the library. Danny knew his father would find out eventually, but wished that he had asked him instead of Reuven.

Reuven's father explains that Reb Saunders has to talk to Danny through him. Reuven is confused about his role as a buffer.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Reuven comments, "It seemed impossible to me that the ball game had taken place only a week ago. So many things had happened, and everything looked so different." This statement shows that Reuven is still reeling from how the baseball accident led him to be friends with Danny Saunders.

Danny's interest in psychoanalysis and reading Freud in German demonstrates his thirst for outside knowledge. He wants to learn more about the unconscious and dreams. Danny says that we are all complicated and that our unconscious is not a nice place. He says this because his unconscious is telling him that he is interested in psychology instead of Hasidism. This conflict is a horrible thing in the eyes of Reb Saunders.

Reuven's father says that the story about Dov Baer was biased and comments, "There is enough to dislike about Hasidism without exaggerating its faults." This shows that Reuven's father dislikes Hasidism, but dislikes it for balanced reasons.

The silence between Reb Saunders and Danny is further explored when Reb Saunders asks Reuven about Danny's trips to the library. Reb Saunders says, "I want you to tell me what he reads. I could ask my son, but it is difficult for me to speak to him. I know you do not understand that. But it is true. I cannot ask my son. One day perhaps I will tell you the reason. I know the mind he has, and I know I can no longer tell him what yes to read and what not to read." This admission from Reb Saunders exemplifies the intriguing question in Reuven's mind about Reb Saunders and Danny's relationship. This passage is a prime example of the struggle between Reb Saunders and his son Danny throughout the entire book.

The lack of communication between Reb Saunders and Danny hurts Danny. He had wished that Reb Saunders had asked him about his trips to the library. Danny is sad that they only talk when they are discussing the Talmud. Reuven's father understands the relationship between Reb Saunders and Danny and feels sorry for Danny. He tells Reuven that he is the "buffer" between them.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Reuven's eye has healed nicely and he can read once again. He takes his final exams and is ready for summer vacation. He hasn't seen Danny in a week. They discuss their summer plans. Danny is going to study the Talmud and read Freud.

Reuven still thinks about the young blind boy named Billy that he had met in the hospital. He calls Billy's home to see how Billy's eye operation went. Unfortunately, Billy's operation was unsuccessful. Reuven wants to see Billy, but Billy's family was moving to Albany.

Reuven is upset by the news and goes out to his front porch to think. He observes a housefly that is caught in a spider web. Reuven blows on the spider web and saves the housefly. Both the housefly and spider then disappear.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Reuven's reaction to Billy's surgery news demonstrates Reuven's compassion for others. Reuven wanted Billy to heal and to be able to see the world. Reuven couldn't help Billy, but he could help Danny see the world.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Danny and Reuven spend nearly every day of the first month of summer together. Reuven plays baseball and studies Talmud with his father. Danny studies Talmud in the morning by himself or with his father, Reb Saunders. Reuven, Reuven's father, and Danny meet at the library in the afternoons.

Reuven asks Danny to come over for dinner, but Danny declines. Later Reuven learns that Danny couldn't eat at Reuven's house due to Hasidic beliefs. Danny, Reb Saunders and Reuven would discuss Talmud on Shabbat afternoons. Danny always finds his father's purposeful mistakes.

Reuven and his father follow the war. Reuven adds to his collection of war maps and they listen to the war broadcasts. Reuven's father continues to write articles and he has to travel to Manhattan for research. During this time, Reuven goes alone to the library and meets up with Danny. Danny begins to read Freud in German.

Reuven is in awe of Danny's ability to read German and understand the psychological texts. Meanwhile, Reuven studies mathematical articles. Danny has a hard time understanding the German and this frustrates him. Danny is used to understanding things right away. Danny's frustration subsides when he finds books such as a dictionary of psychological terms.

Reuven and his family head to a cottage near Peekskill during the last month of summer. Reuven and Danny think it would be immature to write, so Reuven calls Danny the first thing when he returned home from his trip. Danny explains that he has been reading various books the past month including ones recommended by Reuven's father. These books at first caused Reb Saunders to give him a poisonous look, but Reb Saunders changed his opinion when he found out the books were suggested by Reuven.

Chapter 10 Analysis

This chapter details the varying ways in which Reuven and Danny discover information about the outside world. Danny reads books at the library because his father would otherwise forbid him to find out this information, whereas Reuven and his father have an open relationship and track the current events of the war.

This chapter depicts the way each boy spends his free time and where each father places importance on the Talmud and the outside world.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

It is the new school year and for the first two months Danny and Reuven meet on Shabbat afternoons. Reuven is elected the President of his class and spends time being involved in school politics instead of spending time with Danny. Reuven continues to suggest and supply books to Danny. Danny is reading voraciously and has trouble with his eyes.

In December, the Germans launch a major offense and the Battle of the Bulge begins. The Battle of the Bulge lasted through January. Reuven did not see Danny at all during this time. However, they speak on the phone and Reuven thinks Danny sounds sad and tired. Danny isn't much interested in the Battle of the Bulge and wanted Reuven to come talk to him soon. Reuven finally goes to Danny's in the end of February, but they have no time to talk alone. Instead, they discussed the Talmud with Reb Saunders.

In the end of March, American troops have reached the Rhine River and held against German counterattacks. Reuven's father and even Danny were excited with this war news. Reb Saunders appeared to have interest in the war when he said "It is the end of Hitler, may his name and memory be erased." Rumors were abounding that the war was over, but they were false rumors.

In the second week of April Reuven and his classmates are stunned and saddened to find out that President Roosevelt has died. Everyone cries over President Roosevelt's death. Reuven's father comments on how President Roosevelt had seen the country through the Depression.

On May 7 the news of an unconditional surrender comes. Reuven's father weeps over the murdered European Jews in Teresienstadt and other concentration camps. The death toll has reached nearly six million Jews. Reuven weeps in response to the horrifying news as well.

The next day Reuven went to see Reb Saunders and Danny. They discuss the war news instead of Talmud. Reb Saunders describes his previous tragedy in Russia when he was brutalized by the Cossacks. Reb Saunders describes the world as one that kills Jews and makes them suffer. Reb Saunders remarks that this is God's will and that we must accept the will of God. Reuven asks his father if the atrocities of the war were God's will. Reuven's father responds differently from Reb Saunders. Reuven's father says that we can't wait for the will of God and that we must act now. The only Jewry left in the world is in America. He says, "If we do not rebuild Jewry in America, we will die as a people."

The next day Reuven's father suffers a heart attack. While he is recuperating, Reuven moved in with Danny's family.



Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter focuses on the different responses from Reb Saunders and Reuven's father about the atrocities of the war. Both are excited that the war was finally won and Hitler has been overcome. However, they react to the atrocities of nearly six million slain Jews differently. Reb Saunders thinks of it as God's will and that we must accept it. We must wait for God's will and wait for his answer. In contrast, Reuven's father says that we can't wait for God's will. We need to take action. The only Jewry left is in America. It is important to solidify Jewry in America.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Reuven has moved in for a few weeks with Danny's family. They accept him with open arms. Reuven has a deeper relationship with Danny's brother and sister. Reb Saunders' health is failing and he has crying spells which no one discusses. Reuven and Danny fall into a routine of going to the library in the afternoons and discussing Talmud in the evening with Reb Saunders. Danny continues to read Freud and other Jewish subjects suggested by Reuven's father. Reuven continues to read about symbolic logic.

Reb Saunders is withdrawn and still does not communicate with his son. Reuven is able to experience the silence between Reb Saunders and Danny first hand.

Danny teaches Reuven some of the basic concepts of Freud. Reuven is upset because he feels that Freud contradicts everything he knows. This notion did not seem to bother Danny.

In the meantime, from his hospital bed, Reuven's father is reading anything he can about the downfall of European Jewry. Reuven's father is active in promoting the notion that American Jews carry a big responsibility to rebuild the Jewry in the world. He says that it is important to have Palestine as a Jewish Homeland. Reuven's father feels that they can't wait for the Messiah and God. They must make their own Messiah and rebuild American Jewry.

Reuven mentions the importance of Palestine to Reb Saunders and his family. Reb Saunders acts with fervent disgust and contempt for such a thought. Reb Saunders calls the supporters of Palestine, apikorsim and goyim. He is outraged that these people will build the land when God must build it. He says the goyim are contaminated men and can't build the land.

Danny tells Reuven to not mention any Zionist ideas to his father in the future. Reuven didn't know that Reb Saunders thought Zionism was a contaminated idea. Danny begs Reuven to not talk about a Jewish state anymore.

Danny and Reuven talk about how Reb Saunders is trapped by the inheritance of being a tzaddik. Danny trusts his father and therefore respects his silence.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Reuven has a more intimate look into the relationship between Reb Saunders and Danny while he lives with Danny's family. Reuven notes how Reb Saunders appears withdrawn and is caught weeping from time to time. He is befuddled as to why no one discusses the crying episodes.

The only time Reuven sees Danny and Reb Saunders talk is during discussions of the Talmud. Reuven says, "I almost had the impression that they were physically incapable of communicating with each other about ordinary things. It troubled me, but I said nothing about it." The lack of communication is so different from the open relationship between Reuven and his father.

This chapter presents two very different viewpoints regarding the creation of a secular Jewish state. Reuven's father supports building a Jewish state in Palestine, while Reb Saunders views a secular Jewish state as a sacrilege and violation of the Torah. He feels that contaminated goyim would be building the state. This is direct contrast to Reuven's father's view of the Jewish state.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Reuven and Danny have entered their first year of Hirsch College. Danny is upset to find that Hirsch College studies experimental psychology as opposed to Freudian psychology. Danny can't understand how the study of rats and mazes has anything to do with the study of the mind. Danny feels miserable at college, while Reuven thoroughly enjoys all his teachers and classes.

Reuven describes Hirsch College as a rigidly orthodox school. They have services three times a day. They have a schedule that consists of Talmud study in the mornings and a normal college curriculum in the afternoons and evenings. Reuven spends large amounts of time studying. Danny has become the leader of the Hasidic students at the college.

Danny is disgusted with his experimental psychology classes and believes that no matter how long he sits through the classes, he will never like it. Danny and Reuven discuss Freud's theories. Reuven says that Freud doesn't follow intuitive logic.

Reuven's father is heavily involved in Zionist activities. Reuven tells his father about Danny's upset over Freud. Reuven's father says that Danny is realizing that Freud is not God. The health of Reuven's father is failing and Reuven asks him to slow down. Reuven's father refuses because the life of Jews in Palestine is at stake. Reuven's father tells him that he is not a child anymore. It is important to find meaning in our short lives. We need to take action and create meaning, not sit around waiting for meaning to appear. He says that Reuven still needs to create meaning to his life.

Reuven researches the meaning of the word "unconscious." This helps him to understand the trouble that Danny has with experimental psychology. Reuven explains his thoughts about the unconscious only to have Danny become mad at him. Danny goes on to discuss experimental versus Freudian psychology with Professor Appleman. Professor Appleman explains that Freud's theories are based on his own limited experiences. Freudian psychology can't be applied to the masses. Professor Appleman says that no one scientist is God. Therefore, scientists can have conflicts with other scientists. Danny begins to understand and accept the importance of experimental psychology.

Tensions rise between Zionists and anti-Zionists at Hirsch College. A battle breaks out between Hasidic and non-Hasidic Jews during lunch one day about the creation of a Jewish state. The Hasidic Jews say that the Zionist activities are destroying Jewish souls. The two groups remain separated from one another. Danny tells Reuven that he secretly wanted to be on Reuven's side, but he couldn't because of his father.



Meanwhile, Reuven's father is marching in support of a Jewish state. He is going to read a support speech at a Zionist rally at Madison Square Gardens. The speech is in all the newspapers. Danny immediately ceases all contact with Reuven. Reuven was dismayed that Reb Saunders has instructed Danny to not contact him, not over secular literature and Freud, but over Zionism.

Reuven's father explains that Reb Saunders acted that way because he had followers to appease. Reb Saunders' followers would accept a friendship with a non-Hasidic Jew that followed the Commandments, but not one that was in favor of Zionism.

Chapter 13 Analysis

This chapter has two main events. First, Danny finally discusses his feelings about experimental psychology with Professor Appleman. Professor Appleman helps Danny to see that Freud is not a God. Since no one man is a God in science, scientists can disagree with another. This relates to Danny's following of his father as a God. Danny is used to being told that there is one tzaddik or God to follow. He realizes that there are other viewpoints worth exploring.

The second major event is Reuven's father's Madison Square Garden speech about the support of a Jewish state. This speech causes Reb Saunders to forbid Danny from making any contact with Reuven. Reuven can't believe that Reb Saunders would impose this restriction over Zionism. Reuven feels Reb Saunders is a fanatic. Reuven's father says, "...the fanaticism of men like Reb Saunders kept us alive for two thousand years of exile. If the Jews of Palestine have an ounce of that same fanaticism and use it wisely, we will soon have a Jewish state." This shows that Reuven's father doesn't agree with Reb Saunders about Zionism, but he does support the intense actions of Reb Saunders.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Reuven and Danny have no contact with each other for the rest of the semester even though they have the same lunch and classes. Reuven grows to hate Reb Saunders for taking Danny's friendship away from him. Reuven's schoolwork begins to decline. Reuven wonders if Danny is going through the same hard times and hates the silence. Reuven tries to talk ill of Reb Saunders, but Reuven's father always says that people like Reb Saunders have kept the Jewish community alive.

Reb Saunders organizes The League for a Religious Eretz Yisroel. This group believes that no Jewish homeland should be created until the coming of the Messiah. This is in conflict with Zionism. Reb Saunders is zealous in his efforts and is even going to boycott shop owners that are supporters of Zionism. He creates a mass anti-Zionist rally, but it is poorly attended. The college is fraught with arguments over Zionism.

Reuven, still miserable, takes his finals and doesn't do well on them. Reuven's father attends Zionist meetings. Reuven returns to school in the fall. Danny stares at Reuven, but doesn't say hello. This upsets Reuven greatly. Danny is expressionless and Reuven decides to forget about Danny.

Reuven is now a student in Rav Gershenson's Talmud class. Class consists of calling on students at random to discuss texts from the Talmud. Each student is nervous about being called on. Danny answers the Talmud questions easily. Reuven is called on in the first week of October. He responds with an acceptable answer. Reuven keeps expecting to get called on again soon after that, but he is not. In the mean time, he intensely studies the Talmud and waits in anticipation for his turn in Rav Gershenson's class. The wait is beginning to frustrate him.

Reuven's father has become a prominent speaker for Zionist activities and rallies. On November 29, Reuven and his father are overjoyed with the news that the Jewish state was going to happen. The joy is overshadowed by the ensuing violence between Arabs and Jews. Reuven arrives at school to find anti-Zionist leaflets that say the Jewish state was a desecration of the name of God and that Jews should fight against its recognition by the United States government. Tensions between Zionist and anti-Zionist groups grow at the college. Despite the tension, Reuven is able to earn A's for the semester.

Reuven's father collapses at the Jewish National Fund Meeting and is put in the hospital. Danny still doesn't talk to Reuven, but he brushes him as they walk by each other in the hallways. Reuven sees this as a form of communication and sympathy from Danny. While waiting for his father to recover, Reuven focuses on his studies. He works through the Talmud with energy and vigor. He wants to be ready when Rav Gershenson calls on him again. Reuven decides the best way to study the Talmud is to memorize the passages in order to understand them.



Rav Gershenson finally calls on Reuven at the end of February. Reuven is called on for a passage that most of his classmates deem difficult and confusing. Reuven ends up talking about the Talmud passage for four straight days of class. Rav Gershenson does not stop Reuven's explanation at all until the fourth day where he asks him about previous points. Even the Hasidic students are in awe of Reuven's command of the Talmud. Rav Gershenson poses an unexpected question about the reconciliation and Reuven dismisses it as Pilpul. This upset the Hasidic Jews in the class.

Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter presents the tension between Zionists and anti-Zionists. Reuven tries to forget about Danny, but in reality, he mimics Danny's study of the Talmud. Reuven does this by memorizing the passages and becomes well-versed in the Talmud.

Danny is still forbidden to speak to Reuven. However, when Reuven's father goes into the hospital Danny makes a small gesture of brushing by Reuven in the hallway. This small gesture tells Reuven that Danny really does care about him and his father.

Reuven's long, detailed description about the Talmud text and his disparaging comments about Pilpul demonstrate Reuven's anti-Hasidic beliefs. Rav Gershenson asks Reuven to not answer questions about the Talmud in the future in the same manner he did during the four days of class. Reuven searches for Rav Gershenson's name in the Hebrew or English Journals and doesn't find his name. This leads Reuven to believe that Rav Gershenson sympathizes with the Hasidic viewpoint and this is exactly why Reuven's father doesn't teach at this college.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Reuven's father returns home from the hospital in March. There is still silence between Reuven and Danny. The entire Hirsch campus is saddened by the rising violence between Arabs and Jews of Palestine. The Zionist group on campus works to help stop the violence by sending supplies. Reuven finds out that his father has been asked to go to the Zionist General Council meeting in Palestine during the summer. Reuven's father cannot attend because he is sick.

May brings about the birth of the Jewish state. Reuven and his father weep with joy. However, the violence between Arabs and Jews continues. The violence touches the campus personally in June when it is rumored that a recent graduate of Hirsch College has been killed in the fighting. The rumor is true. This hits Reuven and his classmates close to home. The entire school attends a memorial service for the fallen graduate. The very same day Reb Saunders and the anti-Zionist league die at Hirsch College. Anti-Zionism is still going on outside the school, but is no longer an issue on the Hirsch College campus.

Reuven starts his third year of college. Reuven's father is well enough to teach again. One day in the spring, Danny suddenly appears at Reuven's lunch table and asks him to help with his experimental psychology graphs and tables.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The violence between Arabs and Jews of Palestine is discussed further in this chapter to show that the violence has not yet come to an end. The loss of a Hirsch College graduate brings the war close to home. One can debate about a war when the violence is far from home, but when the war is brought to your front door you reevaluate your tactics.

The anti-Zionist movement declines after the loss of the graduate. The decline of the movement prompts Danny to be able to talk to Reuven again. Danny begins to talk to Reuven again. It's as if no time had passed and he had not been silent for so many months. This shows that Danny is used to and understands the silence. This is beginning of the reconstruction of their friendship.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Reuven is stunned by Danny's presence and Danny simply says that the "ban has been lifted." Reuven asks Danny how he can stand the silence when it makes Reuven want to lose his mind. Danny replies that he has learned to live with the silence. Danny still only talks to his father during Talmud sessions. Reuven calls Reb Saunders crazy and sadistic.

Reuven tells his father that night about Danny's reemergence into his life. His father explains that the Jewish state is now a fact instead of an issue of debate. Therefore, Reb Saunders had to lift the ban because the issue was over and decided.

Reuven and Danny return to their old habits of the synagogue and the library. Reuven and Danny have intense debates during Rav Gershenson's class. Danny realizes that he now actually likes experimental psychology. Danny figures out that he wants to study people and decides to go into clinical psychology. Danny will need to earn a doctorate for this line of work and he contemplates going to Columbia for his studies. Reb Saunders doesn't know about Danny's decision. Danny decides he will tell him the day he receives his smicha, which is the rabbinic ordination.

Reb Saunders requests that Reuven come over for Shabbat afternoons. Reb Saunders mentions nothing about Zionism or the silence he had imposed between Danny and Reuven. This upsets Reuven and his hatred for Reb Saunders grows.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Reuven's father asks him if Danny and Reb Saunders are still silent with each other. Reuven tells him that yes, they still do not talk, except for discussion of the Talmud. Reuven's father says, "A father can bring up a child any way he wishes...What a price to pay for a soul." Reuven's father doesn't explain what he means by this statement; however he is foreshadowing to an important discussion between Danny and Reb Saunders that doesn't involve the Talmud.

Danny has decided that he wants to study clinical psychology. He needs a doctoral degree and he will earn it against Reb Saunders' wishes. Danny knows that his father will blow up when he finds out that Danny doesn't want to be a rabbi, so Danny is waiting until the last minute to tell him.

Reb Saunders wants to create a relationship with Reuven again and ignore what has occurred in the past. This upsets Reuven and he doesn't understand Reb Saunders' actions.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Reuven and Danny are in their last year of college. Reuven tells Danny a mild anti-Hasidic story. Danny laughs until Reuven makes a disparaging comment about a tzaddik. Reuven apologizes immediately. However, Danny says that there is some truth to Reuven's comment.

Danny says that a wife has already been chosen for him which will make it even harder for him to get out of the rabbinic inheritance trap. Danny's brother, however, could inherit the tzaddik reputation instead of him. Danny's brother Levi has grown and they attended his bar mitzvah. Levi falls ill the next day and this worries Danny because if Levi doesn't inherit the tzaddik then he would have to instead.

Reuven and his father discuss how Danny's interest in psychology will severely hurt Reb Saunders. Reuven's father asks if Danny realizes what he is doing, as he will need to rid himself of his Hasidic ways in order to study clinical psychology. Reuven's father fears that Danny is only focusing on getting out of the tzaddik inheritance and doesn't fully understand the consequences of such actions.

Reuven's father will talk to Danny about the situation. Reuven's father explains that silence is a way of raising children. It was practiced in Europe by some Hasidic families. Reuven's father disagrees with the silence and believes there are better ways to teach children compassion.

Danny decides to apply for the psychology programs at Harvard, Berkeley and Columbia. Reuven tells Danny that it will be hard to keep his secret when the materials for the universities come in the mail.

Danny explains that he will still be an Orthodox Jew, but he will rid himself of the Hasidic ear locks and attire. Danny realizes that his father will find out about his college materials through the mail. Reuven urges Danny to tell his father about his plans right now.

Danny comes over to Reuven's apartment that night to talk to Reuven's father. Reuven's father asks about Danny's plans to tell Reb Saunders about his doctorate aspirations. Reuven's father explains that Danny needs to know exactly what to tell Reb Saunders. He urges Danny to think about how Reb Saunders will react to the news. Reuven's father asks Danny if he can hear silence. He says that Reb Saunders will explain the purpose of this silence. The understanding of the silence can only be explained to Danny by Reb Saunders.

Danny receives letters of acceptance from the universities. Reb Saunders says nothing about it even though he has seen the materials in the mail. Danny is confused as to why his father won't say anything about it to him.



Time passed and in spring, Reb Saunders can't understand why Reuven has not seen him in a while. Reb Saunders asks Reuven to come over, especially during the first or second day of Passover. Reuven's father is upset that Reuven has not seen Reb Saunders. Reuven calls Danny and decides to visit Danny and Reb Saunders.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Danny tells Reuven that you can listen and learn from silence. He believes silence can talk to you. Reuven doesn't understand what he is talking about. This difference in understanding exemplifies the difference in the way Danny and Reuven were raised by their fathers.

Reuven's father makes a keen observation about Danny's psychological study aspirations when he says, "Danny is now like a person waiting to be let out of jail. He has only one desire. To leave the jail. Despite what may be waiting for him outside. Danny cannot think one minute beyond the moment he will have to tell his father he does not wish to take his place." Reuven's father is looking out for Danny and understands how Danny's choice will affect Reb Saunders.

Reuven's father realizes that Reb Saunders is trying to teach Danny compassion through silence. Reuven's father disagrees with the silence. Reuven finds out that Reb Saunders is only silent with Danny and not with his sister or brother. Reuven dislikes Reb Saunders even more. Reuven's father knows the importance of what Reb Saunders wants to tell Reuven. Reuven's father understands that Reb Saunders talks to Danny through Reuven.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Reuven goes to Danny's house on the first day of Passover. Reuven, Danny and an aging Reb Saunders meet in Reb Saunders' study. Reb Saunders remarks at how Reuven has become a man. Reuven tells Reb Saunders of his plans to become a Rabbi. Reb Saunders explains how Reuven will go one way in life and Danny will go a different way. He says that he has known this for a long time.

Reb Saunders talks about how he was blessed with a brilliant son, but the brilliant son had no soul. Reb Saunders determined this about his son when Danny was four years old. Danny was able to read a story about a poor Jew and his struggles. Danny enjoyed the story because he was able to memorize it. Reb Saunders was shocked at this because Danny should have felt terrible about the story and shown compassion for the poor Jew. Reb Saunders feels that Danny was only a shell of a mind and had no soul and compassion. Reb Saunders likens Danny to his brother Daniel. Daniel had a great mind as well. Daniel's mind was cold and had no soul.

In contrast, Reb Saunders explained that as a child he often cried for the struggles of Jews and felt compassion for them. Reb Saunders' father also raised him in silence. Reb Saunders believes that the Master of the Universe sent Reuven to his son Danny. He believes Reuven was sent because Reuven had a soul and could listen to Danny's words and help Danny.

The climax of this chapter and book is when Reb Saunders finally talks to Danny. He asks him about his doctorate studies, and the way they will affect his Hasidic customs. Tears fill Danny's eyes.

Reb Saunders announces Danny's plans to study psychology. The synagogue is stunned, but Reb Saunders quells any questions by stating that he respects his son's wishes. Reuven and Danny graduate from Hirsch College with summa cum laude honors.

Danny visits after he has started his studies in psychology. Reuven asks him if he will raise his son in silence. Danny says he will if he can't find another way.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Reb Saunders talks to Danny through Reuven. The main theme of the chapter is the description of how Danny is brilliant, but he has no soul. Reb Saunders wants to bring out Danny's soul through silence.

Reb Saunders says, "A man is born into this world with only a tiny spark of goodness in him. The spark is God, it is the soul; the rest is ugliness, and evil, a shell. The spark



must be guarded like a treasure, it must be nurtured, it must be fanned into flame." Reb Saunders is teaching Reuven and Danny that everyone has a soul that needs to be pulled out of their shell.

Reb Saunders says, "...One learns of the pain of others by suffering one's own pain, he would say, by turning inside oneself, by finding one's own soul." This is the foundation of the explanation Reb Saunders gives about raising his child in silence. It clarifies why Reb Saunders has been silent with Danny. Reb Saunders wants Reuven to understand the meaning of the silence.

Reb Saunders believes that Reuven was brought to Danny at God's will. Therefore, Reb Saunders can finally break the silence and talk to his son.



Characters

Abba

See Mr. David Malter

Professor Nathan Appleman

Danny Saunder's experimental psychology professor at Hirsch College is Professor Nathan Appleman. Danny is In conflict With the professor and the content of the class because it is too mathematical and at odds with Freudian psychology. His friend Reuven defends the professor and the methods of experimental psychology.

Davey Cantor

One of the players on Reuven Malter's baseball team is Davey Cantor. Davey provides Reuven with information about the fierceness of the Hasidic team they are playing. Davey calls the other team "murderers."

Mrs. Carpenter

Mrs. Carpenter is the nurse who is in charge of Reuven, Tony Savo, and Billy Merritt while they are in the hospital.

Mr. Galanter

Mr. Galanter is the coach of Reuven Malter's high school baseball team. He is a dedicated instructor who teaches in public school and coaches Reuven's yeshiva team on the side.

Rav Gershenson

Danny Saunders' and Reuven Malter's Talmud teacher at Hirsch College is Rav Gershenson. He is considered a fine scholar and a warm person. Reuven considers him an exciting teacher. Danny often has long discussions with the professor in class which Reuven resents. Later Reuven learns that Rav Gershenson has great respect for Mr. Malter's scholarship. Rav Gershenson cannot openly condone Mr. Malter's methods in class because they question the accuracy of Orthodox interpretations of the Talmud.



Sidney Goldberg

Sidney Goldberg is the shortstop on Reuven Malter's baseball team. The interplay between Reuven and Sidney during the game between the rival yeshivas heightens the tension of the game.

Dr. Grossman

Dr. Grossman is the physician who attends David Malter, Reuven's father. Mr. Malter suffers a heart attack brought on by his overwork in the Zionist movement, which was pressing for a Jewish homeland after World War II. Mr. Malter ignores Dr. Grossman's warning to get more rest.

Killer

See Tony Savo

Bobby Malter

See Reuven Malter

David Malter

David Malter, a respected scholar of the Talmud, is Reuven Malter's father. Mr. Malter's relationship with his son is one of respect, warmth, and kindness. In the story, the relationship between the Malter father and son contrasts with Danny Saunders and his affectionless relationship with his father. By accident, Mr. Malter meets Danny one day in the library and begins to tutor him in secular subjects. Reuven only learns later about this relationship. As the story of the friendship between Reuven and Danny progresses from their high school to their college days, the specter of history affects the life of David Malter. He is a staunch Zionist. After World War II, when the survivors of the Holocaust struggle to establish a homeland in Palestine, Mr. Malter works avidly for this cause to the detriment of his health. He has a heart attack from which he does, however, recover.

Reuven Malter

Reuven is the son of an Orthodox Jewish Talmud scholar. His relationship with his father is one of mutual respect and open affection. They communicate about world problems, as well as personal ones. Reuven is exposed to Talmudic studies by his father, but he is also encouraged to study secular subjects. He is taught by his father not to take things for granted, but to analyze them with a critical eye. Although he is exposed to logic, mathematics, and philosophy, by the end of the book Reuven decides



he wants to become a rabbi. Reuven is the narrator of *The Chosen*, therefore the reader sees the story through his eyes.

Reuven is the pitcher of his yeshiva at the baseball game where his eye is injured by Danny Saunders. This event begins a relationship that takes the two boys through their high school years into college, where they study the same subjects. Each boy decides on a direction that is in contrast to his upbringing. While the reader expects Danny to rebel against the strictness of what he has been taught, the expectation that Reuven will follow in his father's footsteps is ever present. The period in which Reuven matures to young adulthood is a turbulent one. World War II, the Holocaust, and the struggle for a Jewish homeland in Palestine serves as the background for many conversations on the social and political issues connected to the period. As the narrator of the book, Reuven uses the other characters to explain details about various Orthodox sects and how they view important issues like the Jewish state of Israel.

Robert Malter

See Reuven Malter

Manya

The Malter's Russian housekeeper is named Manya. David Malter is a widower and Manya takes the role of a substitute mother, cooking and cleaning for father and son. Manya expresses a great deal of affection for Reuven and his father, caring for them both with a display of strong emotion when Reuven is injured and when his father has a heart attack.

Billy Merritt

Billy Merritt is the blind boy Reuven meets at the hospital when he is taken there to have glass removed from his eye. Billy is waiting to have an operation in the hope that his eyesight will be restored after a car accident blinded him. After a visit to his doctor, Reuven calls Billy's family to find out how the operation turned out and is disappointed to learn that it was not successful.

Jack Rose

Jack Rose is a boyhood friend of David Malter's from Russia. Mr. Rose is now a wealthy furrier who gives large donations to Mr. Malter's Zionist causes. Reuven and his father express a fundamental difference in viewpoint in their discussion of Mr. Rose. Reuven disapproves of Rose's motives for donating money, as well his joining a synagogue for the sake of his grandchildren and not out of any religious conviction. Reuven's father defends his old friend's actions and the importance of retaining friends even when you disagree with them.



Danny Saunders

Danny is the son of a Hasidic rabbi. According to tradition, as the oldest son he is expected to take his father's place as the spiritual leader of his congregation. Danny is also a brilliant student of the Talmud, exhibiting a photographic memory for details. But Danny is passionately interested in secular subjects, too, particularly Freudian psychology. His relationship with his father revolves around the study of the Talmud. Outside of discourses on this subject, his father maintains silence with Danny. In his yearning to learn more about secular subjects, Danny goes to the library, where he meets Reuven's father, David Malter. Unknown to his father or to Reuven, who later becomes his friend, Danny is guided in his secular studies by Mr. Malter.

In the opening pages of *The Chosen*, Danny and Reuven are playing baseball on opposing teams. After Danny causes an eye injury that sends Reuven to the hospital, he goes to see him to apologize. He is first rebuffed by Reuven, but after Reuven's father scolds him for his behavior, Reuven allows Danny to apologize and their friendship begins. It is through this friendship that both boys become transformed during their high school and college years. As the story opens, Reuven expects to become a professor of mathematics and Danny wants to take his father's place as "tzaddik" (righteous one). By the time the book ends, it is clear that Reuven will become a rabbi and that Danny will become a psychoanalyst. Danny and Reuven are contrasted as two young men seeking different professional careers. Their relationship with their fathers is a key element of the story, as well. While both reject what is initially expected of them in the area of a career, it is clear that the author uses these two young men to explore the universal theme of parental rejection. While both move in opposite directions than expected, each finds a way to retain a relationship with his respective father.

Levi Saunders

Danny's younger brother is Levi Saunders. When Reuven encounters him at Danny's home he appears to be unhappy. He often cries unexpectedly and leaves the room, behavior that frightens and bewilders Reuven. Levi becomes ill the day after his bar mitzvah (a coming of age ritual) and is hospitalized. Levi's illness makes Danny's decision to pursue psychology even more difficult and adds to his guilt about disappointing his father. Reb Saunders does accept Danny's decision to go into psychology, and Levi, frail though he is, will inherit his father's role as spiritual leader.

Reb Saunders

The personality of Reb Saunders infuses *The Chosen* with tension. As the spiritual leader of a Hasidic group, he follows strict observances and demands the same from Danny. While Danny's gift of intelligence and a photographic memory satisfy his father during their study of the Talmud, the silence of their relationship baffles Danny. Reb Saunders believes that the silence between them will strengthen Danny spiritually. He knows his son will suffer and he believes that through suffering he will be able to accept



his role as "tzaddik." This role would involve acting as an intermediary between the rabbi's followers and God.

Danny brings Reuven Malter to his home to meet his father. Reuven is accepted and frequently attends services with Danny, but he develops a resentment towards Reb Saunders and his harsh, inflexible methods. Reb Saunders likes to test the boys by deliberately making mistakes in the text. When Danny or Reuven catches his error, he is pleased. The warm, open relationship Reuven has with his father sharply contrasts with the wall of silence that Reb Saunders has imposed on Danny. When Reuven complains about Reb Saunders to his own father, David Malter defends the rabbi. Mr. Malter explains to Reuven that devout Hasidim kept Judaism alive for hundreds of years in eastern Europe during centuries of persecution. Reb Saunders does ultimately accept Danny's decision to study psychology, just as Mr. Malter accepts Reuven's decision to become a rabbi.

Tony Savo

Tony Savo is an ex-boxer who has lost an eye. He shares a room with Reuven when he is hospitalized to have the glass removed from his eye. Tony is a cheerful character who tries to keep everyone's spirits up, especially the children in the hospital.

Schwartzie

Schwartzie is the pitcher on Reuven's team during the baseball game between the competing yeshivas. Schwartzie complains to Reuven about the way Danny bats the ball.

Dr. Snyderman

Dr. Snyderman is the attending doctor when Reuven goes to the hospital to have the glass taken from his eye.



Themes

Friendship

The themes of *The Chosen* unfold through the friendship of Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter. They first meet in the contest of a baseball game between their rival yeshivas (Jewish religious schools). Reuven is hit in the eye by a baseball that Danny has hit, breaking his glasses and cutting his eye. At the hospital he at first refuses to let Danny apologize, but after his father rebukes him, he relents. Much to his surprise, he finds Danny a compelling personality. Reuven is attracted to his intellectual brilliance and is also fascinated by the differences in their personal and religious upbringing. Potok uses this friendship as the basis for exploring conflict between fathers and sons, a theme which transcends the particular setting of a Brooklyn Orthodox Jewish neighborhood where both boys live. The differences in their religious upbringing is explored in great detail as the two develop their friendship and get to know one another's fathers. Their friendship is tested by Reuven's antagonism toward Reb Saunders and the way he relates to Danny. It is put to a critical test when Danny is forbidden to talk to Reuven. Reb Saunders disagrees with Mr. Malter's outspoken views on the establishment of a Zionist state in Palestine after World War II. It was the belief of Hasidic Jews at the time that it was wrong to establish a Jewish state. They must wait for the Messiah before the Jews can have a homeland. The friendship between the two young men at the end of the novel has ripened with their maturity. They see the irony of the fact that Reuven was expected to have an intellectual career as a professor and Danny was expected to follow in his father's footsteps. Instead Reuven will become a rabbi and Danny a psychologist. There is the sense in their friendship that by viewing one another's lives, they were better able to formulate their own futures.

Each has been enriched by his ability to explore their thoughts and feelings together, and each has been enriched from experiences with the other's father.

Coming of Age

Closely related to the theme of friendship is "coming of age." The novel opens when the two principal characters, Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter, are fifteen-year-old high school students. Grappling with their respective ambitions, which conflict with their father's plans, they do not realize their goals until the end of the book when they complete college. In the process of determining their careers they must examine their father's lives. Danny has to take the difficult step of disappointing his father by not following in his footsteps as a religious leader. His decision seems frightening because of the fanaticism of his father's beliefs, but the book ends happily when Reb Saunders resigns himself to his son's decision. He recognizes that Danny has been helped by Mr. Malter and that he has helped Reuven choose his career. As Chaim Potok presents this perennial conflict, his message seems to be that fathers, as well as sons, share in



the coming-of-age experience. When it happens, fathers need to make the adjustment of letting their sons find their own paths in life.

Identity

Throughout the novel, the reader wonders how far Danny will break from his father's strict observance of Judaism. While he eventually must reject many of the outward appearances of a Hasidic Jew, he remains committed to Judaism. As a young boy, he grew earlocks (uncut sideburns) and wore the traditional black clothing of his sect. As a young man, he grew a beard that was never to be cut. When he is about to enter Columbia University as a psychology student, we see Danny for the first time clean-shaven and with trimmed sideburns. He must change his outward appearance to assume his professional role, but it is apparent that inside Danny is still a devoted Jew and has respect for his father. When Reuven asks him how he will raise his son, Danny says the same way his father did, unless he can find another way. This suggests that the impact of his upbringing has been powerful and he must carry it with him even as he changes on the surface. Although Reuven is taking up a religious career, it is evident that he will continue to follow his father's approach to life. The reader expects him to be compassionate and to remain unafraid of examining ideas closely.

Politics

The political background of *The Chosen* is important to Chaim Potok's writing. World War II is a topic of discussion in the early section of the novel. The escape from Nazi persecution and the Holocaust are also important subjects. Later events, like the struggle for a Jewish homeland after the war, becomes a major subject that Reuven discusses with his father. David Malter becomes an ardent spokesperson for the Zionist cause in Palestine. His views are abhorred by Danny Saunders' father, and this causes a break in the friendship of the two young men. Throughout the book many discussions between the characters revolve around important events that helped to shape Jewish beliefs and migrations to avoid persecution. The struggles of the new state of Israel colors much of the background material in the last section of the book.



Style

Point of View

Reuven Malter is the narrator of *The Chosen*, which is written in the first person (the narrator refers to himself as "I"). Potok makes it possible for readers unfamiliar with Orthodox Judaism to identify with the conflicts in the story by having it told from Reuven's perspective. Since he is a secularized Jew, his outer appearance is the same as any young man's in American society. The opening scene of the baseball game also adds to the everyday American atmosphere. It is against Reuven's character that much of the conflict resounds. His antagonism toward Reb Saunders casts the latter in a negative light. The reader hopes then that the rabbi's son Danny will rebel and find a life of his own. On the other hand, Mr. Malter is portrayed sympathetically, especially in his warm relationship with Reuven. When his father's outspoken views on Zionism get Reuven in trouble at school, he is subjected to taunting. Because the Malters are both sympathetic characters and Reuven is the narrator, the reader is inclined to side with them whenever a conflict occurs in the novel. In this way, Potok has structured his novel to present his own point of view on controversial political and religious issues.

Setting

The Chosen is set in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn during World War II and the period shortly after when Jews were struggling to establish a homeland in Palestine (Israel). The neighborhood is an Orthodox Jewish one in which a number of different sects reside side-by-side. Even though Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter lived for the first fifteen years of their lives only five blocks from one another, they did not meet until their rival yeshivas competed in a baseball game. The opening scene of the baseball game sets the mood for the whole novel. It is the conflicting demands between religion and secular interests that provide the dramatic tension of the story. At no time in the novel do any of the characters leave Brooklyn while they are engaged with one another. Mr. Malter does make a speech at Madison Square Garden, but it is only talked about in the book. Besides the scenes at the ball field, most events take place at Danny or Reuven's house, in the library, or in class. Several scenes are also set in the hospital after Reuven is hurt and David Malter has a heart attack. In this way, Potok has been able to devote a good portion of the novel to educating the reader about Jewish history and religion. Since the different views of Mr. Malter and Reb Saunders about Judaism are at the heart of the conflicts in the novel, keeping the characters indoors is an appropriate setting for their conversations.

Symbols

The fierceness with which Danny's team plays baseball is a mirror image of the way Reb Saunders practices his religion. He cannot tolerate other views. The baseball game



becomes a symbol of the battle ahead between the two fathers and their sons and between the two world views of David Malter and Reb Saunders. It is also a symbol of the conflict within Jewish culture.

Another important image is the eye. Reuven's eye is cut when the baseball smashes his eyeglasses. The little boy in the hospital does not regain his eyesight and Tony Savo has lost one eye. The image of blindness suggests that Reb Saunders is blind to any ideas that he does not embrace. Danny and Reuven suffer from a symbolic blindness of youth, until they come of age and realize the paths they must take to reach their goals.

There are two silences in the book. Reb Saunders has a silent relationship with Danny, only speaking to him during their studies of the Talmud. When Mr. Malter makes his Madison Square Garden speech, Danny is forbidden to speak to Reuven. They maintain a silence between them for two years. The silences symbolize the inability of the sects within Orthodox Judaism to communicate with one another.

The war of liberation in Israel becomes a symbol for Danny's liberation from his obligation to follow in his father's footsteps. There is some symbolism in Danny's brother Levi inheriting his father's role as *tzaddik*. Levi is sickly, which suggests that the leadership of Hasidism is weakened when the tradition of inheritance is abandoned. The title of the book also has symbolic meaning. The Jewish people are referred to as "the chosen people." Danny was chosen by birth to become a spiritual leader, but he chooses another course. Reuven was not chosen for the role he will assume as a rabbi. Instead, he chooses that role.

The book ends with a hidden symbol. The final chapter is number eighteen. In Hebrew, this number means life, *chai*. It is a positive symbol with which Potok leaves his characters and readers. Earlier in the novel, Reb Saunders used *gematriya*, a numerology system that assigns each letter of the alphabet to a number. Since eighteen is life, Reb Saunders contends that nine, which is the difference between "this world" and "the world to come," is half of life and that people are only half alive in this world.

Historical Context

The Holocaust

Persecution by the Nazis in Germany before World War II led to the dispersal of European Jews to the United States, Palestine, and other countries. When the full extent of the annihilation of Jews in the gas chambers of Nazi Germany was revealed (SIX million had been exterminated), a resurgence of interest in establishing a Jewish homeland was ignited. During the 1930s, Jews in Germany began to lose their civil rights and eventually they lost their property and were relocated to the work and death camps that the Nazis established in parts of eastern Europe. Those Jews who left Germany before World War II were the first wave during the middle of the twentieth century to settle outside Europe. After the war, some 200,000 concentration camp survivors came to America. Many of them were Orthodox Jews, and they tended to settle into the type of neighborhood described by Chaim Potok in *The Chosen*. By the 1950s, the children and grandchildren of earlier Jewish immigrants from Eastern European countries tended to be assimilated into the larger American culture. Many were Reformed or Conservative Jews and had attended public schools. The influx of a new population of Jews who were religious ignited a new interest in Judaism. In Potok's story, David Malter becomes the spokesperson for ardent followers of Judaism. After the Holocaust, there was a widespread feeling within the Jewish community in America that the fervor of religious Jews like the Hasids had helped Judaism survive centuries of persecution. The feeling was that Jews would only be safe from persecution when they had their own country. This became the impetus for the widespread support among both religious and secularized Jews for the establishment of the State of Israel.

Zionism

While Zionism is regarded as a nineteenth-century movement for Jews to return to their original homeland in the Middle East, efforts to return to Zion date back to the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora in the sixth century B.C. During the Diaspora, when the Jews were exiled from Jerusalem, a leader (a false messiah) would appear, claim to be the messiah, and promise to return the Jewish people to Zion. Notable among them was Sabbatai Zevi (1626-1676), also known as Sabbatai Zebi, who led a large band of European Jews to Constantinople, but, after he was imprisoned, he converted to Islam to save himself from execution. In the sixteenth century, a Jewish Italian family asked the Turks, who controlled the region then, to allow them to establish a Jewish settlement in Galilee. It was not until the late nineteenth century, though, that European Jews had enough freedom of movement and financial resources to begin settling in Palestine. In 1897 the Herzl World Zionist Congress established a worldwide movement. In 1917 the British government established a homeland in Palestine with the Balfour Declaration. It was supported until 1922 by the League of Nations. In 1948 the State of Israel was established after Palestine was partitioned. Support for a Jewish state has not been universal among Jews. The Hasids and other fundamentalist Jewish groups felt strongly



that Jews had to wait for the Messiah before returning to Israel. Many Jews who had assimilated, particularly in the United States, felt that an Israeli state in the Middle East would not be viable, that the antagonism of the Arabs would lead to another Jewish annihilation. In the latter part of *The Chosen*, the Jewish state is being established. Reb Saunders represents the Hasidic view that Jews must wait for the Messiah before returning to the homeland. Mr. Malter represents the Zionist view that a homeland was necessary for the survival of the Jewish people.

Hasidism

Hasidism began in the late eighteenth century in a region along the Russian and Polish border. Its

leader was Israel Ben Eliezer. The traditional Orthodox approach to the study of the Talmud was based on the oral laws that Moses had been given by God on Mount Sinai and their interpretations over the centuries. Ben Eliezer emphasized spirituality and its fervent expression. His praying was characterized by ecstasy and trances, while traditional prayer was restrained. His followers continued his forms of worship and the movement spread throughout Eastern Europe. The leader of each group was considered a "righteous one" (*tzaddik*). The *tzaddik* acted as an intermediary between his followers and God, not unlike the relationship between a Catholic priest and his parishioners. Throughout their history, the Hasids dressed in plain dark clothing. The men were forbidden to shave their beards or their sidelocks and they wore fur-trimmed hats. They have been compared to the Amish of Pennsylvania in their dress. While the Hasids represent a small proportion of the Jewish population in the world today, they are credited with stemming the tide of assimilation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Critical Overview

Chaim Potok's first novel *The Chosen*, written when he was nearly forty, was warmly received by the public. The hardcover edition sold several hundred thousand copies and several million were sold in paperback. Reviews of the book were generally favorable, though there was some mild criticism. Critics found Potok's storytelling skills compelling and praised him for his ability to present complex ideas to his readers. His presentation of Jewish history and theological ideas within his stories is a particular area for which Potok is often commended. His ability to present the religious conflicts within Judaism to both Jewish and non-Jewish readers has earned him high praise. The book "broadens the reader's understanding of the wide spectrum of Judaism," commented Beverly J. Matiko in *Masterplots*. "It is invaluable in providing all readers, particularly young ones, with [the] social, political, and religious history" of Orthodox Jews during World War II. Potok received the Atheneum Award for *The Promise*, a sequel to *The Chosen*, published several years later. He was awarded the Edward Lewis Wallant Award for *The Chosen*, which also was nominated for a National Book Award.

Regarding the author's narrative style, Dan Barnett in a *Critical Survey of Long Fiction* observed that "his sentences are simple and reportorial. The stories develop chronologically." Barnett compares Potok's writing to Ernest Hemingway's, and other reviewers have mentioned the influence of Evelyn Waugh on his work. Lillian Kremer, writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, compared Potok's *The Book of Lights* to Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Like Waugh, Potok explores religious commitment in his characters within the framework of secularized society. Waugh's book is about a dysfunctional English Catholic family. Potok was inspired by it to become a writer. Kremer also compared Potok's style to John Dos Passos' journalistic approach when he writes about the Holocaust. The impact of newspaper pictures after World War II depicted the atrocities of the Nazi death camps. This became the inspiration for Potok's use of newspaper-type headlines in his novel *In the Beginning*, which was published in 1975. A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer found the "narrative ... [in *The Promise*] rigorously and beautifully straightforward." The author's handling of issues facing Jewish women in his 1985 novel *Davita's Harp* was well received. Lisa Schwarzbaum, writing in the *Detroit News* credited Potok with sensitivity. The book, she said, "is a warm, decent, generous and patient exploration of important issues." This is a noteworthy achievement when seen in comparison to *The Chosen*. None of the women in Potok's first novel is portrayed with any depth or has a significant role. Women are seen only in the role of shadowy wife, nurse, teasing sister, or compassionate housekeeper.

The major areas of negative criticism for all of Potok's writing are that it is too sentimental, lacks drama, and that the outcomes of his stories are somewhat contrived. Sam Bluefarb, writing in the *College Language Association Journal*, remarked that Reb Saunders' "resignation to Danny's break with Hassidism . . . [is] too mechanical... with Danny... going off to become a clinical or behavioral psychologist." Bluefarb found the dialogue in this climax of the book weak, but he considered it a "minor flaw in a larger pattern: that of tolerance against intolerance, empty ritual against the vital deed, rote learning against eager wonder." While reviewer Philip Toynbee in the *New Republic*



applauded the "perennial theme" of the conflict between sons and fathers, he found the characters too intellectual. He also criticized Potok for sentimentality. "He can be dreadfully wet at times." In writing his review, Toynbee compared Potok's book to a contemporary book written by Herbert Gold called *Fathers*. He found Gold's characters "larger than life" and more memorable. He did, nonetheless, acknowledge that he would "not quickly forget the strange Hasidic community which Mr. Potok has painted with so much impressionistic skill."

The Gates of November: Chronicles of the Slepak Family was published by Mr. Potok in 1996. It tells the true story of Russian Jews who became refuseniks during Soviet repression in the decade before the collapse of the Soviet Union. As with *The Chosen*, this book also recounts a rift between a father and son. Felicity Barringer, writing in the *New York Times Book Review* criticized the book for an "ungainly mixture of the personal and the political . . . [that is] short on insight in the minds and hearts of the father and son." The book, she claimed,

has too many voices for coherence, but she still found the story fascinating and the struggle of its characters heroic. David Shribman maintained in his *Wall Street Journal* review of *The Gates of November* that Potok "brings a sharp ear, a sharp eye and a soft heart" to the chronicle. In comparison with other Jewish American writers, Chaim Potok is unique in his warm affirmation of the Jewish experience in America and in his deep sympathy for those who struggle to retain spirituality in a secular world. While Potok is the author of nearly a dozen fiction and nonfiction books, *The Chosen* remains his most popular work.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Alton, an honorary research associate at the University of Sydney, provides an overview discussion of Potok's novel.

Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* focuses on the contrasts between extreme ends of Orthodox Judaism. Despite criticisms that Potok is overly optimistic-Reuven regains his sight, Danny renounces the tzaddikate without being ostracized by his father, Danny and Reuven resolve many of the conflicts they feel between the secular world and Orthodox Judaism-Potok's novel provides us with valuable insights into American Orthodox Jewish life during and after World War II. The novel explores in detail the lives and traditions of Hasidic and Orthodox Jews, and creates an apparently realistic portrait of both cultures. *The Chosen* attempts to explore the place of Judaism in a secular society, provides insights into tensions between faith and scholarship, and suggests Judaism's need to create a new philosophy for the modern world.

The setting is Brooklyn in the 1940s. Reuven's detailed descriptions of his and Danny's homes and Reb Saunders' synagogue appear as set-pieces in the novel. This focuses our attention on plot and theme. This self-contained Jewish world, completely separate from the secular world, suggests the conflict between Hasidic existence and secular life—a theme which is repeated throughout the novel.

Reuven Malter's first-person narrative encourages our strong identification with him. Like him, we are bewildered by Reb Saunders' silence, and are furious when Reb Saunders excommunicates him. The dialogue is direct, uncomplicated, and convincing, though relatively flat. The strong focus on plot and theme results in little richness of tone: as Sheldon Grebstein comments, the novel's "overall color is gray."

An understanding of Judaism is crucial to interpreting *The Chosen*, which focuses on the opposite poles of Orthodoxy and Hasidism. Hasidism originated in eastern Europe in the 18th century, and its followers immediately came into conflict with the Mitnagdim (opponents), or established religious authorities. The Mitnagdim focused on scholarship and formal prayer, while the Hasidim (pious ones) believed that studying Talmud (the book of Jewish law and ritual) was not as important as making every aspect of their lives holy. By the 20th century Hasidism's focus had changed substantially to value studying Talmud and eliminating anything from the secular world. Hasidism's leaders were called tzaddikim (righteous ones), and were regarded as superhuman links between God and the community. The Hasidim believed that the only correct form of worship was to approach God through their tzaddik, rather than individually as Orthodox Jews did. Non-Hasidic Jews were considered apikorsim (Jews who denied the basic tenets of their faith), and were shunned. This conflict appears during the baseball game between Reuven's Orthodox team and Danny's Hasidic team, which takes on overtones of a holy war.

Two significant historical contexts are World War II and the Zionist movement. Reuven mentions the D-Day invasion in France, the Battle of the Bulge, the death of President



Roosevelt, the Germans' surrender in May 1945, and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war serves as a reminder of the secular world. No one is immune to its effects, as we see in the different reactions of the Hasidic and Orthodox communities to news of the German concentration camps. Reb Saunders believes these camps were God's will, and speaks of Europe's Jewish communities having disappeared "into heaps of bones and ashes." In contrast, Rav Malter believes that Jews can wait no longer for God or the Messiah, insisting: "If we do not rebuild Jewry in America, we will die as a people." He becomes an outspoken supporter of the Zionists, who believe that the American Jews must make Palestine into a Jewish homeland. The Zionists' opponents, of which Reb Saunders is one, believe this would corrupt the Holy Land. Eventually, the United Nations votes to create the Jewish state of Israel. After escalating violence between Arabs and Jews, the Zionist and Hasidic communities feel more unity. These historical contexts suggest the tension between the different sects of Judaism, and more specifically between the Malter's Orthodoxy and Reb Saunders' extreme Hasidism.

The central imagery of *The Chosen* appears in metaphors of vision. Reuven's eye trouble leads him into another world, one which forces him to leave the pieces of his old identity behind "alongside the shattered lens of my glasses." His new identity incorporates his friendship with Danny along with a much wider view of the world. Danny begins wearing glasses just before he enters Hirsch College. His eye problems suggest his limitations: although he is intellectually curious, he lacks compassion, and doesn't see the wider view of the world that Reuven sees. Once Danny learns empathy, "there was a light in his eyes that was almost blinding."

The novel's main relationships are between narrator Reuven Malter, Danny Saunders, Reuven's father Rabbi David Malter, and Danny's father Reb Saunders. Reuven-whose name in Hebrew means "behold a son"-loves mathematics, but wants to become a rabbi like his father. He is a good scholar, with an open mind, and a compassionate young man. Danny-Hebrew for "God is my judge"-is heir to the tzaddikate, but wants to become a psychologist. Despite his brilliant mind, he lacks compassion, which we see in his feelings of murderous rage during the baseball game, and in his cool appreciation of Hemingway's artistry in describing ants being roasted alive on a burning log. Danny is terribly torn between the demands of his intellect and the traditions of the tzaddikate dynasty. He dreads the thought of becoming tzaddik, for he fears losing his contact with the secular world. Despite this, he already thinks of himself as tzaddik, and feels pride in the respect he's given as heir.

Like Reuven and Danny, their fathers represent opposite philosophical and religious poles. Rabbi Malter, Reuven's father, is tremendously understanding: despite his broad knowledge of Talmud, he is open to ideas from the secular world. His passionate support of the Zionist movement arises from his desire for a meaningful life. Reb Saunders, Danny's father, is tzaddik to his community. He is both a great Talmudist (scholar of Talmud) and a great tzaddik with a reputation for both brilliance and compassion. However, he is also a tyrant, absolute ruler of his household and his community. He cannot accept any idea coming from the "contaminated" or secular world; in his eyes, the Zionist movement is sacrilege and a violation of the Torah. Danny



pities his father because he's intellectually trapped in his Hasidic traditions and therefore has an extremely narrow view of the world.

Minor characters include Tony Savo and Billy Merrit, whom Reuven meets while in hospital. These two characters suggest the importance of faith in a world which is often incomprehensible. Professor Appleman, Chair of the Psychology department at Hirsch College, reconciles Danny to studying experimental psychology. Rav Gershenson, the Talmud instructor, cannot allow secular methods of analysis in his class despite his sympathy for them. Danny's brother Levi-whose name in Hebrew means "joined in harmony"-is a "delicate miniature" of his father, and eventually inherits the position of tzaddik. Female characters are virtually non-existent. Only Manya, the Malter's Russian housemaid who "babbles" in Ukrainian, has a name. Reuven's mother is dead, Danny's mother is alive but practically invisible, and Danny's sister disappears into an arranged Hasidic marriage. This lack of women significantly weakens the novel's realism and leads to a lack of balance.

The theme of father-son relationships is central to the novel's underlying conflicts. Reuven's strong relationship with his father is open and affectionate: they can-and do-talk about anything. Rav Malter teaches Reuven compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance. He encourages Reuven to become friends with Danny, and tries to teach Reuven about Danny's Hasidic heritage so that Reuven will understand Danny. Even when Reb Saunders excommunicates Reuven, Rav Malter forbids Reuven to slander him, insisting that it was just this sort of fanaticism which kept the Jews alive through two thousand years of exile. In the end, it is largely because of Rav Malter's attitudes that Reuven chooses to preserve his culture and religion by becoming a rabbi. In contrast, Danny has extremely mixed feelings about his father. Although he fears his father's temper and dreads his continued silence, he believes that his father is "a great man." However, he dreads being trapped the way his father is: "I want to be able to breathe, to think what I want to think, to say the things I want to say." When Danny realizes he cannot become tzaddik, he becomes terrified about telling his father, because "if the son doesn't take the father's place, the dynasty falls apart." However, Reb Saunders realizes Danny's intentions and acknowledges him as a man. His acceptance of Danny's decision is influenced by three factors. First, he has come to respect his son's soul as well as his mind, and knows Danny intends to continue to observe Jewish law. Second, he feels Danny now has the soul of a tzaddik, and that "All his life he will be a tzaddik. He will be a tzaddik for the world. And the world needs a tzaddik." Finally, he realizes the dynasty will not be destroyed: since "the tzaddikate was inherited, and the charisma went automatically from father to son-all sons," Levi will become tzaddik in Danny's place. Despite this happy resolution, Reb Saunders' insistence on the strict traditions of Hasidism at the expense of the secular world have the effect of driving Danny away from his tzaddikate heritage and into his study of psychoanalysis.

Another theme arises from the Talmud's direction that the two things one should do are to choose a friend and to acquire a teacher. After their initial antagonism towards each other, Reuven and Danny find many common aspects of their lives. Despite their different heritages and opinions, they become fast friends. Certainly they illustrate



Reuven's father's comment that "'Honest differences of opinion should never be permitted to destroy a friendship.'" Their friendship survives various crises, including a year of enforced silence, as well as major differences of opinion about the value of experimental psychology, mathematics, Freudian thought, and even Reb Saunders.

Both boys have teachers in their fathers. Reb Saunders chooses the traditional method of teaching Danny through public quizzes on his Talmud sermons. Later, both Danny and Reuven review Talmud with Reb Saunders, and through vehement arguments they learn the meanings of various passages. However, Reb Saunders isn't an ideal teacher because his exclusively Hasidic viewpoint completely excludes secular considerations. In contrast, Rav Malter teaches Reuven the heretical "scientific method" for studying Talmud, which includes the use of sources outside Orthodox Jewish tradition. When Reuven successfully uses this method to analyze a difficult passage, Rav Gershenson reveres the explanation but forbids him to use this method in class. Reuven then realizes his father is regarded as an heretic because of his methods and opinions. He also realizes that one can hold heretical notions, as perhaps Rav Gershenson does, and still be a rabbi.

Both boys are serious about their studies, and Danny is committed to extensive reading of secular works. In addition to knowing *Ivanhoe*, Danny reads Darwin, Huxley, and Hemingway before becoming intrigued with the writings of Freud. It is during his study of Freud that Danny begins to question many of the aspects of Hasidism. He realizes that he can approach Freud in the same way as he approaches Talmud, suggesting his temporary conversion to Freud as a religion. Just as he became upset by various interpretations of Hasidism, Danny becomes increasingly upset by Freud. However, he can't stop reading Freud because of his uncanny insights into nature of man. Here we come to one of the most significant aspects of the book: the tension between faith and scholarship. Danny cannot stop thinking about Freud and his analysis of the psyche of man, and the more he thinks about it the less he believes he can conform completely to Hasidism.

Finally, the theme of silence dominates *The Chosen*. Danny and his father don't talk, except when they study Talmud. This silence is Reb Saunders' attempt to teach Danny compassion. As a child, Danny recounted a story about terrible suffering to his father to demonstrate his excellent memory, displaying no compassion for the story's victims. Reb Saunders concluded that despite Danny's brilliance he lacked a soul. By enforcing silence between them, he believed that Danny would learn to know pain and suffering. Since a tzaddik must suffer his people's pain, Reb Saunders justifies his actions: "'I had to make certain his soul would be the soul of a tzaddik no matter what he did with his life.'" In the end, this silence is the price he's willing to pay for Danny's soul.

Two central metaphors suggest *The Chosen's* meaning. The first is the fly that Reuven gently frees from the spider's web. The fly represents Danny, who is caught in the almost invisible web of history, the rigidity of Hasidic tradition, and his father's silence. Reuven is the outsider from the secular world who sees Danny's predicament, and whose gentle influence frees Danny from his oppressive trap without destroying either the tzaddikate dynasty or Danny's relationship with his father. The second metaphor is



the novel's title: *The Chosen*. Its most obvious meaning suggests the Hasidim themselves, who believe they are God's chosen ones. However, the chosen also refers to the vocations chosen by Danny and Reuven: psychoanalysis and the rabbinate respectively. Finally, Danny himself is the chosen, in the sense that his father chooses to raise him in silence so that he develops the soul of a tzaddik. This fate is the final choice—one which Danny was powerless to make, but for which he suffers the consequences—becoming tzaddik not for his Hasidic community, but instead for the world.

Source: Ann Hibert Alton, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998



Critical Essay #2

Evans, a professor of English at Bemidji State University, discusses the friendship between Danny and Reuven and its importance within the context of the novel in the following essay.

When Chaim Potok published his first novel, *The Chosen*, in 1967, it hardly seemed destined for widespread popularity. After all, the novel contains no sex or obscenity, only a trace of violence, and its two principal characters are Jewish school boys who excel academically and enjoy engaging in theological debates with their fathers. Even so, *The Chosen*, continues to attract a large and diverse body of readers in the United States and abroad. Surely one reason for its popularity is that it presents a compelling story of friendship, a subject of universal appeal.

The novel's plot line at its most basic resembles the folktale type of "The Two Brothers," a recurring type of narrative recognized and named by the great nineteenth-century philologist Jacob Grimm. It is the pattern underlying the biblical narrative of David and Jonathan found in *I Samuel* in the Bible, which is alluded to in the novel. The typical plot of a friendship narrative usually contains the following elements: two young men become friends and grow as close as brothers, and after some kind of crisis in which one perhaps rescues the other, both become better and wiser. All of these elements are present in *The Chosen*, but Potok complicates the basic pattern by weaving into it the roles of two supporting characters, the boys' fathers. The fathers have been the principal teachers of their sons and continue to exert a strong influence throughout the novel. Hence, the fathers affect the course of the friendship and, at one point, nearly destroy it.

The Chosen, set in Brooklyn during World War II and the years immediately following, is narrated in the first person by Reuven Malter, one of the main characters. The other, Danny Saunders, is named in the opening sentence where it is also made clear that the ensuing story will be their story: "For the first fifteen years of our lives, Danny and I lived within five blocks of each other and neither of us knew of the other's existence." The reason becomes clear as the story begins to unfold. Although Reuven and Danny have much in common, even age, since they were born only two days apart in the same hospital, they live in very different worlds shaped by the religious beliefs of their fathers, who represent polar extremes of orthodox Judaism.

David Malter, Reuven's father, is a teacher in a yeshiva (a Jewish high school); he is also a writer of controversial religious articles in which he takes a rational and scientific approach to sacred texts. He is widowed, and Reuven is his only child, so Malter enjoys an especially close and warm relationship with his son. Malter often expresses pride in Reuven's achievements and openly shows his affection. Ever the teacher, Malter encourages his son's intellectual curiosity and wants him to be fully cognizant of the world. For example, when Reuven is in the hospital and unable to read, Malter brings him a radio so that he can listen to news reports about the war. Danny, on the other hand, has been brought up to shun the world in the strict and conservative environment



of Hasidism. Potok clearly does not expect readers to be familiar with this conservative type of Judaism, for within the dialogue of the novel he uses characters, especially Danny and David Malter, to explain it.

Danny's father is Reb Saunders, a "tzaddik" within his Hasidic sect. This means, as Danny explains, that Saunders is regarded as "a kind of messenger of God, a bridge between his followers and God." As the elder son, Danny is expected to follow in his father's footsteps and inherit his position. The elder Saunders has attempted to prepare Danny for this "chosen" role by training him in a very harsh way, imposing upon him the discipline of silence. Late in the novel, Saunders explains why he has done this. He realized when Danny was only four that he was a gifted child with a photographic memory, and Saunders became afraid that Danny would grow into a cold intellectual instead of a sympathetic and compassionate leader. Thus Saunders turned to the old European method of teaching by silence. Accordingly, he refuses to speak: directly to Danny, except when they are engaged in religious debate. Saunders understands that his silence causes his son pain, but he believes the pain will save his son's soul and also will prepare Danny for his role of tzaddik.

The boys first meet when they participate in a baseball game between their respective yeshivas. When Reuven attempts to initiate conversation with Danny, he is asked if he is the son of the writer David Malter. Learning that he is, Danny insults him: "I told my team we're going to kill you apikorsim this afternoon." (Apikorsim is an insulting Hebrew word meaning "sinners"). Reuven retaliates, telling Danny to go rub his "tzitzit" for luck, referring to the fringes of Danny's religious garment. Then, at a climactic moment, Danny compresses his hostile feelings into a powerful swing of the bat and hits the ball directly at Reuven who stubbornly refuses to jump out of the way. The ball pounds into Reuven's glasses, causing the left lens to shatter and cut his eye.

Danny comes to the hospital to apologize to Reuven, who is not sure if his eye will heal. Reuven rudely refuses to accept the apology, but Danny tries again. This time the boys develop an admiration for each other and the seeds of friendship are planted. So it is at the hospital, a place associated with healing, that the two are healed of their hostile feelings toward each another. In addition, this hospital is where both were born. How appropriate that their friendship also comes to life here. The hospital is also the place where the boys begin to mature. Although his vision is impaired, Reuven begins to "see" while in the hospital. He becomes acquainted with fellow patients, people who are not Jewish, and he learns that he shares common interests with them. He also learns about the suffering of others. The man in the bed next to his, a professional fighter, loses an eye he injured in a fight. Billy, the boy in the bed on the other side of Reuven, is blind and is in the hospital awaiting surgery to cure his blindness. But, as Reuven will later learn, Billy's surgery is not successful. Reuven begins to "see" when he lies in the darkness of his hospital room, closes his unbandaged eye, and tries to imagine what the world is like for Billy. When he returns home five days after the accident, his familiar world looks different. "I felt I had crossed into another world, that little pieces of my old self had been left behind on the black asphalt floor of the school yard alongside the shattered lens of my glasses." To a lesser degree, Danny also begins to see more clearly when he visits Reuven in the hospital. There he discovers that David Malter is



none other than the kind man who had become his mentor at the public library. Danny also comes to recognize his own dark side, for he confesses to Reuven that at the baseball game he had felt the urge to kill.

From its beginning, the friendship of the boys is affected by their fathers. David Malter, in fact, acts as catalyst, for he encourages his son to become Danny's friend. He reminds Reuven that the Talmud teaches "that a person should do two things for himself." One of these is "to acquire a teacher," and, of course, both Reuven and Danny have found teachers in their fathers. The other is to choose a friend. Malter also explains the nature of true friendship to his son: "A Greek philosopher said that two people who are true friends are like two bodies With one soul." Malter's words prove prophetic.

As the novel progresses, Reuven and Danny become good friends. Reuven wins the approval of Reb Saunders, who demands that he come with Danny to Friday services and then subjects the visiting boy to a grueling debate over a religious lesson. During the boys' last year of high school, Renven's father suffers a heart attack. While Malter is in the hospital, Reuven is invited to live in

the Saunders' home, and so the boys have the opportunity to live as brothers. They share a room and also begin to share their deepest secrets, including Danny's confession that he wants to become a psychoanalyst and reject his "chosen" role. Both boys graduate at the top of their respective classes and then attend the same rabbinical college. During their first year at college, they continue to live as brothers and are very happy. '

But the joy of their friendship will be tested by conflict and crisis, and, not surprisingly, the crisis is brought about by their fathers. After the war, David Malter adopts a strong Zionist position and becomes a leader in the local movement. Reb Saunders continues to hold to his conservative beliefs that a new Israel can be founded only by the Messiah, and thus he rejects Zionism. Eventually, Saunders forbids Danny to associate with Reuven, who has adopted his father's cause. Danny, although now a grown man, follows the tradition he has been reared in and obeys his father. However, his physical appearance indicates that he mourns the loss of the friendship. Reuven, as narrator, describes his suffering, particularly his feelings of loneliness and alienation when his father is hospitalized with a second heart attack For nearly two years the young men do not speak to each other, even though they continue to attend the same college Their suffering proves that the friendship is not dead, and on one occasion Reuven is comforted momentarily by the touch of Danny's hand. Reb Saunders lifts his ban on the friendship after Israel becomes a nation. Both Danny and Reuven are happy to be friends again and discuss the pain they had experienced. Nevertheless, the separation has helped them mature. By the end of the novel it is evident that the friendship has been essential in helping them be-' come the compassionate men that they now are. Because of their friendship, both Reuven and Danny have come to a better understanding of themselves and of others They have become independent of their fathers and are able to make sound life choices for themselves.

Source: Deanna Evans, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998.



Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Bluefarb examines the main conflicts in The Chosen: those caused by religious beliefs, by differences in generations, and by the split between the head and the heart.

The conflict in Chaim Potok's novel *The Chosen* functions at several levels. These are: the generational conflict; the temperamental; the conflict between head and heart; the opposition between a petrified fanaticism and a humane tolerance; and, finally, the split between two visions of God and man's relationship to Him. Of all of these, however, it is the opposition between the head and the heart which predominates.

The locale of the story is the Crown Heights section of Williamsburg in Brooklyn from the Depression years to the founding of the State of Israel. Although much of the story's direction is determined by the conflict between Hassidic and Misnagdic traditions in Judaism (as respectively represented by the Saunders and Malter families), it is the conflict between two generations and the Hawthornesque split between the obsessions of the head and the impulses of the heart that carry the major thrust of *The Chosen*.

The Hassidic view originated as a revolt against the arid intellectual concerns of 18th century scholastic (i.e., Misnagdic) Judaism with its tortuous explications in Talmudic *pilpul* and its aristocratic disdain for the poor and illiterate Jew. This resulted in the Hassidic heresy (according to the Vilna Gaon) toward the stress on joy and the intuitions. Yet in its turn (especially as portrayed in *The Chosen*) Hassidism itself evolved into the very thing it had attacked. The distance between the *Ba'al Shem Tov* (or the *Besht*, as he was affectionately called by his followers) and his latterday followers is relatively short, as history goes: a mere two hundred years or so; but the distance between the gentle piety of the founder of Hassidism and the fanaticism of his later followers qualitatively spans a greater distance than time alone can account for. Indeed, Reb Saunders, the Hassidic leader in *The Chosen*, has really reverted to the earlier arid scholasticism which Hassidism in its own beginnings had set itself up in opposition to. .

However, in *The Chosen*, the quarrel between the Hassidim and the Misnagdim (these days, roughly those practicing Jews who are not Hassidim) though decreasing in intensity and bitterness after the slaughter of six million in the Nazi Holocaust, still makes up a substantial aspect of this novel. It is to this group-the Misnagdim (or, to acknowledge Potok's Sephardic, dialectual usage, Mitnagdim)-to which Reuven Malter, the young protagonist, belongs. We must of course remember that many Hassidim consider most Jews beyond their own circle *apikorsim* (heretics). While it is true that the Misnagdim in *The Chosen* did not actively oppose the Hassidim, the baseball game between the Misnagdic and the Hassidic schools on which the novel opens, not only triggers the conflict but determines the direction the novel will take. In a sense, *The Chosen* is a kind of exercise in the "Hegelian" dialectic which the Hassidim and the Misnagdim have engaged in for the last two and a half centuries; however, in doing so,



they have articulated their respective visions toward life and God, and, in a sense, have managed to exert some beneficial influence on each other.

One of the central problems in *The Chosen* is communication-or lack of it. Part of this is deliberate and "chosen." Reb Saunders, in his oddly "Talmudic" way, believes that he can best teach his son the language and wisdom of the heart by forbidding or discouraging, what he considers "frivolous" discourse-what most of us might think of as the minimal conversational civilities. Thus Reb Saunders denies Danny what Mr. Malter the yeshiva teacher freely gives to his son Reuven: warmth, communication, and understanding. On those rare occasions when Reb Saunders permits himself to address Danny, these exchanges take place during the periodic quizzes on Talmud which the *rebbe* subjects Danny to-or when he blows up in exasperation at his son's passivity in the face of his own religious (near violent) commitments.

On the other hand, the relationship between Reuven and *his* father is a tender one, made all the more trusting by the easy and affectionate exchange of confidences that go on between them. They, at least, can do what Danny and his father seem unable to do: communicate. In the instance of Reb Saunders it is an admixture of pride and fanatic pietism that prevents any intimacy between himself and his son (rationalized by the elder Saunders' commitment to the Talmudic *A word is worth one coin; silence is worth two*). In Danny's case it is simply fear of his father that prevents any viable relationship between the two. Conceivably, Mr. Malter, the yeshiva teacher, and Reb Saunders, the Hassidic Talmudist, are of a common generation, if not of a common age; yet it is Reb Saunders' rigidity, and his stiff-necked pride, that give the illusion that he is much older than Mr. Malter-even as Hassidism itself *appears* to be rooted in an older tradition than its Misnagdic counterpart.

The difference between Mr. Malter and Reb Saunders expresses itself most forcefully in their respective visions toward the Holocaust. Reb Saunders can do little more than shed (very real) tears for the martyred Jews of Europe. "*How the world drinks our blood [But] it is the will of God. We must accept the will of God.*"... Reuven's more Westernized father, on the other hand, attempts to counter the existential nullity of the "world" by becoming ever more active in a resuscitated Zionist movement. Reb Saunders, to the contrary, in conformance with orthodox Hassidism, is bound by the Messianic belief-that only with the coming of the Messiah will Jews achieve the millennial dream, the ingathering of the exiles, the return to Eretz Yisroel.

What we find in *The Chosen* is a kind of *doppelganger* effect-minus the *doppelganger* itself. For Reuven and Danny are symbolically two halves of a single (perhaps ideal? Jewish?) personality, each half searching for its complement, which we already know can never be found in an Imperfect world (*Siz a falsher velt!-It' s a hypocritical world!* says a Yiddish Koheleth.). In short, no perfection is to be attained, except in unity. But that is precisely the problem of the characters in *The Chosen*: theirs is a search for that elusive (or illusory) goal. For neither of these two boys growing into manhood can really be said to exist at their fullest potential unless they retain some sort of relationship with each other, which on one occasion is suspended when Reb Saunders forbids Danny



any association with Reuven for an interval of about a year, making the two boys doubly miserable.

Reuven, whose father allows his son forays into symbolic logic, the mathematics of Bertrand Russell, ends up a rabbi! Danny, who throughout the novel is coerced into following Hassidic tradition, and is expected to succeed Reb to the leadership of the sect on his father's death, ultimately breaks away. Danny, for want of a better word-the word has been overly used and abused, though it applies here-has been alienated-from his father, from Hassidism, and finally from the Hassidic community itself. In a sense Danny is recapitulating (suffering through) the transitions and adjustments so traumatically demanded by the exodus from the Old World to the New, adjustments required of his father and his followers, "pilgrims" who came to America from the East European *shtetle* one step ahead of Hitler's kill-squads.

The American Diaspora has also given Danny, Freud and Behaviorist psychology (though initially he has mixed feelings about the latter); but after reading Graetz's *History of the Jews*, he has found that "Freud had clearly upset him in a fundamental way-had thrown him off-balance".

More significant than the conflict of belief in *The Chosen* is the conflict between the generations-each of which is so often collateral with the other. The novel itself could as easily, if not originally, have been called *Fathers and Sons*. For it is as much about the old split between the fathers and their offsprings as it is about the conflicts between religious views and personalities. The sons have been molded by the fathers, though in the case of Danny that influence is a negative one. For Reb Saunders is a fanatic, or at least has those propensities; he represents the archetypal, God-intoxicated Hassid. And it is he who has caused Danny to grow into a tense, coldly introverted personality. Reuven's father, on the other hand, is the tolerant (albeit religious) humanist, opposed both in mind and in heart to the cold scholasticism of the Saunderses.

In the growing estrangement between Danny and his father, the conflict of generations and of visions toward life surfaces. And it is America that is catalyst: the old East European ambiance is gone (unless one accepts Williamsburg as a pale substitute milieu for the vanished *shtetle*); and in the second instance the old ghetto traditions have become influenced, perhaps eroded-the old acculturation assimilation story-by the pressures of urbanism and secular intellectualism.

The relationship between Reuven Malter and his father is rooted organically, not in principle-self or externally imposed-but in tolerance and mutual respect. Mr. Malter is a yeshiva teacher, yet he can comfortably discuss the secular philosophers with Reuven as Danny's father, the Hassidic Reb Saunders, never can with him. Mr. Malter tells Reuven, "the point about mathematizing hypotheses was made by Kant. It is one of the programs of the Vienna Circle logical positivists." Yet with all his easy familiarity with philosophical schools and systems, his acumen in grasping them, Reuven's father allows his son to seek truth in his own way (possibly because of his own exposure to the rationalist winds of Western philosophy). Where Danny is coerced into the study of a specific mode of religious thought, Reuven is allowed by his father to roam free through



the country of ideas. This seemingly minor approach to pedagogical technique-both fathers are teachers in their own ways-will determine the direction each of the boys will later take as young men.

Reuven's father hopes his son will become a rabbi-but would not coerce him into it. The elder Saunders not only expects Danny to take his place in the rabbinic dynasty when his own time comes (as Hassidic custom requires), but can hardly imagine an alternative. On the other hand fanaticism and intolerance go to form the iron bond that binds Danny to his father. What is important here, though, is that Danny becomes an object, manipulated by his father, rather than a person one relates to. This determines Danny's ultimate hostility toward Hassidism itself, so that when he rebels, he not only rebels against a religious movement but against his father, who is its representative. The worship of God gives way, in the first flush of enthusiasm, to his admiration, if not worship, of a substitute god, Sigmund Freud.

. As the novel progresses, Danny the intellectual wizard, *Wunderkind*, finds himself increasingly boxed in by the restrictive ghetto mentality of the Hassidim. He sees that his father" 'Intellectually ... was born trapped. I don't ever want to be trapped the way he's trapped.'"

Ultimately, though, *The Chosen* is a paradigm of two visions that have not only sundered Judaism but have affected other areas of life-the split between head and heart. The Saunderses seem to have an excess of head in their (paradoxical streak of zealousness and emotional) makeup; but the Malters have heart *and* head: they are in balance. For Reuven is not only an outstanding student of Talmud but he "has a head" for mathematics and symbolic logic. Like his father, he also has a spark of tolerance which illuminates his own knowledge of human essences as opposed to ritualistic forms.

Reuven's studies are "brain" disciplines-logic, mathematics, philosophy-yet it is he who finally turns out to have more "heart" than the brilliant son of a Hassid. Danny, on the other hand, having been raised in the tradition of the *Ba' al Shem*, should have been a "heart-and-joy specialist." Yet it is he who is all brain. And this produces a keen irony, since Hassidism, a movement that was originally a revolt against arid scholasticism became (as portrayed in *The Chosen*) transformed into its opposite. Piety, joy, even learning (a latecomer to Hassidism) becomes pietism, rote learning, memorization.

In this split between head and heart, Danny Saunders shows a brilliant flare for Talmudic explication. Yet Reb Saunders, addressing Reuven Malter in Danny's presence, complains, "'the Master of the Universe blessed me with a brilliant son. And He cursed me with all the problems of raising !urn. Ah, what it is to have a brilliant son! ... [But] There was no soul in my ... Daniel, there was only his mind. He was a mind in a body without a soul.' " Too late: Danny has already "chosen" his own path, and Reb Saunders-plausibly or not-realizes at last that it is impossible to turn back now and give his son the love (or heart) he might once have given him, an act which may well have tempered Danny's mind.



Reuven is not exactly a *graubbe yung*, a moron, himself. For in one of the terminal scenes, he proves himself a master of many Talmudic brain twisters-and this, ironically, even when he *cannot* answer one difficult proposition which the teacher himself is unable to resolve! There is enough sanity in Reuven, though-presumably the heritage his father has passed on to him-to bring him to the realization that words themselves have little meaning unless they are rooted in life. If necessary, Reuven will show that he is capable of proving a formidable rival to Danny's father in his ability to untie knotty Talmudic propositions. Yet he also knows that this hardly makes a Jew, much less a compassionate human being. For brilliance, whether in Talmud or in other mental acrobatics, may as often blind the brilliant with their own brilliance as enlighten. The major irony, then, is that Hassidism-the brand portrayed in Potok's novel-though presumably a religious movement of the heart, has become transformed into its opposite.

I should like to say a few words about the symbolic symmetry of *The Chosen*. Potok seems to have extended himself beyond plausibility here. For the conclusion of this otherwise fine and sensitive work is marred by contrivance. Perhaps this can be ascribed to a symmetry which, while possible in life, somehow doesn't ring true when placed in fictional context. In this symmetry Danny escapes the confines of the Hassidic sect while Reuven stays within the wider boundaries of a more tolerant form of Judaism. Further, in this kind of resolution, Potok unintentionally (and unfortunately) reveals his intentions long before the novel ends. It takes no great effort, to guess, even early in the novel, that Danny will rebel, while Reuven, the "nice Jewish boy," will become a rabbi.

Reb Saunders' "conversion"-his resignation to Danny's break with Hassidism-doesn't convince. The novel is too mechanical in this sense with Danny, who was to have inherited his father's leadership going off to become a clinical or behavioral psychologist, while Reuven turns to the rabbinate.

The climax of the novel is illustrated by the following exchange the two young men engage in: Danny tells Reuven: "'I can't get over your becoming a rabbi.'" Whereupon Reuven answers: "'I can't get over your becoming a psychologist'"

Even the dialogue is weak here, betraying the Procrustean ending; it is virtually the antithesis to the brilliant verbal fencing-stychomythia-that the great dramatists from Shakespeare to Shaw were such virtuosos at. In this instance, the dialogue verges on the cliché.

Thus, as Reuven moves closer to Misnagdicnon-Hassidic-Judaism, so Danny moves away from its Hassidic counterpart, giving the novel this mechanical symmetry. The saving feature in spite of the contrived ending is that the choices of the two young men are as much determined by motive and character (or lack of it) as by superimposed plot strictures.

The almost explicit theme of *The Chosen*, then, is that the more repression one is forced to knuckle under to (no matter the noble intentions), the greater will be the rebellion against the source of that repression; it's the old postulate of an opposite and



equal reaction for every action. In other words, the contrivance of the rebellious son against the father and the father's resignation to the son's rebellion-"You will remain an observer of the Commandments?" he pathetically asks Danny-are developments which make it all the more difficult to believe in Reb Saunders as a strong, if stubborn, man.

Still-and this I mean to stress-the "contrivance of symmetry" with which the novel ends is a minor flaw in a larger pattern: that of tolerance against intolerance, empty ritual against the vital deed, rote learning against eager wonder. In any effective fiction it is the process rather than the outcome that is more important. This is especially true in *The Chosen*. For in this novel Chaim Potok gives us as keen an insight into the split between head and heart, tolerance and fanaticism, the strictures of tradition against the Impulses of *rachmonis* (pity) as has appeared in the Jewish-American novel in a long time.

Source: Sam Bluefarb, "The Head, the Heart, and the Conflict of Generations in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*," in *CIA Journal*, Vol XIV, No 4, June 1971, pp 402-9.

Adaptations

The Chosen was adapted for film by Edwin Gordon and featured Rod Steiger as Reb Saunders, Maximilian Schell as David Malter, Robby Benson as Danny Saunders, Barry Miller as Reuven Malter, and Ron Rifkin as the baseball coach. It was directed by Jeremy Paul Kagan and produced by Contemporary in 1982; available from FoxVideo,

The book was also produced on sound cassettes, with Eli Wallach reading the text; produced by Warner Audio, 1985,

A short-lived musical adaptation of *The Chosen* opened on Broadway in January, 1988, with music by Philip Springer and lyrics by Mitchell Bernard.



Topics for Further Study

Research the reasons orthodox Jews settled in Hebron and how their settlement there has made it difficult for Israel to withdraw from Hebron and return the City to Palestinian control.

Compare two different religious groups and discuss where they agree and where they diverge on important spiritual issues and ritual observances.

Describe several relationships between fathers and sons or mothers and daughters among your friends.



Compare and Contrast

1940s: Anti-Semitism was widespread in the Western world in spite of the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews.

1960s: The consciousness-raising of Americans during the Civil Rights movement helped fuel positive feelings among all ethnic groups, including Jews.

Today: Discrimination toward minorities no longer has official sanction in the United States and other countries, but ethnic conflicts still persist in parts of the world. Hate groups in the United States continue to express racial and anti-Semitic views.

1940s: The State of Israel was still a dream although many settlers had come during the 1930s to escape Nazi persecution.

1960s: Israel was holding its own against attacks by its Arab neighbors. The Middle East became a battleground for the Cold War, with the West siding with Israel and the Soviet Union with the Arabs.

Today: Israel has signed peace agreements with several of its Arab neighbors and has begun the process of turning control of Palestine back to the Palestinians.

1940s: Jewish education was conducted primarily after the regular secular schooling of American Jewish children.

1960s: Jewish day schools began to spring up in areas where there were sizable Jewish populations. They offered elementary and high school religious and secular education to both girls and boys.

Today: Jewish education in the United States has been expanded to include courses for adults, similar to continuing education courses that are given in community colleges.

1940s: Many countries and many parts of the world were engaged in World War II. The United States was unified in its willingness to participate in combat.

1960s: The United States was the only Western country to fight in the Vietnam War. The country was divided over our participation in a war that was perceived as not being winnable or honorable.

Today: Along with other members of the United Nations, the United States has supplied peacekeeping forces in areas like Bosnia, where ethnic conflict raged for several years.



What Do I Read Next?

The Promise (1969) is Potok's sequel to *The Chosen*. In this book, Reuven prepares to become a rabbi but runs into an obstacle in the form of apostate scholar Abraham Gordon; at the same time, Danny, now a psychologist, treats Gordon's disturbed son.

Fathers (1966) by Herbert Gold also concerns the relationship between a son and a father. Gold presents an irreligious father who is a shopkeeper and a son who feels he can cross the abyss between them in spite of their generational differences.

Call It Sleep (1934) by Henry Roth. Considered an American classic, this novel depicts the relationship between a young boy and the father who terrifies him. While Gold depicts an affectionate father, the father in Roth's novel has an openly hostile relationship with his son. The story is set in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the early years of the twentieth century.

Fathers and Sons (1862) by Ivan Turgenev, the nineteenth-century Russian novelist. The novel depicts the struggle of two generations. The protagonist, Bazarov, is a nihilist and wants to destroy the old order (honor, patriotism, love, beauty) represented by the fathers (Kirsanov) and to establish a new order based on rational science.



Further Study

Edward A. Abramson, *Chaim Potok*, Twayne, 1994.

A book-length study presenting biographical information about the author and an overview of all of his writings to date. Chapter 2 provides a valuable commentary of *The Chosen*.

Arthur A. Cohen, "Why I Choose to be a Jew," in *Breakthrough A Treasury of Contemporary American-Jewish Literature*, edited by Irving Malin and Irwin Stark, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964, pp. 367-76.

Cohen explains that, until recently, Jews could not choose *not* to remain a Jew, and then he discusses his own religious choices.

Michael Gilmore, "A Fading Promise," in *Midstream*, January, 1970, pp. 76-79.

Gilmore disagrees with the view of the Jewish community found in Potok's novels.

Sheldon Grebstein, "The Phenomenon of the Really Jewish Best Seller Potok's *The Chosen*" in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, Spring, 1975, pp. 23-31.

A helpful analysis of the novel, which includes a discussion Potok's style and of the American dream.

Granville Hicks, "Good Fathers and Good Sons," in *Saturday Review*, April 29, 1967, pp 25-56

In this early review Hicks tries to understand how Potok's "good boys"-and their fathers-are interesting as well as meaningful to a multitude of readers.

Baruch Hochman, review of *The Chosen*, in *Commentary*, September, 1967, p. 108.

In this early review, Hochman praises the psychological tension Potok creates as he explores the conflict of generations, but he criticizes the novel's conclusion as belonging to a fairy tale.

Irving Howe, "Introduction to Yiddish Literature," in *Breakthrough A Treasury of Contemporary American-Jewish Literature*, edited by Irving Malin and Irwin Stark, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964, pp. 278-300.

Howe's difficult essay analyzes the linguistic, historical, religious, cultural, and literary backdrops against which Yiddish literature is created.

Faye Leeper, "What Is in the Name?" in *English Journal*, Vol. 59, no 1, January, 1970, pp. 63-64.



Leeper argues that the novel is engrossing for high school students who understand Jewish religious practices. She cites the multiple meanings of the novel's title as evidence.

Curt Leviant, "The Hasid as American Hero," in *Midstream*, November, 1967, pp. 76-80.

An analysis which criticizes the writing style in *The Chosen*.

Daphne Merkin, "Why *Potok* is Popular," in *Commentary*, February, 1976, pp 73-75.

Merkin criticizes *Potok's* style as "amateurish," his characters as "paper thin," and his moral scheme as "black and white." She suggests that his popularity coincides with a "rediscovery of ethnic consciousness" on the part of his public.

Hugh Nissenson, "The Spark and the Shell," in *New York Times Book Review*, May 7, 1967, pp 4-5, 34.

In this early review of the novel, Nissenson critiques *Potok's* prose, but praises the novel's structure and themes. He particularly admires *Potok's* treatment of Rabbi Saunders' silence, which is dramatically portrayed against a backdrop of God's silence.

Sanford Pinsker, "The Crucifixion of Chaim *Potok*/The Excommunication of Asher Lev: Art and the Hasidic World," in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, no 4, *The World of Chaim Potok*, edited by Danel Walden, State University of New York Press, 1985, pp. 39-51.

Pinsker explores *Potok's* treatment of "sensitive" heroes who are trapped between "rival authoritarian figures." Most of the discussion centers around *My Name is Asher Lev*.

Chaim *Potok*, "Cultural Confrontation in Urban America: A Writer's Beginnings," in *Literature and the Urban Experience: Essays on the City and Literature*, edited by M. C. Jay and A. C. Watts, Rutgers University Press, 1981, pp. 161-67.

Potok's description of the expansion of the world of his Brooklyn Jewish childhood.

Chaim *Potok*, "Reply to a Semi-Sympathetic Critic," in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, Spring, 1976, pp. 30-34.

The author's response to Sheldon Grebstein's article; *Potok* defends his language and style in *The Chosen* and explains how the subject of the novel is "culture war".

Chaim *Potok*, *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews*. Knopf, 1978.

A broad view of the survival of the Jewish people in a variety of "umbrella" civilizations.

Harold Ribalow, "A Conversation with Chaim *Potok*," in *The Tie That Binds: Conversations with Jewish Writers*, A. S. Barnes & Co., 1980, pp. 111-37.



Potok, who calls himself a "freak," discusses his efforts to dramatize clashes that occur between the Jewish tradition and what he calls Western secular humanism.

Karl Shapiro, "The Necessary People," in *Book Week*, April 23, 1967.

A positive view of *The Chosen* as an allegory.

Judah Stampfer, "The Tension of Piety" in *Judaism*, Fall, 1967, pp. 494-98.

Stampfer critiques *Potok's* portrayal of Hasidim, but praises the book for its detailed documentation of Yeshiva life.

David Stem, review in *Commentary*, October, 1972, p 102

My Name is Asher Lev, *Potok's* third novel, is reviewed. Stem analyses the main theme *Potok* explores in his novels, which is trying to live in both a religious and secular world.

Daniel Walden, ed., *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, no. 4: *The World of Charm Potok*, State University of New York Press, 1985.

A collection of valuable essays about and interviews of Chaim Potok.

Mark Zborowski, *Life Is with People. The Culture of the Shtetl*, Schocken Books, 1995.

A flawed, over-romanticized but thorough description of the Eastern European Jewish culture which is used as model by contemporary strict Orthodox Jews and some Hasidic sects.



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Dan Barnet, essay in *Critical Survey of Long Fiction*, edited by Frank N. Magill, Salem Press, 1991, pp. 2659-67. Felicity Barringer, review in the *New York Times Book Review*, December 1, 1996, p. 33.

Sam Bluefarb, "The Head, the Heart, and the Conflict of Generations in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*," in *College Language Association Journal*, June, 1971, pp 402-409

S. Lillian Kremer, "Chaim Potok," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 152: *American Novelists since World War II, Fourth Series*, Gale Research, 1984, pp. 232-43. Beverly J. Matiko, an analysis and critical evaluation of *The Chosen* in *Masterplots*, New York Harper, 1969, pp. 112124.

Lisa Schwarzbaum, review in the *Detroit News*, March 17, 1985, p 5.

David M Shribman, review in the *Wall Street Journal*, December 12, 1996, p. A10.

Phillp Toynbee, review in the *New Republic*, June 17, 1967, pp 21-22.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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